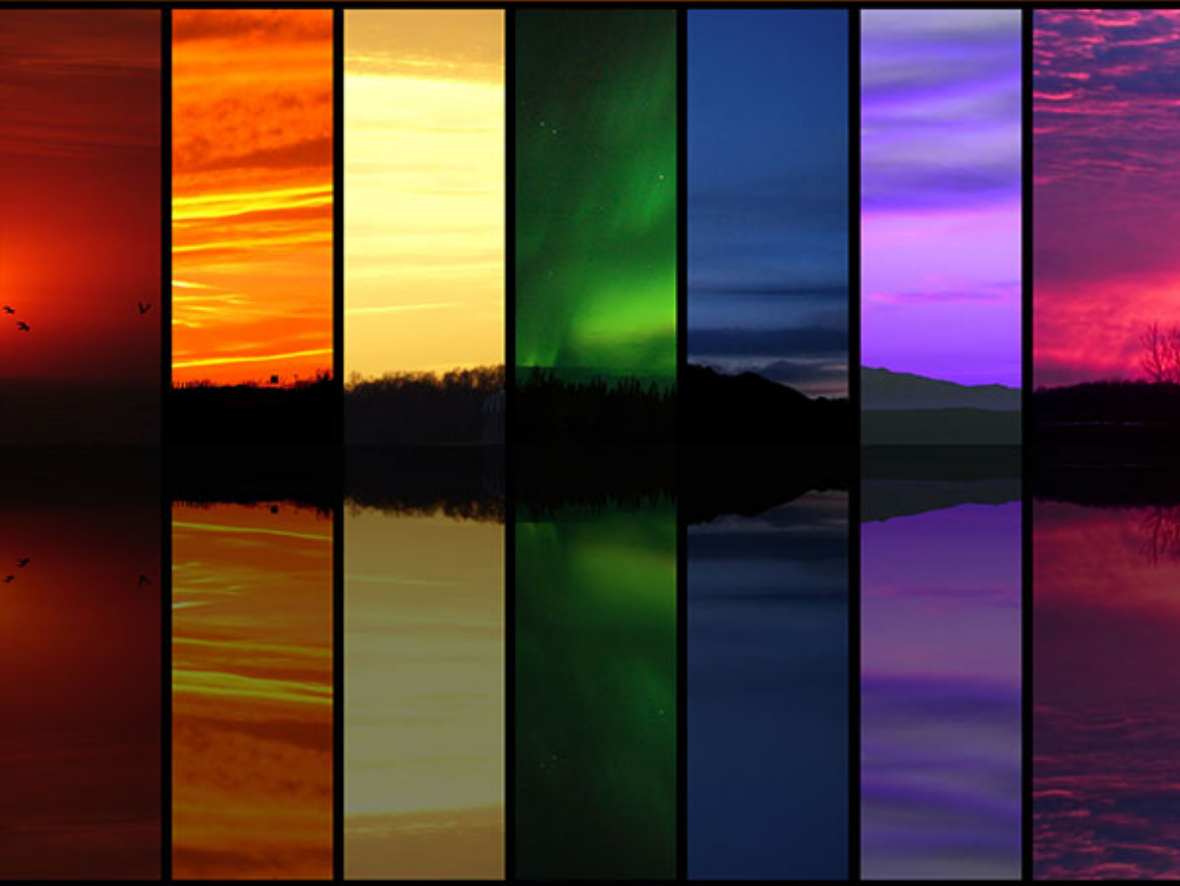


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LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 9

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Volume 9

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate 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 these anthologies are 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.

Over 210 stories were submitted and have now been published as a seventeen volume set with five additional bonus volumes, titled *Love's Landscapes*; this edition is Volume 9.

Words of Caution

These stories may contain sexually explicit content and are **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.

Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating over 210 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in e-print involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Over the course of seven months, nearly forty members chipped in to help at various times; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

Ebook Layout and Navigation

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

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, 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.

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

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INDIAN SUMMER

By D.C. Williams

Photo Description

An extremely buff and slightly grubby young man stands in the doorway of a workshed or cabin. A cooler and various odds and ends are visible. He's stripped off his plaid shirt and jeans and looks slightly overheated and kind of aggravated.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He was the closest thing I had to a brother. He was also my deepest, darkest, little secret. Those hunting trips up north? He may have been hunting deer, but all I was hunting for was a chance to get close to him. A freak storm and a tree through my truck might finally give me that chance.

Sincerely,

Liza

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, bisexual, hunting trip, blue collar, outdoors-type, non-explicit sex

Word Count: 6,173

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INDIAN SUMMER

By D.C. Williams

“The fuck? Why can't you?”

Cody could hear the hurt in Wake's voice. He couldn't say, “*Because I'm sick of eating my heart out over you, and it's hopeless, it always will be, because you're straight, and you think I am too, and you don't ever want to know different.*” Instead he said, “I'll ask my boss again, see if I can work something out, get a couple of days at least.”

As if his boss had assumed anything other than Cody going hunting with Wake, same as they did every year the first week of December. It had been a thin story anyway, because Wake had to know that there wasn't a giant pre-Christmas rush at the garage. The week before Thanksgiving they'd be kind of lively, since people were thinking about the long road trips to Grandma's, but not three weeks before Christmas.

Since he'd been claiming he might not have the time, he could at least keep it to a long weekend, and maybe this'd be the year he'd just blurt out all his private business so his best friend could kick the shit out of him before telling him he never wanted to see him again, or maybe Cody'd keep it to himself some more so it could just kill him slowly instead. At least Wake had stopped using homophobic insults in casual conversation a couple of years ago. Cody had no idea if Wake had been smart enough to realize that they were pissing him off, or if the other man had gotten religion of some kind. Like the kind who wouldn't have sex with you or would fire your ass if you kept using that kind of language. Much more of that crap and Cody would have gone off. Next stop—the emergency room and twenty-odd years of friendship down the drain.

Not even friendship, he and Wake were family, close as brothers. Family sometimes turned their backs on you though, especially if you were queer. Cody mostly confined his queerness to the kind of bar he didn't tell the guys he worked with that he went to, but he'd talked to other gay men enough to know how cold those who used to love you sometimes could be.

So Cody kept his mouth shut, and it made it easier that the best job Wake could get was a hundred miles away. They only saw each other a couple of times a month when Wake came to visit his parents and that annual hunting trip

was the only real time they spent alone together anymore. If Cody ever found someone it might be a problem, but since he knew he was hung up on Wake anyway, that probably wasn't going to happen. He got laid enough to keep from going crazy, and was glad that he was done with pretending to be interested in women. Cody had gotten married at twenty-one, and divorced at twenty-two when his wife found his porn stash. She hadn't actually been as mad as she might have been, but she had sworn that she would come and cut off his balls if he dated another woman, and he'd decided to believe her. He knew he was never going to be with Wake, but at least it gave him an excuse to have the kind of sex he wanted.

Mrs. Zakrewski, Wake's mom, asked him when he was getting married again, but he could tease his way out of that easily, and as far as he knew the rest of the family thought he'd been burned enough that he wasn't in any hurry. Cody turned up at the Z's every Sunday for dinner, but didn't see his own dad more than a couple of times a year and wasn't too worried about what the man thought, since he wasn't usually sober enough to make much sense anyway.

A week later, Cody was pulling up to Wake's apartment in his old F-150, the backseat of the cab stuffed with sleeping bags and groceries, his grandfather's Remington 870 carefully wrapped in oil cloth, since he didn't have a gun rack and Cody had long since noticed that most guys who had one in their trucks were kind of tools. He loved that old gun, and it said something about his dad that he'd passed it on to Cody instead of selling it for drinking money. He'd given it to him to keep when Cody was sixteen and he hadn't gotten that bad yet, but having that gun reminded Cody that there was still a human being somewhere inside the shambling wreck his father had become. He was pretty sure his grandfather had bought it in the fifties right around the time his father was born.

Wake had a Mossberg he'd bought the year they were out of high school. He could have brought one of his dad's guns as well, since Mr. Z didn't go with them anymore, but neither of them was all that serious about hunting anyway. Cody thought they'd gotten a deer once since it had just become the two of them. Mrs. Z liked to have the venison, but field dressing the deer was a horrible gross mess, and the butcher wasn't free.

The day was overcast, but it wasn't that cold for December, and Wake just had a denim jacket on over a hoodie as he slung his gear in back. They pulled into a WaWa to fill up and grab some coffee, and headed up to the tiny ramshackle cabin adjoining state lands that Wake's father and uncle owned.

Cody and Wake had been inseparable since kindergarten, but they'd never needed to talk much. Not when he spent every afternoon at Wake's house when they were little, not when they were riding their bikes all over the neighborhood, not when they were teenagers, not when they first started getting out and working, and certainly not when they were grown men who knew each other inside out. Except for that little detail about whom Cody liked to fuck, of course.

Now, they sat companionably in the front seat of the battered old truck while Cody drove upstate and they listened to the CD Wake slid into the player. Wake still burned them himself, and this particular one had Steve Earle, some of David Alan Coe's less PC moments, and the Civil Wars, plus some crap Cody didn't recognize and Ray LaMontagne's *For the Summer*, which he kind of liked himself, but wouldn't have talked about.

It was mid-afternoon when they got to the cabin, and they got busy sweeping it out, since no one had been up there since the summer and it wasn't exactly airtight. Mr. Z and his brother used to talk about improving the place in various ways, but it was just a big, bare room with a couple of metal frame cots with thin mattresses to put your sleeping bags on, an old Formica top table with mismatched chairs, and a permanently damp couch with a couple of easy chairs. There was running water and a toilet, but no water heater, so the water was only cold, and the service had to be turned on and off every night so the pipes didn't freeze. No electricity, so no fridge, a propane stove to cook on and a fireplace for heat.

"Do you want to go out?" asked Wake as Cody put groceries away and evicted a daddy longlegs from the cabinet.

"Not really. I'm fine if we just chill and drink. I got two thirties the last time I was in Maryland, so we should be good for the weekend."

"We could always hit the beer store, if we run low. Pennsylvania rules are stupid, but there's one not too far." Wake walked over to his backpack and pulled out a small bottle of Jack. "I know you're not much for the hard stuff, but I brought this, too."

"Maybe if it gets cold, but I think the forecast is kind of warm. Supposed to rain tomorrow night, though." Cody was sure he didn't have a problem, but he knew he liked to drink, and he didn't want to have a problem either, so he mostly stuck to beer, and only when the occasion warranted it.

"At least it's not snow."

“There’s that.”

Wake laid a fire and lit it while Cody fried bacon and eggs and threw some bread in the pan to crisp it up a little since there was no toaster, due to the lack of electricity and while there was a contraption in the storage closet that allegedly toasted bread over an open fire, he didn’t think anyone had used it since Mr. Z’s dad had died. This place had been in Wake’s family since the fifties at least, and there were some weird things in that closet.

Wake had dug out the lanterns and filled them and lit them as the shadows grew long and they ate an early supper. They had thrown an old blanket on the couch, and after they finished eating, the two men settled down on it to drink beer and watch the fire glow. Cody loved this, the companionable silence, the way they just worked together, doing what needed to be done without words. He guessed Wake loved it too, but probably not the same way, where he ached all the time for it to be for real, every day, for a reality where Cody could stretch his arm all the way out and let it fall on Wake’s shoulders, pull him close.

Cody had been fourteen or fifteen, that awful year after his grandfather had died, and his mother was really sick, when he’d become aware that his feelings for Wake were more than brotherly. Cody had always spent a lot of time at Wake’s house, since Mrs. Z had offered to let him spend afternoons there because she was home, and his mom didn’t love sending him to the afterschool care. Sometimes it was hard for someone to come get him on time, and Mrs. Z didn’t care how long he stayed. If he was there at suppertime she’d put another plate on the table, and she liked having another boy in the house after all those girls in the family. That year he slept over a lot because his mom was in and out of the hospital, and his dad could still hold it together when he needed to, but days they kept his mom overnight his father would come home after visiting hours and drink until he passed out.

Cody guessed he was a little slow on the uptake, but before he knew what it was he used to lie awake at night and listen to Wake breathe. He’d find all kinds of excuses to touch Wake, until the night they were watching TV, up in Wake’s room, and he suddenly had the urge to reach out and stroke Wake’s hair, letting his hand glide down to the other boy’s neck.

Wake, of course, leapt up and yelled, “Butthole, what are you doing? That is totally gay. Like faggot gay!”

Cody had covered, carrying on that he’d done it because Wake loved it, but he knew two things; he wanted to touch Wake that way, and he wasn’t

supposed to. As he got a little older, he realized it might always be Wake, but it wasn't only Wake. He liked male bodies, and he liked the things two men could do together.

It worked well enough with girls that he could pretend. He knew he was a fucking coward, but he was glad he wasn't one of the guys like Ken Bridges or Jay Castello who couldn't hide it. Senior year, Ken had become Kenni with an "i". He wore nail polish and made no bones about his ambition to move to L.A. and become a hairdresser to the stars right after he finished beauty college. Cody ambushed him one day after school. After a couple of awkward moments Cody made it clear that he wasn't there to beat the guy up. He was still amazed that Kenni had kissed him instead of punching him.

Kenni wasn't Wake, but kissing him was good, and Cody *loved* the way their bodies fit together. They hooked up a few times, but Cody was still dating girls and Kenni didn't seem to expect him to do anything different. Girls were okay. Cody had sex with them when it was expected and it felt good, and he knew something was lacking, but even after they graduated and he didn't see Kenni any more, there were ways to get that missing piece every now and then, even if it still wasn't Wake.

And never would be Wake. The temptation to reach across the old sofa was almost overwhelming. Cody got up to pee and throw beer cans in the bin.

"I miss this," said Wake. "I like having a job, but I wish we lived closer."

"Yeah, man," said Cody. He grabbed some fresh beers out of the cooler, and sat down again after he visited the toilet. Why was he complaining anyway? He had this, and his right hand or another lonely, horny guy could take care of the rest of it easily enough.

Not too long after that, Wake banked the fire while Cody went to turn the water off, and they went to bed. They were up at five, in and out of the freezing shower in record time, and Wake poured out cereal while Cody dealt with the coffee boiler on the stove. They were dressed and out, orange vests on, guns loaded with buckshot, as dawn started to warm the sky.

Cody might not really care if they got a deer. He might not really care if they *saw* a deer, but this he loved. Walking through the woods with Wake as the frost melted and the world woke up? Oh, yes. He couldn't believe he had almost skipped it.

Eight hours later, sandwiches gone, kind of footsore, and without a single clear shot all day, his enthusiasm was waning a little. Wake *thought* he had seen something, and then some turkeys flew out from behind a log. They should be in season, but the buckshot would have made a mess out of a bird anyway, so neither of them tried for a shot.

For December it was almost hot, low sixties at least, which wasn't tropical, but warm for their gear, and not what you'd expect in central Pennsylvania this late in the year, and the air was oddly heavy.

"Let's call it a day," said Wake.

Cody agreed. The deer might wake up from their naps feeling frisky around sunset, but shooting anything at dusk was tricky, and Mr. Z always claimed that was when most hunting accidents happened.

There were a couple of rib-eyes in the small cooler with the milk and the cold packs, and the other stuff that should be kept reasonably cold. Cody pulled them out as soon as they got back to the cabin.

"I don't know about you," he called to Wake, "but I'm hungry. Those sandwiches were a while ago."

"Tell me about it. Let me get the fire back up, if you don't mind cooking."

"Nah." He usually did, and Wake could burn water anyway. "Potatoes good?"

"Sure."

Cody put some butter and a little corn oil in one pan and just a pat of butter in the other. When the pan with the oil was hot, he opened a can of sliced potatoes, drained them, and poured them into the pan. After they'd been on for a minute or two he put the steaks in.

A few minutes later they were settled on the couch with their food and some cold Yuengling. "Damn," said Wake, "if you weren't a guy, I'd marry you."

Cody thought about telling him that the state was kind of getting over that.

"Did your wife cook like that?"

Cody shook his head. "Nah."

"No wonder you're still single."

"So are you."

“Well, I had the sense not to get married in the first place.”

Cody shook his head. “Have you ever even slept with the same girl twice?”

“Of course, man, I just don’t make a habit of it. Might if one of them cooked like this, though.”

“Yeah, well enjoy it, because I don’t have any more steaks ’cause I didn’t want to try to keep them in the cooler past tonight. What would be involved in getting electric service out here?”

“Too much, according to my uncle. It would be nice to have a fridge and some real lights, though.”

“It would. You know, they make fridges that run off a propane cylinder.”

“Yeah, my dad looked into it once. They’re like three times as much as the regular ones and go through gas even faster than a water heater would.” There was a long pause as Wake took a slug of beer. “My uncle’s been talking to my dad about selling.”

“Crap.”

“Yeah. He’s got a point, though. He doesn’t really hunt anymore; neither does my dad. His daughter uses this place for a week or two in the summer, and we’re here for a few days every year.”

“Could he rent it?”

“I guess, but probably not for much, and that’s a headache sometimes. It does suck though. I always thought I’d bring my kids here.”

“You have to have some first.”

“There is that, and since I haven’t been in any big hurry to get married, I don’t know if that’s happening.”

“Yeah.”

Cody had left a pot of water on the stove to heat for the dishes, and the two men washed and dried companionably, turned off the water, had a couple more beers, and went to bed after banking the fire and putting out the lanterns. As he drifted off, Cody became aware of the sound of rain on the roof.

It was still full dark when Cody was jerked out of sleep by a crash. It took him a minute to remember where he was and make sense of the lightning flashing through the window.

“Code?” Wake called from the other cot.

“Yeah. Was that just thunder?”

“Maybe?”

He could hear the wind, and the cabin rumbled. “That was thunder.”

Then there was another crash that made the floor shake, and Wake said, “And I don’t think that was. Fuck, are we safe here?”

“It’s your cabin. You know better than I do. How’s that green roof stuff in a storm?”

“How should I know? Okay, I think. We’ve only replaced it a couple of times since my grandfather built the place, so it can’t be too bad.” Another crash reverberated through the room.

“Fuck. Was that a tree?”

“Maybe. I’m sure not checking. Where could we go?”

“Probably nowhere. My truck’s not going to be safer than in here, and I’m not trying to drive on a dirt road in this.”

“You’re right. I know what would give us a little protection if a tree comes through, though.”

“What?”

“Under the table. We’ll pull the mattresses and our sleeping bags under there, and maybe we can sleep a little, and even if we don’t, it should protect our heads.”

“Good idea.”

The two men set up the makeshift bed, and as an afterthought wrapped their weapons in the blanket off the couch and put them under one of the cots.

It was cozy under the table. They weren’t actually touching, but Cody was hyperaware of Wake’s breathing. Despite the storm, he could actually feel the other man’s heartbeat. He dozed fitfully and then slept.

Cody awoke to light flooding in the thankfully still-intact window. He pulled his clothes on quickly, leaving Wake still asleep, went to the door, and opened it. It didn’t seem too bad. Lots of branches down, the air still and surprisingly warm. There must have been a warm front behind the storm, and the sun shone down.

Cody walked down the steps, and around the corner of the cabin, and stopped. *Oh, fuck!* There was a gigantic old-growth maple across his truck, and a couple of other big trees on the dirt road in front of it. They were barricaded in. His truck was probably totaled, and there was no way to clear any of this mess without a chain saw.

“Wake, we have a problem!” he yelled. Wake appeared next to him, still wearing his T-shirt and sweats.

“Oh, fuck, yes we do. Let me grab my phone and call my uncle. Have him bring a chain saw and give us a ride.”

Wake disappeared and reappeared, holding his phone to his ear and scowling. “No fucking service. Try yours.”

Nothing. “Crap, mine is dead too. There must be a tower down. Ideas?”

“Well, the cabin is fine, at least. We could try to clear some of this by hand, and see if our cells start working again. Or we could hike out to the main road.”

“How far do you think?”

“Couple of miles, but there’s no telling what else is down, and for all I know the main road is closed off at the turn-off for here.”

“Fuck.”

“Why don’t we see what we can get cleared and stay until tomorrow morning, then hike out if we don’t have cell service?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I’ll go get dressed.”

It was even warmer than yesterday. Cody would have thought that a storm like that would have brought a cold front with it, but someone seemed to have forgotten to tell the weather it was December. If there hadn’t been crap down everywhere it would have been a beautiful Indian summer day.

Trying to clear anything was hot, messy work too. Cody was sweating, and he was full of itchy things. Pine needles, dirt, little bits of bark, a few leftover scratchy brown leaves. Then he slipped in the mud and Wake laughed at him.

“The fuck’s your problem?” Cody roared at him.

“You look hysterical.” Wake was laughing so hard he was gasping for breath. “Wet and mad and muddy.”

"I fucking give up," Cody muttered, and went to the door of the cabin to strip off his jeans and plaid shirt. He was down to his briefs in a minute, but there was still mud in weird places.

"Damn," said Wake. "You really do work out, don't you?"

"Not too much else to do, and I like to look good."

"That you do. Trying to clear this isn't doing much good, is it?"

"No. We should have just walked out this morning. Now we're tired and I'm filthy."

Wake laughed again. "Well, if we started walking now we'd be real popular with you like that. Get picked up by some cougar or a van full of fags."

Cody had enough. Wake had certainly said worse things, although not recently, but that was the last fucking straw. "I am a fag!" he yelled.

Wake's face fell.

Cody waited for the fist.

"Sorry, I forgot you didn't like it when I said that. I meant fag-fags, not you."

"I am a fag-fag!" He took a deep breath. "You know?"

"Of course I know. That's not something I'm gonna talk about."

"No," said Cody, "guess not."

"Oh, crap, you didn't know I knew?"

"Not a clue."

"Oh fuck, sorry, I should have said something."

"I could have come out and told you, but I didn't know if that was just your mouth or you really had a problem with it. Frankly, I thought you might beat me up."

"Cody McCullough, you're my brother. How you could ever think I'd hit you, especially over something like that?" Wake just stared at him and said, "Oh fuck, you really thought I might."

Cody nodded. "I know a guy, his actual brother put him in the hospital."

"Oh, fuck... I guess, but no, I ain't like that. At all. Not just with you."

"You talk like that."

“Everybody does.”

Cody stared him down. “Maybe everybody doesn’t.”

“They do at my job, but I knew you didn’t like it, so I tried to watch my mouth. That slipped out. I know you’re gay. I’ve known it for years, and I don’t have any problem with it.”

Cody relaxed fractionally. “Not gonna panic that I’m lusting after you?”

“Fuck, no, man, there wasn’t a lot of room under that table last night, and did I look like I was having any issues?”

“No, you didn’t. What if I said I was lusting after you?”

Wake laughed. “Nice try. I know you got a fella.”

“Actually I don’t.”

“Really?”

“Really. Can we go in and sit and have a couple of beers? The doorway of the cabin is not where I want to have this conversation.”

“Sure. Are you going to put on clothes?”

“No, I’m hot and I’m itchy and I should probably take a shower, but I don’t feel like it right now, as long as you aren’t going to freak out if I’m in my underwear.”

“Nope.”

Cody crossed to the cooler and grabbed a beer for each of them. They might as well drink it before it got skunky, because they weren’t exactly in a position to go get more ice, and the ice that they did have wasn’t lasting as well as it usually did.

Wake was shimmying out of his jeans.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“If you get to hang out in your underwear, so do I. I may not be muddy, but you’re not the only one who’s hot and itchy. I’m not going to get offended if you sprout a woody.”

Cody handed a can to Wake, popped the top, and drank the whole thing down. This whole trip was just too fucking weird.

“If you don’t have a guy, why were you trying to weasel out of this trip?”

“Complicated.”

“Which always translates into pussy, or in your case, dick.”

“Kind of.” Cody let himself look at Wake. Not as ripped as Cody, but nice abs and thighs. Nice package, too. His little friend down there was trying to wake up and take an interest. “You sure you’re not freaked, bro? We keep drinking, and you keep sprawling on the couch like that, and I’m going to get hard. It’s like if you were hanging out with a girl in her underwear. It’s just natural.”

“We keep drinking and I may get hard, too. It’s not a thing, Cody. I know you’re out of my league, and I’m not your type, and it’s not like anything has to happen, but I’m not freaked.”

Cody finished his second beer and grabbed another for himself and for Wake, who also appeared to be out.

“I’m not gay.”

Cody was about to say, “Duh,” when Wake continued.

“I’m maybe not completely straight either.” Now Wake was empty again in about thirty seconds flat and Cody needed to catch up. “I’ve hooked up a couple of times, and I um, kind of had a little thing with Kenni Bridges senior year.”

Cody spluttered beer all over the couch. “What! No fucking way!” A couple of comments Kenni had made sort of fell into place. “No wonder he looked so fucking smug all the time.”

“You too?”

“Yeah,” said Cody, realizing they had both been fucking Kenni when they could maybe have been fucking each other. Or possibly both fucking Kenni at the same time, which was an unbelievably hot thought.

“Trust Kenni not to say anything,” Wake sighed, and got up to grab more beer. He handed one to Cody and said, “But, oh man, he was something else. Hot like a girl, but with that huge fucking dick, and that mouth...” Cody was suddenly rock-hard, and he noticed Wake was kind of tenting as he continued, “Now I’m kind of wishing we had hit that at the same time.”

Cody groaned.

“Damn, that’s a nice bulge in your pants. You like that idea, don’t you?”

“Well my dick likes that idea. The rest of me is completely fucking confused. I will admit that I’ve never asked how you feel about gay people, but

you come across like a complete homophobe most of the time. Now you're telling me you're maybe kind of bi, and you know I'm gay, and now you're talking dirty about Kenni who I've barely thought about in years. Although yes, he was fucking hot, and at *seventeen* he could suck a marble through a straw."

"Well, you figure he's gotta be making some guy pretty happy by now."

Cody laughed. He looked over at Wake sprawled on that sofa in his briefs, semi-hard, half in the bag, and just looking at him that way he always did, like he'd follow Cody into hell and expected Cody to do the same. "Probably. I was squirrely about the trip because it was getting too fucking hard to keep that much of myself from you."

"Cody, you don't ever have to keep any part of yourself from me. I shoulda said something, but really how could you think I'd have an attitude? I never even gave Jay or Kenni much of a hard time."

"I touched you the one time, when I slept over, just your neck, not anything big, and you kind of freaked out."

"What? That's what had you worried? I'd completely forgotten about it until now. I mean I was, what, fourteen or fifteen, and kind of worried that it wasn't always only girls that got me going. Once I was a little older, I just figured I was oversexed, and you know, whatever gets your dick hard. We were kids, Cody, and you might have been up for a little exploration, but you know I'm not your type."

"That's the second time you've said that. Why?"

"Because we're both the guy, Cody. If either of us was even a little, you know, not feminine exactly, but like that, we'd be together."

"Oh." Never mind Wake's complete lack of political correctness, the raw note in his voice on the last part of that sentence said everything.

"It's not always like that, you know," Cody said quietly, "where one guy's kind of the guy and one guy's the girl. Actually, it's usually not really like that. I bottom every now and then, and, you know, yeah, I'm a typical guy, but I think you're thinking all the men I go for are like Kenni, and a lot of the time it's guys like you and me."

Cody was never going to be sure which of them actually made the first move, but suddenly Wake was on his side of the sofa, and his hands were

sliding up and down Wake's chest, tangling in his hair, and Wake was kissing him like there was no need for air ever again.

Somehow they made it from the ratty couch to the nest under the table. At first Cody tried to be gentle, because he didn't know exactly how much experience Wake had, but he figured it wasn't a lot, and might not be all that recent. Then it became obvious that Wake wanted Cody as badly as Cody wanted Wake, and he didn't need or want gentle, and every moment was better than Cody's best fantasy ever had been.

Cody had no condoms or lube with him, and while he might not care about the condom, not with Wake, he wasn't quite ready to take him dry, or even on spit. Wake sort of half rose, his erect cock plastered against his belly, and he sort of crab-walked over to his bag, "I know I got some lotion in here," he said. "Will you let me, you know, without?"

"Yes. I don't usually, but this..."

"It's different," said Wake, "we get to love each other this way too."

"Yeah," replied Cody, parting his legs as Wake scooched back to the makeshift bed, prize in hand.

They made love, drifted off, made love some more, and then finally got up sometime just after dark, took the world's fastest shower, put on sweats, and ate bacon and eggs. Cody couldn't stop grinning, and Wake kept shooting him little sideways looks. "This isn't..." Wake started.

"No," said Cody. "Real deal."

Wake nodded.

They sat on the couch in front of the fire with some more beer, and it was better than it ever had been before because they got to touch each other, Wake half lying against Cody's chest. Wake had his phone on the arm of the couch, and it suddenly went off.

Wake sat up and picked up his phone. "Hey, Uncle Al... Yeah, we're still stuck here... Cabin's fine but there's trees in the road, and one went into Cody's truck... Might be totaled, definitely needs a tow and we could use a chainsaw too... Yeah, we're okay... Better than okay, actually." He smiled at Cody. "We're fine for tonight, Uncle Al, don't even worry about trying to get to us... Yeah, food and beer and company, got a nice fire going... I'll see you in the morning."

Wake turned to Cody. "You heard that. Al'll be here in the morning with the cavalry, so we don't have to hike out, so I don't have to worry about anybody in any cars getting ideas about you." Wake swallowed. "Because you're mine."

"Yeah," Cody agreed, "and you're mine, and I think we need to go to bed and put good use to the time before your uncle gets here."

They awoke to Wake's ringtone, and the beautiful music of chainsaws in the distance. Wake grabbed his phone. "Hey, Uncle Al... yeah, I think I can hear you. About half a mile? ...Do you want us to walk out towards you or stay here? ...Good. Yeah, we'll be ready to go. Did you call the tow? ...That makes sense... You trust Braden with a saw? ...Okay. See you in a few." He turned to Cody. "That was my uncle."

"Duh."

"He and his daughter are working on a tree across the road, about a half mile up. He's making her kid walk towards us with the small saw." Cody summoned up a mental image of a little boy who should have been duct taped to the nearest surface at a family Fourth of July a few years earlier.

"Is that a good idea?"

"He's almost fifteen, and I guess Al trusts him not to accidentally cut anything off between here and there."

Cody shrugged and said, "Let's put these mattresses back on the cots, because that's going to look a little weird."

"Well, the under the table part is hard to explain, but the other..." Wake looked at him hard. "I'm not making a big announcement, but we are what we are. My parents aren't going to be a big deal, and if anyone else is, it's them, not us."

"Okay."

"I'm thinking we can figure something out so we can, uh..."

"Be together?"

"Yeah. Maybe we can figure something else out, but half of a hundred miles is fifty. That's what, less'n an hour in the car? I could do that back and forth every day if I had to."

"Yeah, me too."

They got dressed, had their gear packed up, and were outside the cabin just as the skinny teenager strolled up, an electric garden saw dangling from his hand.

“Hey, Wake,” he called. “Grandpa says it’s charged to the battery pack, but I don’t know how much sawing we’ll get done with this. My mom keeps hogging the big chainsaw.”

Wake rolled his eyes lightly, smiled at Cody, and said, “Hey, let’s do this.”

The End

Author Bio

D.C. Williams is a funny little middle-aged woman who lives in Pennsylvania with one spouse and one child and writes romance novels you wouldn't expect.

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INHALING SMOKE

By Tia Fielding

Photo Description

A shirtless young man with tattooed arms, stretched ears and a lip piercing holds a toddler. The baby is looking down at something; it almost looks like they're drawing together.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

They did not think I could do this, when a phone call woke me and my boyfriend, telling me my best friend who I had donated sperm to had died in a terrible accident, and it was me or foster care for the baby. They did not think I could raise this baby. Being a tattooed, pierced, young, gay tattoo artist. But I WILL prove them wrong. I will be amazing. \with the help of my super supportive boyfriend I will get through this.

P.S. I would love a HEA story, not PWP.

XXX,

Jessica ;p

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: profession-tattoo artist, established couples, men with children, tearjerker, HEA

Content Warnings: death of a secondary character

Word Count: 13,263

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Foreword

The way this story came to be was a bit odd, even for me. I had a series of books planned in my head, and I was writing what I thought was the first novel in the same universe. There was a side character called Micah in that story, and he'd barely been seen thus far. I knew a few bits of him, knew who his love interest would end up being in his book, but nothing else.

Then I suddenly ended up finding this perfect prompt by Jessica (thank you!), and something clicked in my head. "That's the love interest! And he has a baby?!" The rest is 13k words of history. ;)

If this story feels like a glimpse of something bigger, that's because it is. This is Austin's POV of what happens when the baby comes along. The real, whole story will be told in Micah's POV at some point whenever I get to writing it.

INHALING SMOKE

By Tia Fielding

Austin sat on the window seat at Fiery Squid Tattoo and sketched. It was just a basic job, another tribal with a dreamcatcher-like design in the middle. Most tattoo artists he knew would scoff at that kind of thing, but Austin wasn't picky. It wasn't a case of money over artist's integrity, but Austin's belief that everyone should get the tattoo they wanted, not the tattoo others thought better for them.

The street outside was buzzing. It was summertime in Boston, and all the small shops on Newbury Street were bustling with people, locals and tourists alike. Because the studio was below street level, Austin couldn't see much more than people's legs from the knee down and sometimes a not-so-nice upskirt view of a petite woman walking past. Had it been a guy in a kilt...

Grinning, Austin adjusted his position to get the last of the afternoon sunlight. The sun shone on his spot from just past midday until around one forty-five at this time of year. He lifted his gaze from his sketchpad when Soda, his oddball fellow artist, walked by on his way to see out his latest customer.

"Call me when it's healed and we'll schedule a time for the coloring," Soda reminded the forty-something woman who now sported a bandaged area on her back. "And take the dressing off when you get home. Remember what I said about sunlight!" he called after the client, and Austin grinned.

"Think she'll take proper care of the ink?"

"I think so, and I gave her the instructions on paper, too." Soda came to sit with Austin.

"You have more for the day?"

"Just Tegan from upstairs. We'll continue her back as long as she can sit comfortably."

Tegan co-owned a pet store on the street level with her girlfriend Audrey and their friend Ben. About two months ago Audrey had dragged her "sicker half," as Tegan called herself, down to the studio for some ink. Tegan had had scoliosis while growing up and still had some issues from the surgeries she'd

had a long time ago. Her spine was straight now, but she wanted to commemorate the “wicked groovy thing” it had been with some ink.

Audrey had been the one making her face her fear of additional physical pain, and she'd been there holding Tegan's hand through the first session. They'd agreed to make a design based on the old X-rays Tegan had of her spine at its worst. Tegan had pain from sitting still for extended time, so they had to continue in increments whenever Soda had time for her. She said it was important to pay respect to her spine for making her grow as a person, even if it took the rest of her days to complete the tattoo.

Austin could understand the sentiment. He had several commemorative tattoos of places and people. In some ways, most of his tattoos were there to remind him of phases of life or things he loved or, in some cases, hated.

“Hy will be coming home tomorrow. She'll probably have a fit if you don't clean up your station,” Austin stated casually.

“I know. I know.” Soda leaned back and lifted his freckled face toward the sun. “Let me rest for a moment first.”

“Oh, I won't care, you're not in my view, but you are in hers, and it's her studio.”

Soda opened one eye and glared at Austin, then went back to his basking.

Hy was their boss, the owner of Fiery Squid. She was one of the best female tattoo artists in the world, and traveled all over to educate and take part in conventions. Having been blessed with a name like Hyacinth, she'd shortened it to Hy pretty early on and would kick anyone using her full name in the knee. Austin knew; he'd once tried when he'd been upset with her and limped for two days.

“I just have this one to do in about an hour, and I'll be off. Micah should come by once he's done with his stuff at school.”

“Ooh, will he have time to do stuff for us?” Soda perked up and grinned at Austin.

“You'll have to ask him, not me. I've no clue where he will be at the end of the day. All I know is that he's finishing some huge piece for a show and that's it.” Austin continued to draw the few last lines, and Soda went back to enjoying the sun.

The peace and quiet ended soon with footsteps and chatter sounding from the stairs leading down to their front door.

“Walk-ins. Awesome.” Soda sighed, put on his game face, and got up in time to greet a group of twenty-something tourists who were “just looking”.

Austin’s boyfriend of just over a year, Micah, was studying for his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Tufts. Micah, who sometimes seemed almost naïve in his innocence, was a wunderkind if Austin had ever met one. His way of drawing and painting things he saw was unique and beautiful.

They were lucky that Hy had asked who had drawn the art for the ink on Austin’s left leg. She’d been spellbound over the intricate detail of the piece—something very personal for both Austin and Micah—and asked if Micah wanted to draw some unique pieces for them.

These days they had clients who came in for Micah’s work. Naturally it had to be tattooed by Austin, Soda, or, if she was in Boston, Hy, but it was still Micah’s art, and he liked to be present when they were putting it on a client’s skin.

There was a part of the wall with the tattoo artists’ artwork reserved for Micah. Every time his work was taken off the wall and given to the newly inked customer to frame or whatever, Micah would come up with something else and fill the space until they had someone wanting another piece of his on their skin forever.

Austin loved his boyfriend more than he had ever thought he could love someone. That was pretty much the only reason why he wasn’t terribly jealous of Micah’s vision and skill. Austin himself, on the other hand, was just a regular artsy kid from a small town near Albany, New York.

He’d been a troublesome, wild teenager. With his best friend, Katie, they’d been a menace. Katie had known early on she wasn’t interested in sex. Now they knew the word for it; she was asexual. She hated dating and disliked guys hitting on her for her looks, and she rarely found anyone romantically interesting.

Austin, on the other hand, had known he was different from most of the boys he knew since he was six.

Together they figured that it was easiest to just play at being a couple by the time people around them started dating. So they “dated” all through high school, and frankly, if you didn’t count Micah, the platonic thing he’d had with Katie was still the best relationship of his life.

Although he did enjoy the sex with Micah a lot...

“Honey?”

Austin snapped out of his thoughts and looked up to see the object of his fantasies—and his reality—standing in front of him, looking curious and knowing.

“Hey, Foxy.” Austin grinned at Micah. “Guess what I was just thinking...”

Micah blushed and ducked his head, making some of his blond hair escape from the hasty ponytail he'd tied together with what looked like a ripped piece of paint-spattered cloth.

Austin left his sketchpad on the seat and got up, enfolding Micah in a hug. Micah let out a contented little sound, almost a snuffle, and burrowed into Austin's chest.

“Awww... they're so cute!”

“Come on, girls, don't stare!”

“But they *are*!”

The group was still there, and Austin and Micah were garnering attention. Micah tensed against Austin.

“Hush now, Foxy. Everything's fine,” Austin murmured into his ear and shot a look over Micah's head towards the people.

One of them, a tall jock-type guy, caught the look and nodded slightly. He put a hand on one of the girls' shoulder and squeezed lightly. It took about ten seconds for the whole group to ignore Austin and Micah, and Austin had to admit he was pretty impressed. He smiled briefly at the jock, before concentrating on his boyfriend.

“You're early. Did you finish the painting?” he asked, hugging Micah even closer for just a moment before pulling him down to sit on the window seat.

As always, their legs seemed to entwine, and then they corrected their position by sitting face to face, Micah's long legs on both sides of Austin. They were in public, so sitting like they sometimes did at home with Micah's ankles crossed behind Austin's back was out of the question, but Austin still heard a half-suppressed “Aww!” from one of the girls.

“Yeah, I flew through what I had left. I guess I got to the studio in the right mindset this time.” The smile on Micah's lips was blinding; it lit up his face and Austin's chest.

“Congrats, darling. I know it was a rough road to get it done.” He leaned in to kiss Micah gently.

“Thank you,” Micah said in a tone that was full of sincerity. Not that there was a different mode to Micah as a person. All he could be was real and sincere, and sometimes Austin feared people might try to take advantage of it somehow.

“Proud of you,” Austin whispered, and Micah ducked his head again.

“Okay, lovebirds,” Soda said loudly and made them both jump. “Time for me to clean. Austin needs to finish the sketch, and Micah, would you mind...?” Soda nodded towards the wall, making his tight, messy curls bounce.

The shop had cleared from the tourists, and Micah looked around, obviously happy to see the place empty.

“Sure. I can sketch a bit.” Then, just like Austin had known he would, he asked, “Anyone coming in?”

“Tegan when she has time, and a girl in a bit for this.” Austin showed him the sketch. “Nobody else unless we get more stragglers.”

“Oh...” Micah seemed to ponder that for a while. “Can I—”

“Hey Micah, you can go to Hy’s space if you want!” Soda called as he walked towards the back.

Austin hid a grin. It was nice how Soda didn’t make a big deal about Micah’s shyness and instead made sure he would be comfortable while working.

“Sure thing!” Micah called to the back, beamed another heart-stopping smile at Austin, and kissed him soundly. “I’ll be back there.”

“Okay, Foxy.”

They untangled themselves, and Micah picked up his messenger bag from the floor where he’d dropped it after coming in. Austin watched as his lover walked to the back where Hy’s workstation was situated. It had several elaborately painted screens hiding it from view, and it would provide Micah with all the privacy he’d need.

Soda’s spot was in the middle and pretty much in the open for anyone to take a look at how he worked, unless the client wanted more privacy or the ink was going somewhere more intimate.

Austin worked in the front in a similar setting. When he got to his zone, very few things could drag him out of it, so he didn't mind being out in the open.

They all settled to their tasks, and Austin was setting up his station when the door opened and his client walked in. The girl, Rhonda, was a new regular. She'd had her first tattoo done by Austin when she'd turned eighteen about a year ago. Now she had a few more, and she saved diligently between sessions to get more ink added on her body.

Rhonda agreed to the sketch, and Austin made a stencil while she chatted with Soda. They were about halfway done with the actual tattooing when Austin's cell rang in the back. He didn't get calls often, but the people who called him most often all had their own ringtones.

This one was Katie's signature tune, and she never called him during the workday without a good reason.

"Babe? Can you answer for me?" Austin called towards the back, knowing Micah was closest to the phone and familiar with Katie by now.

"Sure!" Micah called back.

"You have a boyfriend?" Rhonda's eyes widened in surprise.

"Uh, yeah, Micah." Austin blinked at her. He'd had no idea why she didn't already know this.

"The cute blond guy?"

Austin chuckled. "That would be him."

The aforementioned cutie burst out from behind the screens with a grin on his face, brandishing the cell phone. His expression told Austin the news was good, but he still felt his heart beat faster.

He raised a brow at Rhonda who smiled and nodded, so Austin put his machine down and pulled off one black glove. He'd just have to replace it once the call was done.

Micah could hardly contain his enthusiasm as he shook the cell at Austin. "Come on!"

Austin took the phone and heard Rhonda giggle in her chair.

"Katie?"

“Austin! River walked!” she squealed into his ear and almost made him drop the phone.

“Oh my God! That’s awesome!”

River had taken his time to learn, he’d been crawling like crazy for months now and standing against support for almost as long, but walking had taken time.

“Sixteen months, Austin! He’s sixteen months and now he’ll be able to get everywhere and ohmygod what the hell will I do?!”

Austin realized the startled burst of laughter came from his own mouth when Micah looked at him with similar awe on his face.

“Okay... okay...” Austin raised his hand, knowing Katie would be able to hear the familiar gesture in his voice somehow. “So Nugget can walk. Big deal. Kids learn to walk all the time!”

“He’s already too fast when he crawls, but now he’ll be able to reach everywhere even faster than before. What if—?”

“No what ifs, Katie. We’ll figure it out. You can even come over for the weekend if you have it off.” Austin said, then realized he hadn’t asked Micah first. When he looked up at his boyfriend, Micah was smiling at him indulgently, not upset in the least.

“I’ll... Okay. I’ll figure out my schedule and let you know. If we can make it, can you get us from the train station?”

“Sure, we’ll figure something out. Borrow Ben’s car if mine won’t start or something.” Without looking, Austin knew Micah was blushing where he stood, rocking gently back and forth on the balls of his feet.

“Okay. Well, I’ll text you or something.”

“Bye, love to Nugget.”

“From me too!” Micah said quickly.

“Hear that?” Austin smiled.

“I did. Bye!” Katie sounded much calmer now.

Austin ended the call and handed the phone back to Micah. “Thanks, Foxy.”

“I’ll take it back...” Micah fidgeted toward where he’d been working.

Because he couldn’t resist, Austin quickly grabbed the hem of Micah’s T-shirt and pulled him closer. Despite being in the shop with a client right there,

the action was too familiar for Micah to do anything but lean down and accept the kiss Austin wanted to give. Then Micah blushed and stumbled away as quickly as possible.

“He’s fucking adorable.” Rhonda’s tone was dreamy.

“All mine. Back off,” Austin said lightly and replaced both of his gloves, if only to keep an even amount of them left in their box on his workbench.

He got back to his zone and resumed working on Rhonda’s “dreamcatcher-thing” as she called the design.

“So, a friend’s kid started to walk early?” she asked after a while.

“Yeah, Katie’s my best friend since... forever, really. Lives in Albany with our kid, River.”

“Wait, what?” Rhonda sounded confused. “You have a kid?”

“Well, sort of, I guess. She wanted a baby. I could help her out and be the best Uncle A ever...” Austin added shading to the curve of the tattoo, tilted his head, wiped the excess ink off with his thumb, and then glanced at Rhonda’s stunned face.

“But you’re...?”

“Gay? Yes.” He grinned. “We didn’t actually have sex to make the kid. There are other ways to do that, you know?”

She snorted and shook her head at him. “Doofus. I do have a set of younger twin brothers who are IVF kids.”

“I guess it’s not weird for me. Katie’s like... I mean before Micah, she was the closest thing to possibly staying with someone forever I’d had. We are totally platonic, Katie and me, always have been. But she’s my best girl, you know?”

“And Micah is your best guy.” Rhonda stated, her expression softening knowingly.

“Oh yes...” Austin smiled.

The conversation stopped there, most likely because she could read him by now and knew he wasn’t a chatty person. This was also deeply personal information, or would’ve been to most, but Austin had never been shy or felt like he had anything to hide.

They were young, still. He was only twenty-five to Micah and Katie’s twenty-four. Before he met Micah, his family had mainly consisted of Katie

and Nugget, who was yet to be born. There was his mom, of course, but she lived in Pittsburgh now, having moved there to be with her sister. Austin's mom had always been a single parent and knew all about how to manage alone with the kids, or in their case, kid, because Austin was an only child. Her sister, however, had recently divorced and was at a loss on how to cope with five under fifteen-year-old kids alone. Austin knew his mom would've liked to be closer to River and Katie, but she'd admitted defeat after the third teary phone call from Austin's aunt.

Austin's mom was great. She'd always been supportive and loved Katie and then River. Even before they'd told her River was Austin's son, she'd loved the little boy by proxy. She understood that, technically, she wasn't a grandmother in the way most grandmas would be, because Austin wasn't River's dad, but his uncle instead. That didn't mean she wasn't spoiling the kid left and right. Austin knew Katie would call his mom soon to tell her the good and terrifying news of River's mobility.

Once he was done with Rhonda's tattoo, Austin cleaned it with controlled, efficient movements. Then he wrapped her shoulder and gave her the usual spiel about the aftercare, although she knew it already and was very conscious of making sure her tattoos healed properly. She paid and went on her merry way, and Austin tidied up his workspace like he always did.

"Austin!" Micah's tone was enthusiastic, and he almost startled Austin.

"What?" He looked up at Micah, who was already fidgeting, waiting to get his full attention.

"I had this awesome idea for River."

"Alright, tell me more?" Austin sat in the client's chair and gestured Micah closer.

They were both tall but not very bulky, so they could comfortably sit in the same chair, Micah on Austin's lap.

"You know, now that River walks I can paint him some shoes."

"Yeah, you can," Austin agreed. It was Micah's way of showing people he loved them; he bought canvas shoes and personalized them for his loved ones.

"How about we get a pair or two for River and I paint them, and then give them to him when they come over?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Foxy. We could go to a shoe store and find a pair right now. That way we can have them ready if they come over for the weekend."

“I think we should buy two pairs, with one slightly bigger and paint them both. Kids’ feet grow really fast.”

“Sure, we can do that.” Austin smiled and listened to his easily excitable, shy, artistic, and sometimes awkward boyfriend rattle off the locations of several shoe stores on their way home where they could find the perfect pair for the kid whom they both loved more than Austin had thought possible.

The windows were open in the bedroom and pretty much everywhere else in the house they’d rented a few months ago. Micah had been living in a cramped apartment with two of his friends, Caleb and Hannah.

They all got along really well and were from the same secluded community in Virginia. Micah disliked it when Austin called it a cult, so he tried not to. Caleb and Hannah were a couple, and that wasn’t really an ideal living situation with only one bedroom and a large living room in the apartment. Micah tried not to complain about the couch, because they couldn’t afford to get a new one for him to sleep on at the moment, but Austin knew his boyfriend’s back was killing him some mornings.

So when Austin felt like he and Micah were in it for the long haul, they had decided that a house would be great. They’d lucked out. They now rented a semi-detached home in Roxbury, in a part of the neighborhood that was pretty nice.

The owners of the house, a middle-aged couple who had their house converted into two apartments after their children moved out, were nice and didn’t mind the gay. They’d wondered about the Thompsons, but then Mrs. Thompson had told them their daughter was bisexual and had dated both genders growing up. This was one of the things Austin only knew because Micah was friendly enough to win over the neighbors on both sides, especially the female ones.

Despite his sometimes-debilitating shyness, Micah managed to make impressions with his large, innocent blue eyes and his gangly body, and his constant absent-mindedness, especially when he got to painting in their backyard.

He’d been doing that all day, and when Austin came home, he’d found his lover napping in the shadow of the back porch. Like they did pretty much every day, they made something to eat for dinner before hanging out in the living room.

If they were watching movies, they'd sit with Micah between Austin's legs and leaning back on his chest. If they had something to discuss, they'd be face to face, like they often did in the Fiery Squid in Austin's spot.

When inspiration struck, they'd each lean on a corner of the couch and sketch in their notepads, with their legs tangled together in the middle.

All in all, they touched each other a lot. Austin had taught Micah how to touch another person and in return Micah had taught him how to love.

In some ways, Austin hadn't known love, despite his experiences with Katie. From the start, he'd never really seen romantic love between two adults, because his dad had been out of the picture by the time he was three. His mom never remarried and didn't really like dating, but instead concentrated on her job, her friends, and then later, volunteer work.

With Katie, it was never romantic. Her parents, the only happily married couple Austin really knew growing up, were pretty much anti-PDA, and he couldn't remember them ever touching each other in front of the kids, not even in passing.

All Austin knew about touching other people came from previous more or less failed relationships and hook ups. Those, however, were more than Micah had ever experienced. In some ways Austin could appreciate the fact that he had done the promiscuous thing for a while. He had more to give to Micah physically than if he hadn't, and Micah taught him about the more spiritual side of love in return.

So by the time Austin found himself head over heels with the blond artist that frequented the pet shop above his workplace, he wasn't sure what to do with the budding emotions. Luckily Micah knew, partially instinctively, how to act.

Micah's upbringing was very different from Austin's. Where he'd grown up, people followed a preacher who was the head of their community. They were tactile, hardworking people with a fear of God instilled in them by the preacher.

Lucky for Micah—and Austin—the community, called Lydia, encouraged their young adults to search for their own way once they turned twenty-one. That was exactly what Micah, Caleb, and Hannah had done, and the rest was history.

Micah had about a year or two left in his studies, Caleb worked on construction and did some carpentry for his bosses, and Hannah was a nanny

for a great family in a nice neighborhood. None of them missed home enough to want to go back, Micah had told Austin. They all felt like the restrictions and rules of Lydia were too much for them. They were not meant to live under the rule of the preacher.

So now, Austin hovered between sleep and wakefulness, trying not to jostle the bed because Micah had finally fallen asleep half an hour ago.

The heat was oppressive, and their AC worked half of the time at best. When it worked, it made the house freezing cold, and when it didn't, they were sweaty and cranky. Mr. Thompson had promised to get the AC fixed in the whole house because theirs was acting out too. They just hadn't gotten to it yet and now, in the middle of the heat wave, the repairman they preferred was busy as hell because people needed him more than usual.

Austin must've fallen asleep, he thought, when he was jerked out of the almost-dream by his phone buzzing on the nightstand.

He picked up the phone and saw the number wasn't familiar, but the area code suggested Albany. Weird. It was just past three in the morning.

"Hello?" Austin said into the phone, his voice sounding hesitant even to himself.

"Austin Moore?" A female voice asked, and something about the formality with which she said his name made Austin's skin crawl.

"Yes, this is Austin Moore."

"Right, good. This is Officer Rivera from the Albany police department in New York. I'm sorry to call this late, but—"

"What's happened?" Austin managed to get the words out, and he felt Micah turn to him before a heavy arm draped across his middle and squeezed him for support.

"You're the emergency contact for a Katie Reyes and the next of kin to her baby boy, River. I'm really sorry to have to do this over the phone, but there's been an accident."

A soft humming started in Austin's ears, and it turned into a roaring waterfall, then something even more horrible: a near silence that felt like the static of a TV.

Micah pried the phone from his fingers, and Austin looked at him in confusion. He could see Micah speaking, but couldn't hear a word over the empty static in his head.

Eventually, Micah put the phone away and knelt on the bed next to Austin. He placed his hands on Austin's cheeks and leaned in close to kiss him gently on the lips. When he pulled back, Austin could see the sorrow in his eyes, and something about that felt so wrong in the core of who he was and who Micah was to him that his ears popped and he could hear again.

"Honey, are you with me?" Micah asked, probably for the second time.

"Y-yeah, yeah. I'm here. Can you...?"

"There's been a fire, Austin. In the building where Katie and River live."

"A-a fire?" Austin swallowed hard, trying to concentrate on staring into Micah's eyes when all he really wanted to do was to run and not listen.

"Yes. They were trapped, and by the time the firemen got there, Katie was unconscious. They got to River in time, honey. River will be just fine." Micah tried to soothe him.

"What about... what about Katie?" Austin knew before he asked, but he needed to hear the words.

"I'm sorry, Austin. She didn't make it. She died half an hour ago in the hospital."

Austin broke down, then. His mind refused to do anything but break down and check out, and he went willingly, the sorrow pushing everything else onto a back burner.

He wasn't sure how long he cried, but eventually he slept. When he woke up, the exhaustion he felt was deep inside him, inside his heart, and he could barely stumble out of the bed without falling over under the weight of his grief.

"Honey? Come get some coffee. We need to get going in an hour or so," Micah said from the kitchen.

"What?" Austin managed, his mind struggling to make sense of things.

"We have a plane to catch, Austin. We need to go get River."

He must've looked at Micah in a funny way, because the love of his life slid off from the stool he'd been sitting on and padded to him. Micah hugged him close and held him for a while, until Austin's brain caught up with everything.

"I'm his next of kin."

"Yes, you are, honey. I know we never thought this would happen, but I called the officer again a while ago, and she said it's either River's other parent, his grandparents, or the foster system."

“No. Absolutely not,” Austin said vehemently.

There was nothing wrong with Katie's parents, but they were getting older now, and couldn't raise a rambunctious little boy. He wouldn't even think of foster care, not after all the stories he'd heard.

“I know. So I told her we'd be in Albany as soon as we can and to make sure Katie's parents were with River until we got there.”

“I need to...” Austin pulled from the hug and looked down at himself, then at the coffeemaker and frowned.

“Go shower. Then come have coffee. I've already packed and gotten all the paperwork from the safe. We'll make the flight if you move, now.” Micah smiled at him, kissed his tear-sticky cheek, and pushed him toward the bathroom.

“Okay...” And so he moved, went through the familiar motions in a surreal situation, and thanked the universe for giving him Micah.

They made it to the hospital in Albany around two in the afternoon. Austin, still in a daze, clutched the folder of legal documents in one hand and Micah's fingers with the other. Micah had kept him afloat so far, and Austin knew he'd continue doing so, even with all that was going on.

Micah did all the talking, and eventually they were at the pediatric ward. Logically, Austin knew River was fine, but he was dreading the moment he'd lay his eyes on the baby. He wasn't sure why it scared him, whether it was a fear of seeing they'd lied to him and there were injuries, or if the fear came from seeing Katie in their son. Katie, who would never be with them again. Austin trembled as Micah spoke to the nurse, and barely registered the steps behind him.

“Excuse me, are you Austin Moore?” someone asked.

He turned around to see a Hispanic woman in a police uniform. The name tag read Rivera and something about that rang a bell, but all Austin could do was blink at her.

“Officer Rivera,” he said after a few beats of silence.

“Right, but you know that because you read my tag.” She smiled at him warmly, with sadness in her dark brown eyes. “We did speak on the phone last night, but your fiancé took over at some point.”

Austin wondered about the word “fiancé” briefly, but didn’t ask. He was sure there was an explanation to that. Then a familiar hand pressed against the small of his back, and Micah’s scent enveloped him with comfort.

“Officer Rivera.” Micah’s tone was polite, slightly cautious, but friendly. “I’m Micah Morris.”

The two of them shook hands while Austin watched.

“I’m sure you two want to go see River, so I won’t keep you any longer. I’d like to speak with you both, though, to let you know what happened and such, once you have a moment. Here’s my number, so if you would call...” She handed a card to Micah, and Austin stepped toward the door to River’s room.

He wasn’t sure how he ended up on the other side of that door, but when time moved for him again, he was standing by the baby’s bed and looking down at his sleeping son.

“Oh, Austin...” Katie’s mom Eva whispered, tears streaming down her face as she came to give him a brief hug. It was like she sensed he couldn’t quite grasp the reality yet and couldn’t deal with anything more than quick physical contact for comfort.

“I’m so sorry, son.” Gregory said, as if what had happened was somehow his fault.

Austin waved a hand at them, not quite dismissing but without any words to convey the emotions.

Micah came into the small room then, and froze momentarily when he saw the couple on the other side of River’s bed.

“You must be Micah,” Katie’s mom said, and Austin registered them shaking hands and continuing to speak while he stood there staring at the angelic little person.

Maybe the chatter woke him up, or maybe he’d just napped enough, but suddenly River twitched a little, then slowly blinked a few times before attaching his clear gaze to Austin.

“Hi, Nugget,” Austin whispered and reached his arms toward the boy.

Something clicked in that moment, and suddenly Austin had a lapful of snuggly sixteen-month-old baby pressing his face into Austin’s neck. River had never been shy with Austin, no matter how long it was since they’d last seen each other. Micah looked at them from across the room and smiled in an almost serene way.

"I think we'll go home for a nap," Eva said, and Austin looked at her properly for the first time.

She looked exhausted, and so did Gregory. They had Katie when they were older, nearly forty, and now they were both in their early sixties. They were about to retire, and they'd looked forward to traveling more now that they'd have time. Right now, neither of them looked like they wanted to do anything but sleep for a very long time.

"We'll take care of River. Don't worry," Austin promised.

"Do you have all the papers you'll need?" Gregory asked, stepping closer. He stroked River's hair that was almost exactly the same color as Austin's.

"Yeah, I made sure we have it all," Micah said quietly, giving them all space.

The look of shock on Micah's face when Eva hugged him would've been priceless in any other situation.

Now none of them were quite themselves, they all felt the oppressive weight of their grief and it drowned everything else. Eva hugged Austin and River too, and then she and Gregory left for the day.

Austin maneuvered himself and his son on top of the bed, and River curled up against his chest.

"Should we call Katie's lawyer?" Micah asked as he pulled a chair close to the bed and sat down.

Austin took one of River's little hands and gestured for Micah to reach over. The three of them held hands while Austin thought what the smartest thing to do would be.

"I suppose so. I don't have one, but given that he's River's lawyer too, I guess we can count on him, you know?"

They made the call and found out her former lawyer had moved to New York and Katie had replaced him with another one called Gina Sandler. Miss Sandler got to the hospital by five, just in time to hear what River's doctor had to say.

"I'm Doctor Jesse," the young-looking blond doctor said and shook everyone's hand in turn, even River's.

The boy was clearly already enamored of the cheerful doctor, and Austin felt thankful for that. At least he wouldn't have bad memories of his brief hospital stay.

“We were told that River is fine and good to go as soon as you check him out.” Micah stated before Austin could organize his thoughts enough.

“Oh yes, this little guy had some oxygen when they brought him in last night, but that was pretty much it. I heard from Officer Rivera that his room wasn't actually affected by anything but some smoke, and the smoke inhalation on his part was minimal and certainly non-threatening.”

Austin registered the “on his part” and knew instantly that was what had happened to Katie. They'd been trapped, and...

Micah took River from Austin's arms and helped the doctor with the checkup while Austin's mind reeled, and he tried to control his expressions as well as he could.

“Alrighty then,” the doc said and smiled at them. “If you have somewhere to go for the night, I will go fix the discharge papers for you and you'll be on your way in no time.”

“We have a room for them at a family friendly hotel,” Miss Sandler piped up, and Austin looked at her questioningly. “I guessed you wouldn't want to stay with Katie's parents and you don't have family in town, so I took the liberty of making the reservations for you. It will all be paid from what Katie called her ‘disaster-fund,’” she explained.

“Oh, well that's okay, then.” Austin nodded and started to look around for River's things.

There wasn't much to pack, since the boy had been literally torn from his bed by the firefighters and rushed into the hospital in his light summer pajamas with a funky retro pattern on them. Eva and Gregory had brought some stuff over from their place, so they dressed River in a toddler-sized hoodie.

“We need to get him more clothes,” Micah said once they were done and waiting for someone to come in with the paperwork.

Micah was standing by the window, lightly bouncing a tired-looking River in his arms, while Miss Sandler—“Oh just call me Gina!”—sat in a chair. Austin tried not to pace.

He was by the door when it suddenly opened and a nurse they hadn't seen yet stepped in with a clipboard in her hands. The woman took one look at Austin, and he could tell he was being judged.

“Right, then,” she said and stepped around him without greeting him. “I have discharge papers for River Reyes, here.”

It was curious how the room seemed to fill with something akin to tension. Micah turned around with River in his arms and looked at the middle-aged woman, neither of them saying anything. The nurse brandished the clipboard towards Micah, and when he didn't make a move to take it, she turned and looked at Gina.

"Oh..." the nurse said, before thrusting the thing at the lawyer.

"How about you try once more with that?" Gina smiled at the older woman with what Austin could only describe as a pissed off Cheshire cat look.

For a few seconds the nurse stood there, frozen to the spot before slowly raising her gaze back to Austin. She had the grace to blush, and Austin sighed straight at her before holding out a hand.

"Is it the ink? Piercings? Stretched ears? The gayness? Because the last one doesn't show, but my lawyer and my boyfriend here can vouch for that if you'd like confirmation." He couldn't help it. He tried, he really did, but... "You know I could think a few things about you based on appearance, too. Make assumptions and all that..." He signed his name with a flourish and handed the papers back to the now slightly pissed off looking woman.

"Austin, play nice," Micah said quietly and smiled a little, even though Austin knew he'd disappointed and perhaps embarrassed his partner.

"Sorry. It's just been an incredibly hard twelve hours or so, and I want to get out of here without being judged."

"I understand," the nurse said and gave them all a tight little smile. Then she excused herself without an apology and fled the room. Not that Austin blamed her, not really.

"Let's just go," he sighed the words at Micah and Gina.

River held his hands toward Austin when Micah stepped closer, and Austin gladly accepted the warm weight of the baby.

"We'll be just fine," Micah whispered to them, kissing both of them on the cheek.

"I hope so," Austin managed to say. He really, really hoped so.

It had been an interesting two days, learning to live with a baby full time while juggling paperwork and other not so fun things Gina threw at them and figuring out what they wanted to do with the stuff in Katie and River's

apartment. Austin had wanted to go there, to see it for himself for whatever reason; he didn't quite know why. Micah had put his foot down, and because he rarely did, Austin had listened to him.

Instead, Gina had gone with Gregory, and Micah had gone along because he'd thought one of them needed to be there.

Austin stayed back with River and Eva at the Reyes' house. It wasn't awkward at all. River was doing well and played with some wooden building blocks on the floor while Austin and Eva drank coffee and tried to chat a little.

"I don't know how I'd do this without Micah," Austin said at some point, the words coming out weirdly without the conscious thought of wanting to say them.

Eva looked at him and smiled. "I know. I feel the same about Gregory. I guess that's the whole thing with being with your other half. You can rely on them being there, and without them you're incomplete."

"I would still do this gladly, River is my son, and that was the agreement I had with Katie..."

"We'd never try and take him, you know that, right? We know you're capable, we know *you*, Austin. Katie loved you without hesitation, no matter how unsuitable you two ended up being romantically." She meant, naturally, their sexualities.

"Yeah... I don't think I've ever loved anyone more than I do Micah, River, and Katie." To Austin's surprise, those names were in order, too. He knew it would probably change, that River would become number one eventually, but for now they were learning to know one another on a day-to-day basis instead of "about once a month" as it had been before. Even then, Katie had been there at all times, because the adults wanted to spend time together as well.

"She loved Micah, too. She never thought he wouldn't be perfect for you, you know?" Eva glanced at him as she bent to take a painted wooden piggy from River and examined it as the treasure it was for the baby.

"This is a very fine piggy, go show it to Daddy," she encouraged.

River turned around and wobbled his way around the coffee table to Austin. It hit him then for real. He was Daddy now. Not Austin or Uncle Austin. He picked up the boy with the pink wood clutched in his hand and tried to keep his tears back for the baby's sake.

“What do you have there, Nugget?” The words came out a bit breathless, and he hid his face in River’s hair while taking the pig into his much, much larger hand and looked it over with eyes blurred with tears.

He avoided looking at Eva, knowing that she’d caught his expression and would no doubt be crying by now.

When the other adults came back, they looked harried in different ways. It was obvious they’d all been crying.

“We took River’s clothes and some other things to the dry cleaner’s. They can sort it all out.” Gina waved a hand and sat down next to Austin and River.

“The fire”—Gregory cleared his throat—“the fire hadn’t gotten into all of the apartment, but the smoke and water damage was pretty devastating in the living room. Even though River’s room was fine, everything had the smell of smoke stuck to it and...” He looked shaken and so very tired.

“Officer Rivera knew of some service that can handle getting the smoke off things that can’t be washed, so we packed stuff and took it over to them,” Gina said in a monotone voice so unlike the perky tone they’d come to know in the past few days, it was disturbing. “Fire restorers, I think, they were called.”

Micah edged closer to the couch and came to sit on Austin’s other side. River immediately thrust the piggy to Micah, who smiled and accepted it, kissing the boy’s cheek, then Austin’s. Micah practically radiated protectiveness and love, and Austin soaked it in for a moment.

“We’ll send you the stuff Micah said you’d want to keep for River, and the rest can stay in storage here when we get it all back. The things that can’t be salvaged... the building manager was pretty understanding and will take care of it for us.” Gregory gestured toward the stairs. “I need a nap.”

Eva told them to help themselves to whatever they needed and followed her husband to the bedroom. Austin couldn’t blame her for wanting to take care of the man; after all, he’d never seen Gregory look so old and somehow, small.

The morning of the funeral was cloudy, like the sky was waiting to be crying soon, too. Katie hadn’t been religious, so they gathered at the Reyes’ home, and Gregory and Austin fetched the urn of Katie’s ashes from the funeral directors.

They had Katie’s favorite flowers—yellow roses—everywhere in the house. Photos of her, River, and Austin were on every surface that wasn’t covered in

some sort of food. Nobody wore anything special, just their best jeans and shirts; there were no black suits in sight. Instead, according to Katie's wishes that they'd found in Gina's files, everyone wore a brightly colored top.

River wore his bright yellow SpongeBob shirt with red shorts and his favorite shoes, the canvas ones Micah had painted for him way before the fire.

There weren't too many people around—not because they hadn't wanted to come, but because those were Katie's wishes, too. She'd wanted people to remember her the next time they went out drinking with friends, or held a loved one's hand. She'd also left a wish for people not to buy her flowers, but instead, put the money in a special bank account for River's college fund.

So there they were, sitting on borrowed chairs in the backyard or in the living room, all the people Katie held dearest. There were aunts and uncles and a few close cousins. The one grandparent she had left, Eva's mother, Grandma Molly, was there, as were some friends who had been close to her from college or work.

All in all, it couldn't have been more than twenty-five people, but more than double that had sent messages to the family, telling them that they would remember Katie and put their "flower money" into River's fund.

Around midday, Austin found himself sitting in the backyard under a tree that had his and Katie's initials carved on the bark. They'd been eleven and twelve when they'd done that, and even then, there was no heart around the letters. They'd just known.

"Dada!" River called from the middle of the backyard, pointing at Austin with his chubby little hand.

Austin smiled and waved at the boy, seeing several of the guests look at their exchange with smiles on their faces. There, in this group of people, there was no prejudice. They all knew he was River's father and Katie's first choice to raise the child if she wasn't able to.

Austin wasn't looking forward to the prejudice he was sure they'd encounter out there in the real world when they got back to Boston and had to start their lives over. But for his son, for his "surprise family" like Micah had called them, he'd overcome anything.

The first week or so back in Boston was hard. River was adjusting, but so were Micah and Austin. Luckily their AC was fixed now, and Mrs. Thompson had offered them help in any way they needed.

“The new addition to the family, as adorable as he is, can throw you for a loop, especially if anything surprising happens,” she’d told them and patted Austin’s shoulder.

Her premonition, or hunch, or just knowledge about babies and parenting, came true around day nine of their new life.

River cried in the morning, and Austin thought it was just regular crying, and they continued on with their routines. Micah had gone out to his studio space to finish another painting first thing in the morning. By the time he got back for lunch and to check up on River, Austin’s nerves were shot to pieces.

“He stops for a moment, but then he starts again and it’s not crying anymore, now he wails, Micah.” Austin looked at his partner, feeling more helpless than he ever had before.

“Can I have him?” Micah held out his arms to take the crying baby from Austin. “Go walk around the block, honey,” he told Austin, and all but pushed him out the door.

It made sense to remove Austin from the situation for a moment, but he still felt wound up beyond belief and so, so helpless. For the first time he knew what Katie had meant about feeling like the worst parent ever for not being able to take away the pain from River when he’d had colic when he was two and a half months old.

By the time Austin was back, he felt less tense, and miracle of miracles, River wasn’t screaming. He practically ran up the steps and let himself into the house as quietly as he could, because River would only be quiet if he was asleep.

He found Micah on his back on the couch, with River tucked safely between his side and the cushions. River’s thick baby blanket was tightly wrapped around the boy, almost like a swaddle.

“Oh God...” Austin huffed out a breath of relief and sat on the edge of the coffee table.

“I think I figured it out,” Micah said very quietly, speaking in the funny, stiff way people do when they’re trying not to move at all while talking.

“Oh?” Austin took his hand and threaded their fingers together.

“Ear infection. If you want, you can call a doctor, but I think we can handle this on our own because he doesn’t have a fever.”

Austin stared at Micah like he was the fucking second coming. “How...?”

“He grabbed his ear a few times. And he has a bit of a cold, right?” Micah smiled. “We had a lot of children in Lydia at all times, and there were always kids with ear infections.”

Of course. Micah's past in the not-a-cult was the reason why he'd never even batted an eye when a while after they started dating, Austin had told him he was going to be a father-of-sorts soon. If there was something Micah was good and familiar with, it was children.

“What do we do?”

“Once he wakes up, we make sure he gets enough fluids, give him some Tylenol, maybe wet a towel with warm water and try to keep it pressed to his ear. He should be fine in a couple of days. If he gets worse, we call the doctor. Unless you want to do it now?”

“No, I trust you,” Austin said, and Micah's expression turned into something that told Austin he had just given his partner the world.

“Okay. So why don't you go and figure out the lunch situation, maybe some banana and peanut butter smoothies for me and Nugget here?” Micah batted his long lashes at Austin who chuckled quietly.

“Fine, fine...” He let go of Micah's hand, leaned over to kiss him gently. “But you're also having a sandwich. And I'll cut some grapes into smaller pieces for him if he wants them.”

They did all they could at home, but whenever the Tylenol wore out, River was in pain again. The next afternoon, they decided that taking him to the doctor's was mandatory.

“Mrs. Thompson told me to go to this place.” Micah came to the hall where Austin was trying to get shoes on River, who wasn't cooperating at all.

“Who is it?”

“Their old family doctor, or his clinic. They used the clinic when their own kids were small, and now the guy's daughter has taken over. Apparently they're top notch and very family oriented, all in all,” Micah spoke while picking up River's Teletubby stuffed toy—the purple one, obviously—and distracted the baby with it until Austin could get the shoes on him.

“Alright, let's go, then. The cab's here.”

“We really need to buy a car,” Micah said, and Austin knew he was right.

“We do, yes. Maybe when Katie’s insurance money comes through? Since we need the car mainly for River’s needs anyway?” Austin picked up River, and they left the house, Micah clutching Tinky Winky in one hand and the clinic’s card in the other.

The clinic wasn’t far, luckily, because River was starting to get that pained expression that preceded a mini-meltdown. The cabbie was understanding, and he got a nice tip for his good choice of routes.

They rushed inside the homey-looking Victorian house that had at some point been converted into a doctor’s office.

“Hi, I’m Shannon, how can I help you?” A young woman sitting behind the desk asked as soon as they stepped inside.

“Ear infection that hasn’t gone away in a few days. He’s getting worse now,” Austin said quickly, showing how frazzled he was, but he couldn’t help it.

“Okay, we only have one person before you, and Dr. Papadopoulos will gladly take a look.” She smiled at them all, then gave them a clipboard and a pen. “Could one of you fill this in for us?”

Micah took the papers, and they went to sit in a waiting area, which looked like it had once been a fancy parlor. Austin wished he had time to properly look at it, but there was none. River was tugging at his ear and making hiccupy noises, sounding completely miserable.

“Erm, it asks for parents or guardians. Can I put myself here?” Micah asked, frowning at the paper. “I mean, how legally correct does this have to be for them?”

“I’ve no clue. Want to go ask the girl?” Austin fought the urge to bounce River on his knee, because it seemed to be the go-to gesture to amuse the kid when needed. Sadly it wouldn’t work here, not with the pain.

Micah got up and rounded the corner to the hall. He came back immediately.

“She’s not there. No idea where she went.”

“Okay, well leave it empty until we can ask?”

Suddenly, a man who looked to be in his late twenties stepped into the room from a door in the back Austin hadn’t noticed before. He wore scrubs and a name tag that read Nurse Eric, and smiled at them, and River, before walking closer.

“Having trouble with the info sheet?” he asked, pointing at the clipboard in Micah’s hand.

“Yeah, actually we were.” Austin smiled back at the guy.

“We’re looking at the section with the parents’ information. We were wondering if that needs to be legal information or should we leave it empty until we have something in place for River?” Micah asked, looking nervous and shy suddenly. Something about the nurse seemed to trigger that side of him.

The man looked at them, seemingly confused, so Austin jumped in.

“See, we’re a brand new family unit, and although River here is my son, Micah hasn’t adopted him yet, so he’s not his son legally yet.”

The nurse seemed to pick up on their relationship, looking from Austin to Micah and back, and then glancing at River with a weird expression on his face.

“Oh,” he said, narrowing his eyes. “Well, I’m pretty sure it’s fine to put you there as the other parent, if you two are it.” Something in the words or maybe how they were said seemed to make Micah sink into himself a little.

It ticked Austin off. Nobody should make Micah feel bad for wanting to be River’s second parent. He balanced River in his lap and reached his other hand to Micah who took it instinctively, despite standing next to them instead of sitting down. The nurse tried to hide a sneer in a pretty unsuccessful way.

“Yes, we’re ‘it’. Since his mother, who was my best friend since I was his age, died some weeks ago.” Austin hoped his tone and expression conveyed what he felt.

Micah squeezed his fingers as if to calm him down despite having retreated into his shell a little.

For a few seconds the nurse looked cowed, but then he straightened his back and was about to say something undoubtedly unpleasant, when the receptionist whirled around the corner.

“Eric! Can you check the supplies in the kid’s examination room?” she asked, seeming a bit breathless.

“Sure.” Eric the Nurse left the room without saying a thing to Austin’s family.

“Are you done with that?” Shannon—Austin remembered her name suddenly—asked them after Eric vanished somewhere to do his job.

Austin asked her the parental unit question, and they put Micah down as an emergency contact and the second parent, pending.

“So, River Dorian Reyes.” She looked at the clipboard and smiled at River. “What a lovely name you have!”

“Thanks, the credit goes to his mom,” Austin said, smiling, until the fact that Katie was gone forever hit him and he froze.

Micah, who had sat at some point, reached a hand around Austin. “We lost her recently,” Micah said and smiled sadly at poor Shannon who, unlike the nurse, looked shocked and sad at the same time.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured, and with the lack of anything else to add, she took the clipboard and walked away.

Losing someone in their mid-twenties seemed especially disturbing to a lot of people, even more so when leaving behind a kid River’s age. Not that Austin blamed them, at all.

It turned out that Doctor Mary Papadopoulos was a young woman who was obviously not as Greek as her last name was, and the small diamond on her ring finger told them why that was, exactly. She was also very nice, kind, and calm, and River took a liking to her immediately.

“Is it normal to feel like the worst parent in the history of parents when you can’t help your child when they’re obviously in pain?” Micah blurted out the question while she was taking a peek into River’s ears.

Austin held River on his lap and, hopefully, still too, while the doctor worked.

She smiled. “Oh yes. Everyone feels like that at some point, but especially new parents. You didn’t even have the infant time to draw from, that’s huge.”

“It’s like suddenly having a new baby who isn’t really a baby after all.” Austin nodded.

“Some of the most nervous parents are those who adopt toddlers, you know. At least here in my clinic.”

She looked at the three of them and smiled. “At least, you have a good relationship and all knew each other before the tragedy happened.” They’d filled her in with why exactly they had River in the first place.

“Yeah, I mean it was never planned to be this way, but obviously Katie knew I could do it,” Austin said, then glanced at Micah. “She knew *we* could do it.”

Micah flashed him a huge smile, and again Austin wondered where he'd be without his partner.

They got antibiotics for River, and promised to call back in a few days for an update. They liked the doctor a lot, and were welcomed back anytime they needed. Finally, Dr. Mary gave them her emergency number as well.

"I don't give this to everyone, just those who I can see needing it in a panic situation. You guys are new at this daddy thing," she said, and brushed River's hair behind his ear, making him hide his face into Micah's neck. "It was sprung on you and you weren't prepared. So I get it, and I want to be there for you."

"Thank you, it matters a lot to us both," Austin told her and meant every word.

The antibiotics did their trick, and a couple of days later River was back to his usual babbly self and Austin could call the clinic to let them know.

The trip to the clinic wasn't a magical cure for the occasional feelings of ineptitude and chaos that followed them around for the next several weeks. It shouldn't have been a surprise when they found themselves collapsing into bed after long days of working and taking care of River, but somehow, in the beginning, it was.

Gradually, they formed a routine that worked. Because they were still a new family, they didn't want to place River in daycare and preferred to keep him with whoever could have him during the day.

If it was Micah's day, it meant he painted at home and watched River at the same time. Usually after lunchtime, Mrs. Thompson would come and ask if he needed help watching the boy. Mrs. Thompson took a liking to River and began to treat him like one of her own grandkids. She was never intrusive, just offered help and gave her time gladly, being an additional support network for Austin's family. Her husband still worked, but she was retired and had time on her hands—in her own words, more than she knew what to do with.

If Micah was at his studio or at school, Austin would take River with him to the Fiery Squid. They had gotten a playard for him, and it took up most of the previously empty floor space in the front. That way River could play and be easily reached if and when he needed something. His little spot of Squid was between the windows and Austin's workspace, which made Austin's work a lot more fun in some ways, and more difficult in others.

Almost all the clients loved River and his easygoing nature. They would chat with him and play with him while waiting, and they were always happy to ooh and aah at his artwork—toddler-friendly art supplies courtesy of Auntie Hy.

Deep down, Austin knew that it wouldn't always be easy, not with no mom and two dads, not with life in general, but so far things looked pretty awesome for his son. The early days of River waking up sobbing in the middle of the night for no apparent reason had stopped, and Micah firmly believed it had been the only way River's baby psyche could handle the loss of his mother.

Austin and Micah had decided to incorporate things they knew Katie would've liked into River's routines. They read to the boy every night and would have done it even without Katie's influence, and they limited his TV time to a minimum. They also encouraged River's creativity in every way they could come up with, and set some rules and agreed to hold on to them while River grew up.

They continued to nurture River's individuality, and even watched some older Disney movies with the boy because Katie had loved those. They did fast forward the scary bits, naturally, but there was still enough for them all to enjoy. Sometimes Micah was the one who got lost in one of the movies, mostly because they were completely new for him. He'd never seen any of them as a child, so Austin enjoyed teaching both Micah and River all about Dumbo, The Little Mermaid, and other classics, not that River had the capability to sit down and watch for more than a few minutes yet anyway. Micah kept telling Austin they had time and it was the thought that counted and all that, but sometimes Austin wondered if he needed to come up with more ways to keep Katie's memory alive. He trusted that he would figure it out by the time River was old enough to understand more.

The one thing Austin had managed to overlook for a couple of months in the newness and mild panic of the situation was intimacy. Before River they had a pretty awesome sex life, and they'd made love most nights and sometimes during the day if they were both home. It was as natural as breathing for them, especially now that Micah had gotten to a point where he craved Austin's touch without any shame or hesitation. He was still pretty timid about asking for sex if he wanted it, though, and in a way that was what alerted Austin to something being wrong.

“You’re acting weird,” Austin stated one Saturday morning when they had their breakfast and were cleaning the kitchen together while River sat in the living room, watching Teletubbies from an old VHS Mrs. Thompson had given them along with the player. “Why are you acting weird?”

Instead of answering, Micah blushed and ducked his head, finding cover behind his hair. That was a sign that Austin could read better than any words.

“Oh...” It all made sense now. The funny looks and the lingering touches that Austin had thought were just Micah needing more physical contact now that River took most of Austin’s attention.

“I know you’ve been... distracted... and...” Micah said after a moment of silence.

“No, no...” Austin wrapped his arms around Micah’s slender body and pulled him close. “Now that I’ve realized it, it’s all I can think about.” He noticed how his voice turned husky and his body suddenly reacted to the closeness of Micah’s body against his.

Micah swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing with the motion, and just like that, getting to bite and lick the long, graceful neck was all Austin could think about.

The doorbell ringing was the only thing keeping him from attacking Micah right there in the kitchen while their son was babbling at the TV in the next room.

Micah, still blushing, tore himself away from Austin and went to open the door.

“Oh, Mrs. Thompson!” Austin could hear Micah say.

“Good morning, Micah,” she said cheerily, then went quiet and continued after a few beats. “I think I came here just at the right time!” There were brisk steps as she walked further into the house and to the kitchen.

The grin on her face as she took in Austin’s flustered complexion was wickedly knowing, something he would’ve loved not to have seen on the face of a woman her age. Ever.

“Mrs. Thomp—” Austin started, then corrected himself before she could “—Marie.”

“I came over to ask if you two would let me take River to the park and maybe to visit my grandkids. I thought you might need some alone time for a change.” The grin was back and Austin fidgeted internally.

Micah had vanished mysteriously, and Austin didn't blame him even a little.

He decided it was best to concentrate on River. "Oh... well I think it would be a great idea for him to get to play with other kids again."

"That's settled, then!" Marie clapped her hands delightedly, and in less than ten minutes, River was packed and ready to go. "I'll return him by bedtime and make sure he has dinner so all you have to do is give him a bath and a snack and put him to bed."

The whirlwind that was Marie Thompson blew away with River in tow, and suddenly Austin and Micah were alone together for the first time since they'd brought River home three months ago.

They stood there in the hallway, staring at each other.

"We have roughly six hours to do grown up stuff." He looked at Micah. "Any ideas?"

At first Micah blushed, but then he began to unbutton his shirt. Before Austin knew it, Micah was walking toward the back of the house, stripping the rest of his few bits of clothing off and dropping them wherever they fell.

Austin stared after his suddenly playful lover. The sight of Micah's bare ass vanishing around the corner towards the bedroom finally jolted Austin into action. He grinned, pulled off his T-shirt, and ran after Micah, already opening the button of his jean shorts.

When he got to the bedroom, Micah was lying on his back in the middle of their bed, looking much more shy than any gorgeous man naked in bed who was about to have sex should.

"You have no idea how much I want you..." Austin's voice sounded husky again.

Micah looked pointedly at Austin's cock that was already rock hard. "I know."

Austin tried to hold back, to not jump into bed and on top of Micah like an animal, but he didn't quite manage. He was on the bed with Micah before he realized he had moved, and Micah welcomed him with open arms.

"Six hours?" Micah smiled, looking excited and hopeful. "Not that I wanted to get rid of Nugget, but..."

"Less talking, more making out."

That was where they started. Touching seemed like a sudden burst of luxury, and they kissed and touched, leisurely, until they couldn't stand it anymore.

"Austin..." Micah whined, probably wanting Austin to take over like he normally would.

Austin shook his head. "No, this is your show. At least for round one."

Luckily Micah seemed too turned on to worry about anything or get self-conscious. He flipped Austin on his back and straddled him smoothly, then grabbed Austin's hand and seemed to think for a moment. Then, flushing slightly, he pressed Austin's hand against his cock. Biting his lower lip, Micah wrapped his long fingers around Austin's cock and looked up.

"Together," Micah whispered.

Austin moaned softly at Micah's grip on his dick. "Okay, whatever you want, Foxy."

Austin loved art, but nothing was more beautiful for him than Micah in the throes of ecstasy. He knew it was still difficult for Micah to let go completely, but now it had been too long for him to be able to think anything at all. Instead, he gave himself to the pleasure and undulated his body on top of Austin's while somehow still being able to pleasure Austin at the same time.

Micah's long-limbed body, still completely tattoo free, moved with instinct guiding everything. Even knowing him so well by now, Austin still felt spellbound watching Micah. There was such innocence in Micah, such grace and something almost poetic; it made Austin wonder how he'd ever gotten this lucky.

"C-close," Micah breathed, threw back his head and let out a funny little almost-howl, coming all over Austin's hand.

The way Micah's fingers squeezed Austin's cock a bit firmer as he came was enough to throw Austin off the edge and into the abyss he hadn't realized he'd been missing, both physically and mentally.

Micah slumped on top of him and they breathed together, waiting for the first round rush to leave them and for their heartbeats to slow down again.

Eventually Micah lifted his head and smiled at Austin. "Hi."

"Hi, Foxy." Austin kissed him.

"Have I told you lately how much I love you? And River."

“I think you tell me every day, without words.” Austin ran his palms up and down Micah’s back. “I love you too, and so does River.”

Micah ducked his head again, looking so pleased it made Austin’s heart stutter. He realized he should give Micah more credit and remember to tell him how important he was in Austin and River’s life. No time like the present.

“I could’ve done this without you, maybe,” Austin started, and Micah tensed slightly. “But I would never have wanted to, and without you my son wouldn’t have two parents who love him and want to make sure he has everything he could ever need. Don’t you ever think you’re not important, or that I don’t cherish you, because I do. So, so much.”

Big tears rolled down Micah’s cheeks, and Austin grabbed him, rolling them over again. “When we’re all good and ready, I want us to get married,” he said quietly, looking into Micah’s eyes. “We’re still learning how to be a family, but eventually it will come naturally, and then I’ll pop the question. Or you can, if you want.”

Micah smiled through his tears and nodded. “Okay.”

They kissed again and again, starting round two without realizing it.

A while later Austin fumbled for the lube and made sure Micah was ready before entering him slowly. He’d been the first one to do this with Micah, and he prided himself on making it as close to perfect as he could each time.

“Love you,” Austin murmured, rocking his hips, finding the right angle. He didn’t give a damn about saying the words while making love, because if that wasn’t the time, then when was it?

“Harder,” Micah said, surprising Austin a little, because usually they went slow and gentle, taking their time. “I think I want it harder and faster,” Micah implored, sounding slightly insecure.

“Whatever you need, Foxy.” And so Austin moved faster, harder, making sure he pegged Micah’s sweet spot as often as possible. He enjoyed it, no matter how they did it, because it was Micah in his arms and nobody else. To let Micah find what he liked whenever he was ready for it was a perk, something Austin would never take lightly.

“Let go,” Micah whispered, jerking himself quickly, waiting for Austin to come first this time.

When he did, Micah followed him soon after, his body milking Austin for all he was worth until he had to pull out because he was so tender.

An hour later they were showering. There had been a round three in the shower, and they were taking their time to wash each other, feeling lazy as hell.

“Do you miss River already, too?” Micah watched Austin rinsing his hair.

“Uh-huh,” Austin admitted, surfacing from under the spray.

“So let’s take a little nap and then go see if they’re back?”

“Sure.” Austin smiled, and Micah flashed him a happy, relaxed smile.

They dried off and changed the sheets before climbing back under the covers. Micah rested against Austin’s chest like so often before, and they both sighed contently, relaxing gradually in the gentle hum of the AC.

It took five minutes for Micah to shift restlessly for the first time. Austin opened his eyes, wondering if he’d imagined it. No, he felt it again soon after.

“You want to get dressed and go see if they’re back?” Austin asked when Micah fidgeted again.

“Can we?” Micah asked in a whisper.

“Sure. He’s our son. Of course we can.”

It was almost funny how fast Micah was out of bed and pulling on clean clothes. Austin looked at him with a raised eyebrow, and Micah waved at him impatiently.

“I don’t care if she sees us in different clothes. It’s not like she didn’t do this because she wanted to give us time to do this exact thing!” Micah babbled and began to pull a comb through his blond, slightly curly hair.

“Then throw me some underwear.” Micah did, and they were out of the door in five more minutes.

Before they had time to ring the Thompsons’ doorbell, a car door closed near the sidewalk and Marie looked at them knowingly.

“Missed us already?”

Micah nodded and went to the car, fishing River out of the car seat Marie had for her grandkids and now for River too.

“Dada!” River squealed when Micah turned with the boy in his arms and River could see Austin.

“Hey, Nugget. Did you have fun?” Austin smiled at his son. He accepted sticky fingers against his cheeks and a very wet kiss aimed in the general direction of his lips.

“You three are just the cutest,” Marie said as she came around with River’s bag.

Austin looked at the two most important people in his life and smiled at her. “I don’t know about me, but they sure are.”

The End

Author Bio

Tia Fielding is a thirty-something Scandinavian. She is a self-proclaimed queer person, lover of everything pretty, witty people, words, cats, sarcasm, autumn, and caffeine. (Lots of caffeine.)

Tia started writing stories early in life, almost as soon as she learned how to write. Her early stories about horses and ghosts have now turned into romantic tales about people in love, but her early enthusiasm and imagination still runs wild. After losing the thread of her writing in her teens, Tia rediscovered the joy of writing stories through fan fiction, which kick-started her publishing career. Tia is not ashamed of her past of borrowing other people's characters, but has found creating her own much more satisfying.

In 2013 one of Tia's novels, Falling Into Place, was recognized by the industry's Rainbow Awards in the Best LGBT Erotic Romance (Bobby Michaels Award) category.

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IT TAKES TWO

By Alexa Milne

Photo Description

Two men dance bare-footed on a chequered marble floor. They are dressed in dark trousers, white shirts and wear braces. The taller man has his hand placed lightly on the other man's back. Their heads almost meet but their bodies are tantalisingly just apart, as if they don't want to be too close.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I have been living in stolen moments. It's been weeks since the first time he grabbed my hand and pulled me to the dance floor, my father's expectations and the ledgers of our failing family restaurant forgotten. After everyone leaves for the night, he's been teaching me how to dance. It was a lark at first, a welcome distraction from, well... everything. Lately though, something is different. We move as one being now. The feel of him, my hand pressed on the small of his back, the heat of his face inches away from mine... it's all I think about, having him in my arms. I count the hours, the minutes till I can brush my fingers over his shoulders and feel his breath on my chin. Does he feel the same way?

This could be historical or contemporary—wherever the picture takes you. I hope there is an HEA for these two, and I am dying to know what happens when they finally kiss! Oh, and if it works for a tango lesson or two to devolve into sexy times (clothes torn off/open and cum splattered all over the marble floor), I won't protest.

Sincerely,

Penny

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: infidelity, angst, dancing, friendship, accountant, bartender/waiter, student, wedding

Word Count: 22,362

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IT TAKES TWO

By Alexa Milne

“Lucca, are you listening to me?”

She was right. I wasn't listening to her; I was watching him. He seemed to glide between the tables, talking to the customers, picking up empty plates and pouring wine. The way he moved fascinated me, how he curved his body, tucking in his behind and arching his back to avoid hitting anything. It was like I'd never seen him before, and now I couldn't stop seeing him. Last night, lying alone in bed, every time I'd closed my eyes I'd seen him, those blue eyes shining and his lips a hair's breadth away from mine. I'd come so close last night, so close to total and utter disaster.

“Lucca!”

I pulled myself back to the real world. “Sorry, Savvy, you were talking about the flowers. I'm sure white carnations and yellow rose buds will look lovely.”

“Sometimes I wonder if you're bothered about this wedding at all.” She pouted, but there was still a twinkle in her eyes. She leant forward and smiled at me. She had a great smile; it had been one of the first things I'd noticed about her. “Look, you know I didn't want all this fuss, but Dad wants to throw his money around, and I, at least, want to make sure that it's not totally over the top. I think Dad would have got us thrones if he could. At least we won't have the pictures all over some magazine with the logo for Dad's restaurants in every shot!” She ran her fingers through her short blonde hair, pushing it back, away from the front of her brown eyes. We made a good team and we were good friends. She was fun to be with and she took me out of myself and forced me to be sociable.

We sighed simultaneously. “I don't know, Lucca, why does everything have to be so bloody complicated? It's hard keeping everyone satisfied; I know you didn't want a lot of fuss either.”

She knew me well; I'd never been a party animal and I had few close friends. It took me a long time to trust people; perhaps that was why I made such a good accountant. We'd met at university during our second year. We

were friends first, and then one night, we both got a bit tipsy and somehow ended up in bed together. I'd never been one for one night stands. I'd had a few other girlfriends but nothing had lasted, so Savvy and I sort of fell into a relationship, which worked for us both. Now, ten years down the line, we were weeks away from our thirtieth birthdays and from our wedding. We'd been at a family party, looking at the photographs from my cousin's recent nuptials when Savvy had jokingly said, "You know, Lucca once told me that if we got to thirty and hadn't found anyone else, we should get married."

"Then it's about time he asked." My papa had always liked Savvy. Then Mama had waded in. "Yes Lucca, your papa's right; organising a wedding takes time." And I found myself asking if she wanted to marry me. I'm not sure which of us was more surprised when she said yes. We've never even lived together; I was going to move into her house on the outskirts of Leeds after the wedding—or at least that was the plan. I hadn't put my flat up for sale yet. I argued things would turn around and that we could make more money renting it out. Maybe that should have told us something, but here we were, discussing flowers.

I looked across to the bar. "I wonder how many glasses Papa has polished over the years. Whenever I think of him, I see him there behind the bar or wandering between the tables. Losing this place has been hard for him to come to terms with."

"I know, but Dad will give him a fair price, and he'll be able to retire at last. Your Mama will definitely be pleased." I nodded, knowing she was right. I'd looked after the books for a while, and the restaurant simply wasn't making enough money any more. People didn't want to pay more when there were fast food outlets around, like those owned by Savannah's father. Pile it up and sell it cheap was a philosophy that worked.

"Can I get you anything else, Sir?" I jumped at the sound of his surprisingly deep voice. I looked straight up into those bright blue eyes. My stomach lurched, and I felt the blush beginning to develop on my cheeks. Was he doing it on purpose? The way he said 'Sir' in that glorious Italian accent went straight to my cock. Last night I'd held him in my arms, my hand spread across the small of his back, our bodies moving in unison. When we'd started the lessons, it had been bit of a laugh. I was completely awful, but he had such patience. We fitted together so well, with him being smaller and slighter than me. But when he led, showing me the moves, it became obvious he had a powerful physique hidden under those clothes. His hands were strong when they held mine and his

arms well-muscled, which I suppose allowed him to carry around heavy plates, as well as steer me in the right direction. He kept telling me off for looking at him, pushing my head back with his hand but I couldn't help myself. I became fascinated by such little things, like his long eyelashes and the dimple on his chin.

“Would Sir like a pudding, or a coffee perhaps?”

I pulled myself together and met his gaze. “No, thank you, Tony, we're finished here.” I managed to keep my tone on an even keel as if nothing had happened the night before, as if I hadn't pulled him close, or felt his erection pressing into my hip and then come within a whisker of kissing him. “If you could just clear the table, please?”

“Certainly, Sir, it would be my pleasure.” There was just the hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth, and I fought back a blush again, grateful my lower half was hidden under the table. At some point, the lessons had come to mean more than a good laugh. I'd found myself looking forward to seeing him. Those hours became the most important in my week. He flirted with me and I found myself flirting back, loving the praise and the attention he gave me. I'd considered asking him out, just for a drink, nothing more, so I could spend time with him other than at night in the dark. I wanted to know more about him. Where was he from? How did he learn to dance? I had a big list of questions. Whenever I'd asked him anything, he'd shaken his finger at me. “Now is not the time for chatting, Signor Romano; we have work to do if we're going to turn you into a dancer.”

Did he deliberately brush his hand against mine as he took my plate? I looked at Savvy, but she hadn't noticed. I tried to concentrate as she continued to talk about her day at work, but my eye was constantly drawn elsewhere. I saw another customer write something on a napkin and slip it into Tony's pocket.

“Looks like Tony has pulled again,” Savvy said chuckling. “I swear he could charm the birds from the trees.”

“Sorry?” I asked, confused.

“Tony, the waiter, you know, dark and handsome; I think that man has just given him his number. Your dad will be sad to let him go. He's such a flirt, and your papa says he's great with the customers. I'd ask Dad to give him a job when this place closes but his talents would be wasted in one of his businesses.

He's so cute and such a good flirt with the women as well as the men. I bet he's never short of offers from either."

I felt myself tense. "I can't say I've given it much thought. Each to their own I suppose." I had no right to feel the surge of jealousy coursing through my veins. I was with my fiancée. I needed to pull myself together and stop having these vague fantasies. He was simply flirting with me in the same way he flirted with everyone, just as Savvy had said. I wasn't special. For all I knew, he could be screwing a different person every night.

"It's a pity you didn't take him up on his offer to teach you to dance." She looked at me for a moment. Perhaps it was something in my face. "Are you alright? You seem to be completely distracted tonight. You're not coming down with something, are you?" She touched my forehead. "You do look a bit peaky."

That was it. I was determined now. Tonight, I'd tell him that I didn't need any more lessons.

"I'm fine, Savvy; stop fussing." I know I had no right to be irritated with her, and I immediately felt like a complete bastard. "I'm sorry; I guess I'm just tired, you know with work and the restaurant and everything."

When the last of the few customers were making their way out of the restaurant, I turned to Savvy again. "I'll order you a taxi. I've got to talk to Papa about the sale. Your father's been very generous."

"Call it a wedding present. He likes you and it'll do no harm to have an accountant in the family. And this place is in a good site. Leeds is next on his master plan, and this gives him a great location. You know it hasn't been the same here since Mario left. The food is alright but not good enough to get people to pay a reasonable price. These days it's all about cheap and cheerful and that's what Dad offers. It may not be gourmet but it's all about bums on seats."

"I'll come and wait outside with you." A few minutes later, I waved her goodbye and turned to go back into the restaurant. Tony was stacking chairs and tables, clearing a space on the marble floor. I went over to the bar.

"Papa, you look tired. I'll sort everything out for you. Go home to Mama; you know how she worries about you."

"You're a good boy, Lucca. Did you get things sorted with Savannah? The wedding isn't far away now. Your Mama is so excited; her baby boy married at

last and Savannah is such a lovely girl, not one of these flighty things you see on these TV programmes. She has a good head on her shoulders. She's good for you."

"I know, Papa; I know I'm very lucky to have her. Papa, we've got the paperwork for the sale. The solicitors have looked everything over, and Derek wants to do this as quickly as possible. The offer he's made is more than generous. I'll bring everything around to the house tomorrow." As I felt his arms go around me, I knew there were probably tears in his eyes.

"Tomorrow," he said, patting my back. "I know you're right."

I saw him to his car, locked up the kitchen and returned to find Tony waiting for me at the side of the room. I told myself I could end this. I had to end it. After all, he was only teaching me to dance. A few weeks ago Savvy had teased me about my two left feet and how I was going to show her up during our first dance together. Tony had taken my hand in front of them all and pulled me up towards him. He'd begun to take me around the small space at the bar, one foot at a time, showing me how to move in a few simple steps. I don't know how many times I stood on his feet that first time. "I'm sorry; I said I was rubbish."

"I will teach you to dance like Fred Astaire," he announced, just like that. Two days later, we started my secret lessons at the end of service. No one thought it was strange for me to be there; I often worked late and then came in for a meal and to see Papa. "Take your shoes and socks off," he told me. "If you are going to step on my feet, I'd rather you didn't break my toes."

He taught me the waltz first. I don't know how many times we both chanted 'one, two, side, together', but after a few lessons, I'd grasped the basics and was moving around the floor taking him with me. I don't know when I began to notice how good it felt to have him in my arms or how much time I spent counting the minutes until we could do it again. We hardly talked during each session beyond the basic instructions on the steps. I knew nothing about him beyond the fact that he worked in the restaurant a few evenings a week.

"You have learned to waltz very well, Lucca. I think your intended will be very pleased with you."

"Are you sure? Shouldn't I have some more lessons?" Was I begging? It felt like I was. "Sorry, that was presumptuous of me; you probably have somewhere else to be." Now I was digging, but it was so wonderful, being able to move around the floor and to take control. It made me feel strong and confident in a

way I'd never done before. I couldn't bear the idea of stopping. I needed my fix of this, and even more, I needed my fix of him, however dangerous and reckless that might be.

He looked at me, his eyes shining in the semi-darkness. "Alright then, I will teach you to tango." I couldn't have explained to anyone the excitement I felt at hearing those words. And so we'd started again with the basic steps of the dance.

"Now turn!"

I'd moved my head last night, suddenly, as he told me to do, stuck my chin out too far and caught his. He'd cupped my face. "Are you alright?" I had been until he'd touched me, until I felt his breath on my face, until I'd seen the concern in his eyes. He was millimetres away and the realisation hit me that, more than anything, I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to feel his lips on mine and I wanted it more than anything I'd ever wanted in my whole life.

"I'm sorry, I have to go. I've got an early meeting tomorrow. You can lock up, can't you?" I'd turned and run for my life, for my sanity, unable to deal with my feelings, but still I'd come back tonight. It was only right to tell him to his face. It was simple. All I needed to do was thank him and leave, then I would be safe again, wouldn't I?

He stood up and walked towards me. "I wasn't sure you'd want to continue after last night. Why did you leave? You were doing so well. You'd only stood on my toes once." He stood in front of me, barefoot as usual, wearing a crisp white shirt and black trousers held up by the dark blue braces he always wore when he was working. I tried to remember what I'd told him, but my thoughts were all over the place.

"I told you, I felt sick," I said. "I needed some air. Sorry, I shouldn't have left you to lock up. If you don't want to continue, we don't have to do this." No, that was wrong. I was supposed to be telling him it was over, I'd learned enough and I didn't need him anymore. But I couldn't say the words.

He shook his head, took my hand, and led me to the middle of the floor. I could tell he knew I was lying through my teeth. "We'd better get some more practice in then. We haven't got much more time together. Your father gave me my notice earlier. Why didn't you tell me you were selling the restaurant? I'll need to find a new job. I'll be sorry not to be working here anymore. I like the people. I like you."

Oh God, I felt my heart leap out of my chest, like in one of those cartoons. I needed to get myself under control, and quickly, but before I could do anything, he'd closed the space between us and taken up both my hands. "Dance with me, Lucca. Hold me in your arms and dance with me."

I stood, unsure of what to do next. I'd just have this last session and then end things, no harm done. "There's no music," I said, stuck to the spot. He began to hum the song we'd chosen to dance to, and we began to move totally in sync with each other, our heads together and our hips slightly apart as he'd taught me. We moved in a straight line across the floor then turned abruptly. "Good, you've really got that now." I grinned like a Cheshire cat; praise from him felt wonderful. He reached over the bar and put the music on. The sound filled the darkened room. I raised my arm again and spread my other hand on the small of his back. I felt him place his hands on my arms. Briefly, the stubble on his face grazed across mine as we stood almost cheek to cheek. I wanted to pull him towards me so our hips met, so I could press our bodies fully together, but he'd taught me right from the beginning that the tango wasn't the same. On the beat of the music I began once more to do the basic steps I'd mastered, turning when we reached the end of the room.

"I think it's time we tried something a little more ambitious. I'll lead you through some more difficult steps." We stopped, he moved his lower leg, twisting his body to and fro as he did each move, precisely placing his foot every time.

"Now you," he instructed. I followed as he did each step, slowly at first and then more quickly. When I looked up, he was staring at me. He spoke almost in a whisper; his voice was low and the tone did something to my insides. "I don't know who told you that you had two left feet. I guess you just needed the right teacher to bring the moves out of you. Your fiancée is going to be very impressed with how much you can do."

I knew it was wrong, but I didn't want to think or talk about Savannah at that moment. I could feel his breath on my face. I watched, fascinated, as his lips parted slightly. I wanted to run but my feet refused to move. I held my breath as he ran a finger down my cheek.

Could a man purr? I swear he did. "I could teach you so many things, Lucca." Then it happened, his lips touched mine. No other part of our bodies touched at all. His mouth felt so soft. I could feel his tongue pressing. I opened my mouth slightly and moaned when his tongue ran along my lower lip. If there was anything else happening in the world at the moment, I didn't want to know.

Surely the heat I was feeling had burnt everything else away anyway. Then his warmth was gone. Not sure my legs would hold me up, I grasped the chair by my side and sat down with a bump.

"I've wanted to do that from the moment I first saw you," he said, kneeling in front of me. My mouth opened and words came out. "I'm getting married. I'm not gay. I don't know why I did that." I felt his hand in mine.

"I think we both know there's something going on here. You kissed me back; I didn't imagine that, did I?"

"No, you didn't, but I can't do this." He reached out and kissed my hand. I felt his face graze my skin. It was so different to being kissed by Savannah. "Oh God, Tony; I shouldn't have done that." I felt my cock stir in my trousers. Shit, this was real; this time I wasn't dreaming it.

He took my face in his hands. "I'm going to leave now, Lucca. I will continue to teach you if that's what you want, but you must know I have feelings for you. This is more than just wanting to be in your arms." He released my face, stood up and placed my hand on the bulge at the front of his trousers. I knew mine was the same, hard and begging to escape. As if some force held it there, I couldn't pull my hand away. "I want you, Lucca, and I think you want me. I know your situation, but only you can decide what's right for you. I'll be here again in two days if you want to take this further, but I'm not prepared to play second fiddle." I watched him turn and walk away, more certain that he was taking the foundations of my whole world with him, than I was about anything else in my life.

The next day felt like it lasted forever. I had meeting after meeting with different people who needed me to show them the best way to avoid declaring income on which they didn't want to pay tax. For some, it meant the difference between keeping their businesses afloat and going under. I felt like I was helping them, but others simply wanted to keep their money for themselves. It was all perfectly legal and part of my job, but that didn't mean I had to like it. More than once, my mind drifted to our kiss, to the feel of him under my hand, to the daydream of what it would be like to wrap my fingers around his cock. My phone vibrated in my pocket. I expected the text to be from Savannah or my father; he could just about manage to use the phone I'd bought him now. I looked at the message a few times.

Meet me tonight at 10 at Club Argentine. I'll give your name to the doormen. Please.

It was the final “please” that got me. I immediately googled the club and found there was a tango exhibition there tonight. I could tell myself I was there to learn. I could see my parents earlier and allow Mama to stuff me with food, and go on there afterwards. I’d be safe in a club full of people, even if I was tempted, wouldn’t I?

I chose my clothes carefully—my black suit, which I knew hugged my arse, my white shirt, and the red braces Savvy had bought me. I looked at my ties and put on the red one that matched. I could take it off after I’d seen my parents.

I shuffled the papers together into a pile and put them back in the folder. “That’s it, Papa, that’s everything completed. I’ll take them to the solicitors tomorrow.” I pressed my hand over my father’s fingers. This was the end of an era. “I know you’ll miss the old place, but now you and Mama can have some time to enjoy yourselves rather than you working yourself to death.”

He sighed and patted my hand. “I know you’re right, son. Now, eat and make your Mama happy. We thought Savannah might be here tonight.”

Mama placed the food on the table in front of us. “I wanted to show her my outfit. I finally found one today.”

“Hmmm, only after she’d dragged me all around Harrogate for the hundredth time.”

“Well, it’s important, Giuseppe. I’m the mother of the groom. I don’t want to let him down.”

“You could never let me down, Mama. You’ve been the best parents a son could hope for and I love you both. Mama, as always this lasagne is magnificent.”

Later, I made my excuses and left. As I drove back into Leeds, I questioned what the hell I was doing. I told myself I was just going to watch and learn. This was not a date; I wasn’t going out with Tony. At most, it was a drink together.

I parked a little way away and walked the short distance to the club. The entrance was busy with people milling about. The posters on the wall outside showed various dancers. I stopped in front of one poster which showed two men in hold. Was that what we looked like when I had Tony in my arms? I

made my way to the front of the queue, and gave my name to the doormen. I was allowed in immediately and told to wait at the bar.

Perched on a stool, I ordered a drink and looked around. The place was nearly full by now. In the centre there was a large rectangular dance floor. I sensed him before I heard him; perhaps it was the smell of his cologne. "You came then." I turned to see Tony standing behind me. He wore the same black trousers and white shirt he worked in. His dark hair was slicked back. He looked like a gangster in some 1930s film. I almost expected him to be carrying a violin case or tossing a coin. As I scanned him from head to toe, I saw he even wore those black and white shoes like they did in the old movies.

"I came," I said quietly.

"I've got a table over here." I followed him to the edge of the dance floor and took the chair next to his. There was very little room to manoeuvre and our thighs touched. Neither of us moved them. "I brought you here to see what is possible. There are some great dancers performing tonight, both amateur and professional."

"I saw some of them on the posters outside. When did you learn to dance? I would have thought it was unusual these days, for a man to dance to your standard. You've worked for my father for ages, but I know so very little about you. I don't even know your full name." I could have looked at his employment records but I wanted him to tell me only what he wanted me to know. Was the idea of dancing with a mysterious stranger more alluring?

"My name is Anthony Matteo Jones."

"Jones!" I couldn't hide my surprise. There was another obvious change as well. "And what the hell, your accent? That's not Italian. I assumed that you were."

"My mother's Italian but my father's Welsh. I was born in Cardiff."

"But the accent?"

"Ciao, Signor," he said rolling the letter R. "You mean the Italian one all the customers love their waiters to have. You know that's what they want; it's what you seemed to want as well, so I kept using it. We don't have much of an accent at home, just a bit of a Welsh lilt. I came to Leeds when I was eighteen, and I've been here for nearly six years now. I can talk Yorkshire, ee by gum, as well if you want. As for the dancing, my sister went to ballroom lessons and I followed her and found I wanted to join in."

I grinned at his description. “*I watched my Sis go pitter pat, said I could do that, I could do that!*”

“Wow, you can sing. I’d never have figured you for a musicals fan. I know, it’s very *Chorus Line*. Being one of the few boys made me very popular; all the girls wanted to dance with me in competitions. It was a great way to meet women.”

Now I really was confused. “But you’re gay.”

“Oh, Lucca,” he said putting his hand on my thigh. “Why do people need labels?” Before I had chance to reply, the lights went down and the music started. A series of dancers performed to various Latin rhythms. They were beautiful, the men in their suits and the women in their dresses, as they swirled and stepped across the wooden floor. “These are people from the local dance club,” Tony told me. “For some of them, it’s the first time they’ve performed in public.”

“Do you go to the same club?” I asked just as the music stopped and the MC came out and said something in Spanish.

“You’ll love this,” Tony whispered in my ear. He took my hand and held it between our thighs as two men took centre stage on the dance floor. For the next five minutes, they danced together. I watched, mesmerised by each move they made, and each step they took. They moved together as one, hardly deviating from the spot. They flicked their legs and whirled around, one picking up the other, cheeks together and hip to hip. The steps were more intricate than anything I’d ever seen. Then, at the end of the dance, they kissed, and I know I stopped breathing as all around me people stood and cheered. I just stared until I felt Tony pull his hand from mine. “I have to go,” he said into my ear. “Wait here, you’ll see me soon.”

Gradually, the noise died down and the men left the stage. For a while music played and the audience got up to dance. I didn’t know how long I was supposed to wait. I needed a drink, but I was afraid to move lest I lose my spot.

“Your drink, Sir.” I looked up as a glass of wine was placed on my table. “Tony thought you might need one.”

As if by magic, the floor cleared and a spotlight hit the centre of the room. The music began again and two men appeared in the centre. Both wore similar outfits, the usual black trousers but this time with red sashes around their waists. Instead of white shirts they wore black boleros with red trim leaving

their chests bare. I could only see the taller man who was facing me when they began to move, legs intertwining in those oh-so-intricate patterns. And then I saw his face; the other dancer pressed him close then they pushed each other away and circled around like cats circling their prey. Their eyes hardly left each other as they seemingly fought against one another but then were drawn back together as if by some invisible thread. I heard a growl and felt my nails digging into my palms. Every nerve ending felt alive; adrenaline pumped through my veins. I wasn't sure if I wanted to fight or flee. Some of me felt I shouldn't be there, that this was too intimate, that I didn't belong, but more of me wanted to pull Tony away from the man who held him in his arms. He was mine, not his. I wanted him in my arms; I wanted to press my body against his; I wanted my hand on his chest; I wanted him! Shit! I wanted him! All around me the crowd erupted when the dance came to an end. I tried to see where he had gone, but lost him in the melee. I waited, unsure of anything. He'd taken everything in my world and stamped it underfoot as certainly as I'd watched him stamp his feet on the dance floor. The buzz from my phone brought me out of my head.

*Next lesson, tomorrow, usual place, 11pm Sleep well, your
Tony xx*

My Tony. By the next day, it had got so bad that I was doodling his name on official papers. He was all I could think about. By the time I'd crawled into my bed last night, I must have looked at his message over a hundred times. I looked at it as I held my cock in my other hand and came so hard my whole body shook. This was so fucked up, but I knew I'd be there as he instructed. I didn't know what I wanted to happen, or perhaps I did, but I didn't want to put a name to it. Was I gay after all or bisexual? Could you get to nearly thirty and find that you fancied men? And did I fancy men or did I just fancy him? I know a few of us had messed around when we were in our teens, but a few quick handjobs didn't count, did they? Surely everyone did that. I'd slept with women. Alright, I'd only slept with Savannah since we officially became a couple, but I found her attractive; we were comfortable. Shit! We really were comfortable. I'd never wanted to kill anyone who touched her, and drag them off and claim her as my own like I did last night, watching Tony dancing with the other man. Oh God, it was no good. I was lost, and more than a little afraid that I didn't want to ever be found.

The evening seemed to go on forever. I put on an action film to take my mind off what was to come but found myself looking at Bruce Willis's vest in a

whole new way. I began to look at every man on the screen, considering what I liked or didn't like about them, regardless of their acting ability. It was like I was giving myself some sort of gay test. When my phone sang out, I grabbed it quickly wanting it to be Tony.

"Oh, it's you," I said disappointed.

"And good evening to you too!"

"Sorry, I thought you might be someone else. What's up?"

"Aww, are you missing the gorgeous Savannah? Anyway, does anything have to be up? I am your best friend and your best man after all. You haven't called me for a couple of days. I just thought I'd check you're alright." I settled into the sofa and leaned back. I'd known Josh since we'd started secondary school and we'd stayed friends even after university had taken us to different places. Both of us had come back home, me from Manchester and him from Sheffield. "Sorry, mate, I've been a bit distracted lately. Dad's finally signed the papers to sell the restaurant to Savvy's father, and work's been a nightmare."

"Good job I called then, because you sound like you need a good night out. Friday, you, me and anyone else who's about. Definitely no women!"

He was my oldest friend and I'd trust him with my life. If there was anyone I could talk to about this thing with Tony, it was Josh. "How's Danny Boy?" I asked.

"Oh God, my brother is so loved up with Zach it makes you want to puke. He says I'm just jealous and maybe he's right. He's as happy as a pig in muck, whereas I'm still looking for Ms Right and now you're getting hitched as well. I'm going to be a sad old man left on the shelf. It's no good, I need to get pissed and drown my many sorrows. I'll see you in the Crown at seven on Friday, alright?"

"Looking forward to it. If you're there first, get the beers in."

"Will do."

The restaurant was in darkness when I arrived exactly at eleven. I parked around the back and let myself into the kitchen. The emergency light gave off a faint glow in the corridor that connected the kitchen to the dining room. I opened the door and saw a candle light suddenly flicker and grow before me.

“You came then; I wasn’t sure you would.” The light from the candle flickered across his features, illuminating his cheek bones and creating stars in his eyes. He smiled, and I could see the white of his teeth. “Are you just going to stand there?” he asked.

“I don’t know what to do,” I said, placing my arms across my chest. He got to his feet and sauntered towards me. This time he wasn’t wearing his braces. Slowly he undid the buttons of his shirt and left it hanging open and then, when he reached me, he unfolded my arms and did the same to mine. He took hold of my right hand and pulled it gently then pressed my hand and his to my chest, bringing us together and began to sway then step backwards, sideways, forwards, not really going anywhere. I followed where he led as he hummed the music and put his head on my shoulder. There, in the light of one candle, we swayed together, our other arms loose at our sides. I closed my eyes and just let him take me wherever he wanted. “Keep dancing,” he said quietly. “Just follow me and close your eyes.”

After a couple of minutes, I felt his other hand move between us. He pulled down the zip of my jeans. I’m not sure who was most surprised, me that his hand was now on my cock, or him finding I wore nothing under my jeans. “Keep dancing,” he whispered again as he closed his fingers around me and began to stroke.

“Does that feel good?” he asked.

I only managed to get out one word. “Yes,” I whispered. His strokes increased in speed, but still we moved around the marble floor. I wasn’t sure how he could do it, but I didn’t care. My whole body seemed only to exist in two places, in the feel of his fingers around my hand and around my cock. I knew this wasn’t going to take much longer. I could feel my orgasm waiting in the wings, gathering speed. My cock was so hard that his touch was almost painful, but there was no way I wanted him to stop.

“I’m going to come,” I warned.

“Open your eyes,” he said. I did and looked straight into his. “This is me doing this. This is my hand stroking your cock. This is me making you come.” I couldn’t stop myself.

“Oh fuck!” And then it happened and my cum coated his fingers. He arched his hips away from me but continued to milk me of everything I had. I knew I must be dripping cum all over the floor and even on my shoes but I didn’t give a damn. I felt him use his fingers to wipe the head and then he tucked me back

into my jeans. My knees buckled. "I need to sit down," I gasped. "Too much. I can't. Shit, that was so good. I've never felt anything..."

"Sit." He guided me to a chair. "I'll just get a cloth to clean up." I looked across and could see the flecks of white on the dark squares of the chequered floor. "You've a few drops on your shoes as well." He got down on his knees in front of me and ran a finger across my shoe. I swear, when he put that single digit in his mouth and groaned, my cock lurched upwards again, straining to get to either his finger or his mouth. Seconds later he'd retrieved a towel from the bar and wiped the floor. I noticed him tuck it into his belt, probably out of habit. I had no idea how much time had passed. He returned to kneel in front of me and took my hands. "I'm sorry you missed your lesson."

I'm not sure where the next words I spoke came from. "Come home with me, please. You haven't, I haven't..." He pressed a finger to my lips.

"There's no need. Tonight was for you. I wanted you to feel good. And no, I'm not going to come home with you, not tonight. I want to, but you're getting married in a few weeks, and I'm not that sort of man. I needed you to understand what you could have if you wanted, but if I went home with you tonight, I'd want everything from you, and I'd give you anything you desired. I'm going to leave. You've got a lot to think about, Lucca, and some big decisions to make."

He was right. Although I really had no idea what I truly wanted, there was one thing I was certain about; I wanted him more than I'd wanted anyone in the whole of my life.

I gave him a few minutes, and then I got to my feet. I had no idea where he lived, or who he lived with. He'd worked in the restaurant for a few months now, doing a few evening shifts a week. Before we'd started dancing, I hadn't even noticed him among the others who also worked there on and off. Now, at least, I had a name for him but not the one I was expecting. I hadn't intended to follow him, and believe me following a man on foot with a car wasn't an easy thing to do. It was around midnight on a Thursday evening so there weren't many people about as he walked up towards the University buildings. He kept walking for a few miles along the Headingley Road and then ducked into a side street and I lost him. The houses were mostly student lets around there, back-to-back houses that had been knocked through and usually accommodated several students at a time. Did this mean Tony was a student? It struck me I hadn't even considered that he might do something else; I'd assumed he just waited on

tables for a living. I wanted to smack myself in the face for my arrogance. I really did have no idea about him. Perhaps he just shared because it didn't cost as much, but working at night did give him the daytime to study. There was, of course a simple solution to all this; I could simply ask him. There was a lot I could ask him. I needed to do as Josh used to tell me. "Sort out your shit, Lucca." That had been his advice about Savannah. "Sort your shit out or you're going to lose her, and Savvy is too good to lose." So I had, and here I was back in it up to my neck. Well, there was one positive thing I could do. If the shit he'd encouraged me to sort hit the fan, I could, at least, blame him!

At dead on seven the next day, I pushed open the door to the bar and brushed the water droplets off my jacket. The Crown was like many another pub that had been transformed after the smoking ban. The old lounge area was now a restaurant, but the bar had kept its pool table and dart board and its old wooden floor. Josh was there already, watching Danny cueing up a shot while Zach did his best to put him off. I waved to them both and noticed Josh had got the beers in. He was taller than me and still mostly blonde, although less so than he had been as a teenager. He'd filled out as well from being the scrawny, spotty youth I'd first met, aged eleven. His brother Danny was a couple of years younger but had the same colouring. He and Zach had been together for five years now and had celebrated their civil partnership last year. Josh worked behind the scenes at the BBC studio in Leeds, helping to research and develop local news and other programmes. It meant he'd met a few people over the years and always had a story or two to tell. He got up when I got to the table, and we automatically hugged each other.

"It's good to see you. Seems like ages." It was in fact only a week since we'd last seen each other.

"How you feeling then?" he asked. "Getting nervous now as the big day approaches?"

"I'm fine, just busy, you know how it is. Met anyone famous this week?"

"No, not this week, but I've been acting as floor manager for a change, on the local news. Live is really a buzz. We lost the weather on Wednesday."

"Oh yeah, I think I remember that. She was waving her hands around and there was nothing but a green screen behind. She should have just drawn on a map on a piece of paper and put some rain clouds on it—that'd be accurate for most days!"

“You’re probably right; certainly would be for today. Anyway, how is the lovely Savannah? You really are a lucky bastard, you know. I’ve no idea what she sees in you, though.” I’ve never been very good at lying to him or hiding anything from him, and I guess he saw the look cross my face. Truth was I wanted him to see it. I had to talk to someone; I was going to explode if I didn’t.

“Are you sure you’re okay? You sounded a bit funny last night. Not getting cold feet, are you? The wedding is only a few weeks away.” I looked down at the table and bit my lip. What the hell did I say? I want to fuck one of the waiters at my dad’s restaurant? I think I have feelings for another man? I think I may not be entirely straight after all? Some guy took my dick in his hand and I ended up coming all over the floor while we danced in each other’s arms? Well, which would you chose? I looked over to where Danny was potting a ball, which he did easily. Despite the fact they were playing against each other, Zach’s face was filled with pride. The look of love that passed between them didn’t make me want to puke, instead it filled my heart with something completely and utterly sappy, like I’d just been given a basket full of puppies and kittens. Bloody hell I had it bad!

“Told you,” Josh said, seeing the direction of my gaze. “Look at the pair of them. Makes you sick, sappy gits, the pair of them.”

“It doesn’t make me sick,” I said quietly. “In fact, I quite envy them.”

“Well, yeah, they’ve got each other and that’s good, I’ll give you that. Lucca, you would tell me if there was something wrong, wouldn’t you? I’m getting vibes. Is there something you want to tell me?” I looked around the bar which was beginning to fill up with people falling out of their offices into a night out.

“Do you mind if we get out of here?”

“Okay,” he said tentatively. “I’ve a few bottles of wine at home and we can pick up a curry or pizza or something.”

“Thanks, a drink or two will help.”

“So there is something?”

“Please, I can’t do this here. At yours, alright?”

We got a taxi, picked up some food, and twenty or so minutes later we were sitting in Josh’s third-floor flat overlooking the river. With the pizza on plates

and the wine poured, we sat opposite each other in the big open plan kitchen/living room.

“So spill,” Josh told me. I looked at him, not sure whether to tell him the full story or just the edited highlights. Either way, he was going to be pissed with me. He liked Savannah. I’d always been grateful that my two best friends had got on so well, because it had made things so much easier. I swallowed nearly half of the huge glass of wine, and then placed it back on the table. I could feel my heart thumping in my chest; it was so loud I thought Josh would be able to hear it as well.

“Fuck, Lucca, what the hell is this? I’m getting worried now. You’re not ill or something, or is it Savvy, or your parents? You’ve got to give me something here because I’m filling in the gaps.”

“No, it’s nothing like that. Everyone else is alright. It’s me; I’ve done something totally unforgivable. I should hate myself for doing it, but I can’t.”

Josh fixed me with an angry stare. “Who is she?” I swallowed hard.

“There is no she.” I wanted him to get what I meant without me having to spell it out for him, but it was obviously so far out of left field that he just stared at me, an incomprehensible look on his face. “Then, if it’s not another woman, what the hell is it?” he yelled.

I got up and walked to the windows that ran from floor to ceiling. It was dark now, but the lamp lights flickered in the water and I could see the lights in the city stretching ahead. I couldn’t face him. “Do I have to spell it out?” I asked. “There is no other woman.” I could almost hear the cogs in his brain working things out.

“Shit, Lucca. Are you trying to tell me there’s—I can’t believe I’m about to say this—another man? You’ve slept with some bloke?” All I could do was nod.

“What the hell! How? Sorry that’s stupid. When? Who? Is it serious? Is this just a one-off thing? Like an experiment? Did you just get pissed or something? No-one took advantage of you, did they?”

I turned around. “No, I knew what I was doing. Will you just hear me out before having a go at me? I need to talk to someone about this. I don’t know what to do.”

“Okay, come and sit down and I’ll listen. Eat something before you drink anymore.” I noticed he’d nearly drained his glass. I managed a few bites of

pizza, and then swallowed another mouthful of wine. "D'you remember the evening when we were all out at the restaurant and were talking about my two left feet?"

"Yeah, Tony the waiter grabbed you and made you do a few steps. I'm not sure I've ever seen anyone go quite that shade of puce."

"Well, I've been having lessons from him. I didn't want to show Savannah up, and Tony offered to teach me at the restaurant after work and..."

"But that was over a month ago now. Have you been having lessons ever since?"

"Yeah, sometimes two or three times a week. He taught me to waltz and now he's teaching me to tango."

"Oh, I see; I get the picture. Just the two of you, after hours, dancing, in each other's arms. Is that how it was?"

"You have to hold the other person, and he was teaching me to lead, so I held him in my arms. He taught me, Josh. Tony taught me to dance, and it felt good having him there. Alright, perhaps it was being in the dark and doing it in secret, but I began to count the minutes until we'd be together again, and then I nearly kissed him."

"So that's all this is?" I watched him physically deflate as if he'd been holding his breath waiting for me to finish and now he believed everything was alright.

"No, there's more; I went back the next day. It was all I could think about, Josh. I had to know. I had all these feelings and I had to know, so we kissed and it felt so right. Don't ask me to explain; you just know. I was the one who didn't want to stop, but he walked away." I tried to work out what Josh was thinking. Anger, disgust, disbelief, I think they were all there. "Bloody hell, I only found out his full name this week or anything about him come to that, even though he's worked for my father for ages. Then last night we met again and... well... things went a bit further."

"How much further?" I was beginning to get a bit scared now as he ground the words out through gritted teeth but I couldn't seem to help myself. "About the same distance we did that time when there were a few of us wanking each other off!"

"Yeah, but we were teenagers, not bloody thirty and about to get married!"

I thought I may as well tell him it all now. "I asked him to come home with me, but he wouldn't. He told me I had to make up my mind and choose, but how do I do that? I love Savvy, but I get hard just thinking about him." I saw him glance down. "No, not now, you pillock! What am I going to do, Josh? I need help."

"I've a radical suggestion."

"Oh yeah, I'm all ears," I said, leaning forward on my knees.

"Stop seeing him. For Christ's sake, Lucca, like you said, you're getting married in a few weeks! Do you want to risk what you have with Savvy for some bloke you hardly know? He's given you an out. He's told you to make the decision, so make it. Put it down to experience, and get on with the rest of your life! And, above all else, say nothing to Savvy. Don't ask for her forgiveness just to indulge your guilt. That's it; that's my advice."

I thought about what he'd said for a while, and I knew he was right. I could text Tony and never see him again. The restaurant was going to change hands; he was going to have to get a new job. I could make a reasonable stab at a first dance with my new wife. It was all so simple. All I needed to do was stop seeing his face every time I closed my eyes, stop imagining his touch on my cheek, stop hearing his voice and stop remembering how it felt to come from the stroke of his hand. Above all else, I needed to forget how it felt to hold him in my arms. "I know you're right..." I whispered.

"I hear a but." He stopped. "Okay, let's say you take this further—what? You're going to tell him some story to get him to bed and then fuck him or he's going to fuck you? Or maybe you're going to leave Savvy and set up home with him. You're going to tell your parents and your friends you've turned gay all of a sudden. Have you thought for a moment with anything other than your dick?"

"I know it's a mess, Josh, but this isn't all about my cock and where it goes. I have feelings for him."

"What? Are you trying to tell me you're in love with him or something?"

"No, of course not!" I sounded emphatic, but I wasn't really certain of myself or how I felt. "I'm not even sure I love Savvy like that, or that she loves me. Let's face it, Josh, we've never even lived together because she likes her space. Maybe we shouldn't get married; maybe we should just be good friends. It's not too late. I need to talk to her. What if we're making the biggest mistake

of our lives?" I wanted him to agree with me; he was my friend, and I wanted him to put his arms around me and tell me everything was going to be alright, and he would help me sort things out and make decisions, and we'd always be friends. That's what we'd always done up until now. One look at his face, and I knew that someone had not only shifted the goalposts but changed the game. There was going to be no hug as he grabbed my arms and shook me. "You are an idiot; you have the most beautiful woman in the world willing to marry you and you're going to fuck it up over what, some bloke with a cute arse?"

I looked at him then, my best friend and my best man. His face was red, his eyes wide, his body full of pent up aggression. I needed to get out of there. I knew this was nothing to do with me fancying men or one man to be exact. I shook him off me and got up. "I'm going to go, Josh. I'm sorry we couldn't talk about this. I really am very sorry." He didn't stop me leaving. Once I was down at street level, I got out my phone and called the only person I suspected would know the answer to my question.

"Danny, it's Lucca. Just how long has your brother been in love with my girlfriend?"

Sometimes you shouldn't even try to work people out. Now I had this information, what was I going to do with it? So Josh had a thing for Savannah, it wasn't as if I could just say, 'Hey, Savvy, I don't think I want to marry you after all, but I've got you someone off the subs bench, and I hope that's okay while I go and explore my own sexuality!' I slammed my hand down on the table in front of me sending papers flying. "Fuck!" This was such a mess and there was no way out of it without someone getting hurt. I needed to see Tony no matter what he said about making my mind up. Deep in my heart, I think I'd already decided, regardless of what happened with him. It didn't take me long to find out exactly where he lived; I argued with myself that I did my father's accounts, so if I accidentally saw the address of one of his employees there was nothing wrong with that. The street wasn't far from the main road. I looked on Google Maps and then at the street view. Okay, I admit it was a bit stalkerish, but I didn't care. Looking at it, the house was undoubtedly one used for multiple-occupation so maybe he was some sort of student after all. I knew he wasn't working at the restaurant tonight, so I decided to just simply knock on his door. He could shut it in my face or let me in; I was prepared for either eventuality.

It was still light as I stood on the doorstep, my heart in my mouth and my stomach AWOL. I knocked on the door as the local church clock struck seven.

I'd tried rehearsing what I was going to say but the words kept slipping from my mind or swapping themselves around until I may as well have been speaking some language known only to my brain. I'd been scared plenty of times in my life, but never like this. The door opened, and I was greeted by a short blonde girl in jeans and T-shirt.

"Oh, hi," I said lamely. *Why had I expected Tony to answer the door?* "Ummm, I'm looking for Tony Jones; he does live here, doesn't he?" The girl looked as if she didn't know what to say.

"It's okay, my name is Lucca Romano; Tony works at my father's restaurant in town. I needed to see him. Is he in? Could you let him know I'm here? I'll wait."

"Sure, he's upstairs in his room. I'll let him know." She shut the door and disappeared. I hopped from foot to foot and contemplated running back to my car more than once, then leaving as quickly as possible, but then he opened the door. He was wearing black jeans and a T-shirt with AC/DC emblazoned across it. He looked so different. His hair was all over the place and his blue eyes were full of confusion. And as for my heart, it made its own decision: I think I saw it jump out of my chest and nestle itself just next to his own.

"Lucca, what the hell are you doing here?" He held his ground and showed no sign of letting me in.

"Can we talk? Please? I didn't know what else to do." We were interrupted by someone leaving. I waited while Tony spoke to him and couldn't help wondering if he'd slept with him or maybe the girl. I know I had no right, but I had no control either.

"You'd better come up to my room then. I'm at the back, at the top of the first set of stairs." He closed the door behind us, and I followed him up. I was taken back to all those student houses I'd lived in; somehow they all seemed to smell the same. His door was open. He ushered me in and then closed it behind us. The room was clean but cluttered. There was a double bed, wardrobe and chest of drawers, a desk and a couple of chairs. A large window filled nearly the whole of the far wall, which made it seem more light and airy. Scattered all over the desk were papers and books surrounding a laptop.

"I was working," he said by way of explanation.

"I have no idea what you do." I was still standing, not sure of what to do. The only places to sit were on the chairs or the bed, and one chair was covered with clothes. Tony pulled the duvet cover straight.

“Sit on the bed; I’ll get us a coffee, and then you can tell me why you’re here.” He closed the door, and I went over to his desk, curious to find out exactly what it was he was doing. The papers were full of graphs and complicated equations I didn’t understand, even though I’d done A-level maths and spent my days working with figures. The texts on the shelf above the desk were all about colour science. I knew Leeds was a leading university in the field, because someone from school had gone there. I could see a few novels, mostly sci-fi, and other bits and pieces. To one side there was a photograph of Tony with people I assumed were his parents and his sister. He looked younger than he did now, but not that much younger, so I guessed it wasn’t taken too long ago. I heard the footsteps on the stairs so sat down and waited.

“How did you find me?” he asked as he placed the mugs onto the small cabinet next to his bed. “I didn’t tell you where I lived.” I wasn’t sure if he was angry with me, but he took the seat at his desk and turned it to face me.

“I looked up your address from the records at the restaurant. I know I shouldn’t have, but I needed to see you.”

“So, have you made your mind up?”

“Tony, it’s not that simple.”

“So, you’re still getting married then?”

“Officially.”

He got up from the chair and looked out of the window. I put down the coffee and followed him.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I leaned my forehead against the back of his neck. “Tony, I can’t just tell Savannah it’s all off, just like that. You must understand.” I couldn’t help myself, and I kissed the back of his neck where small tendrils of dark hair curled uncontrolled by the usual gel.

“I shouldn’t let you do that,” he whispered. So I did it again and reached my arms around him. For what seemed like forever we both stood there, his hands on mine, my lips kissing the back of his neck. I felt his whole body sigh. “Why do I do this to myself? I’ve always been a sucker for straight men in suits. Usually, I just look at them from afar and don’t get involved, but from the moment I first let you hold me in your arms, I knew I was in trouble.”

“You weren’t the only one. For some reason, standing here, holding you, just feels right, more right than anything I’ve ever felt in my life. It’s as if I’ve found the lost piece of a puzzle.” He turned his head slightly so I could see his face.

“Please tell me you didn’t just say that. You’ll be talking Plato and split-aparts before we know it!”

“What?” I had no idea what he was on about. He turned fully to face me so our heads were only inches apart.

“Plato said that when the world began there were these happy creatures that weren’t male or female but someone was jealous—I can’t remember who exactly—and split them apart making them search forever for their other half. You sounded like that.”

I leaned down and pressed our lips together, and at the same time reached my arms around him and pulled him in closer. I don’t know if we were split apart or what, but I did know I’d never felt more right in my life, standing there, holding him, feeling his warm, wet lips on mine. I wanted to breathe him in, make him part of me. I pushed at his mouth, and he opened enough for me to run my tongue between his lips, then nip and suck on the bottom one. It was perfect, and I never wanted it to end. I could feel his erection pressing into mine; I reached lower to cup his arse in my hands. I wanted to lift him up, to feel him wrap his legs around my waist while still kissing me. Then I wanted to carry him to the bed, place him down, and fall on top of him. I just knew I needed to touch him, to feel his warm soft skin under my hand, my tongue, and my teeth. I wanted him to be mine; I needed him to be mine. I felt hands undoing the buttons of my shirt and broke the kiss. I couldn’t take my eyes off his slim fingers as he undid each one and then slowly ran his hand down my chest. I didn’t have much hair, just a smattering and a small dark treasure trail, which he traced with one finger. I was no gym bunny, and my six pack wasn’t exactly obvious, but I was alright. I felt his lips and shivered.

“Can we take this to the bed?” I asked. “I want to see you too, and touch you.”

“Yes, please. I’m just going to lock the door first. People have a habit of bursting in if you’re not careful.”

I took off my shirt and toed off my shoes then lay on my back on the bed. Grinning, he slowly removed his T-shirt and then lay on top of me. We kissed again. It was different kissing a man, the scrape of stubble somehow adding to

the sensations. I opened up and felt Tony's tongue exploring my mouth. I couldn't stop my brain thinking about his cock being in the same place and how it would feel. I wanted to taste him. I wanted to give him all the pleasure I could. I rolled us over and sat up to look at him. I began to undo his belt and then the buttons on his jeans. I pressed my hand to the bulge and felt just how big he was. The last time I'd had another person's cock in my hand, I'd been thirteen. I looked at Tony, and he nodded. With one hand I pulled his black briefs down just enough and then freed his cock with the other. He was fairer than me; my skin had that olive Mediterranean tinge from having Italian ancestry; his had obviously been tempered by the Welsh genes. His hair was still dark but more brown than black, and he clearly kept himself trimmed down there. I found myself staring not sure what to do next.

"Are you alright?" he asked. "My cock hasn't scared you off, has it?"

"No, sorry, you know men; it's all about bigger or smaller, thicker or thinner."

"So?"

"You want to compare?" I asked. He grinned. "You've seen mine so show me yours." He reached up and undid my trousers. "A briefs man as well I see. Let's have a look then." I should have felt strange having a man with his hands in my pants pulling out my cock, but I wanted to show it to him. I wanted him to like it. His cock was now lying against his taut stomach muscles. I knew I was hard, and he exposed me easily.

"Hmm, looks good enough to eat," he said, lifting his own up to compare. "Pretty similar, I'd say; we might need a tape measure for a final decision." I couldn't stop myself. I fell forward and ground our cocks together while sucking his bottom lip, and then moved along to kiss along his collar bone. The friction between us was creating wonderful sensations, but I wanted more. I kissed down his chest, pulling myself back until I was level with his cock, now leaking with precum. I'd tasted my own spunk more than a few times over the years, but I wanted to taste him. I wanted to feel the weight of his cock on my tongue, to stretch my lips around him and to take him in as far as I could. I'd never had any desire to do this before, in my life, but the need hit me like a wave crashing on the beach; it was unstoppable.

I looked down at him. "I want to suck your cock but I've never... before... so." He reached up and pressed his hand to my cheek. "Just do what you want to do and go with the flow. There's no right way. It's best if you can get some

suction on it though and breathe through your nose. A hand on the bottom of the shaft allows you to work on the head. They may deep throat all the time in porn, but that is something you have to learn to do.”

“Can you do that?” I asked, wondering if my cock could get any harder.

He winked at me. “You’ll have to wait and see, won’t you?” He scrambled in the drawer next to the bed. “Here, this will help.” He passed me the lube and I spread some on one hand then wrapped it around the base of his cock and began to pull up and down. I licked my lips, then opened my mouth and put them over the now swollen head. The taste wasn’t unpleasant. I clamped my mouth all around and began to suck while running my tongue underneath and trying to maintain the rhythm of my hand. I hoped he was getting something from this; stroking I could do, as I’d had a lot of practice at that, but it was quite hard maintaining suction. When I heard him groan, it made my chest swell. “Oh fuck, that feels good. Can’t be too noisy though,” he warned. “People about, but don’t stop.”

I did as I was told, sucking as best I could. I loved the weight of his cock in my mouth and on my tongue. My rhythm improved, and I tentatively took hold of his balls with my other hand and squeezed.

“Shit! Keep that up, and I’m going to come down your throat within seconds!” I wanted that. I was determined to try. I squeezed again, and I recognised the telltale signs. His hands went to push me off, but I shook my head and waited.

“Coming,” Tony cried as he began to empty himself into my mouth. I swallowed as much as I could but had to give up, and let the rest go over my face until I’d finally milked everything out of him. Grinning, I wiped my hand across my mouth.

“You look pleased with yourself,” he said as I fell down next to him.

“I’ll get better,” I promised. I saw a dark cloud cross his face. I reached up and kissed him once again. “I promise I’m going to talk to Savannah. You must know this relationship matters to me, Tony. You matter to me. I’m laying everything on the line here, and I have to admit, I’m fucking terrified.”

“Maybe this will make you feel more certain.” He kissed down my chest, and my body rose in response, instinctively wanting to be closer to him. When I felt his hand and mouth around my cock heaven really did become real. Expertly, he brought me to a shattering climax, and boy! I almost felt like he

was trying to swallow me whole. He didn't spill a drop. It wasn't the first blow job I'd had; Savannah was good at them, but I'd felt nothing like this—my senses were totally overwhelmed. For a while, Tony lay with his head on my chest, and neither of us said anything. The parameters of my world had shifted, and I was no longer the same man, living the same life. Everything had changed, and all I wanted from him was more. I'm not sure how we managed to sleep, but we did, lying there in each other's arms.

Although it was still dark when I woke up, I was surprised to see it was nearly dawn, and that Tony was still lying in my arms. I pulled myself up a bit and kissed his forehead; he moved under my touch.

"I'm going to get going. I've got to get to work in a few hours, and I need to shower." Tony pulled himself up and sat on the edge of the bed watching me search for my clothes.

"Stop it," I said forcefully.

He looked up and smiled at me. "Stop what? I'm just sitting here."

"You know very well what."

"Well, it seems a shame to waste it." He looked down at his erection. "And you said you wanted the practice!" I needed the loo, but I couldn't resist the look in his eyes or the way he was gently stroking himself to full hardness. My mouth watered. I fell to my knees and wrapped my hand around him and then my mouth around him. "Oh yeah, that's it, hollow your cheeks and suck." He leant back on his hands and let me do all the work, but I had to admit I loved it. The feel of him in my hand and on my tongue was amazing, and the little groans he made sent shivers down my spine. It didn't take long until he was coming down my throat, moaning quietly so he didn't wake the rest of the house. I licked my lips, removing the few stray flecks of cum that had escaped.

"I said I'd get better," I said triumphantly. "Now, I need the loo, and I'm going to have to leave. I've got early meetings this morning, and I stink of sex." I knew my own cock was hard in my trousers, but I had plans for dealing with that in my morning shower.

"I'll meet you downstairs and let you out," Tony said, grabbing a pair of jeans. "The bathroom is next door."

Five minutes later, we were kissing on the doorstep. The first rays of the sun were beginning to rise over the horizon. I felt like my life was starting anew just like the day; it was exhilarating and terrifying in equal measure.

“I’ll call you from the hotel later. I have to go to Manchester tonight as I’m auditing a firm over there first thing in the morning, and then tomorrow it’s the closing night of the restaurant so we’re all there for dinner.”

“I know, I’m working tomorrow night. I’ll miss the old place. I’ve enjoyed working there, and your papa has been good to me.”

“I won’t be able to talk to you tomorrow, everyone is going to be there, but I’m going to tell Savannah afterwards. I’ve already talked to Josh, my best man, but he didn’t exactly take it well. I’ve got to go.” I kissed him again and waved to him from the car. It was going to be a long couple of days.

Thirty-six hours later, I was standing in front of my mirror making sure I’d removed any stray hairs from my suit. I’d brushed my hair back and shaved more closely than usual. The three-piece suit was my best and almost black in colour. I chose a white shirt and a blue tie. My shoes shone so much I could see my face in them. It was going to be a big night for the family. From tonight, Romano’s would be no more, after nearly forty years of service. Tomorrow my parents were off to Australia to see my elder brother, Roberto, and his family. By the time they returned, the restaurant would be transformed into just another fast-food joint—Derek didn’t take much time over these things because, as he’d told me often enough, ‘time is money!’ They planned to be back in time for the wedding.

At six thirty I was waiting outside Josh’s apartment building. I had to speak to him first, to try to clear the air, or the evening could be even worse. I didn’t think he’d tell Savannah or my parents out of spite, but I didn’t want to take any chances. I had no idea if Savvy would be interested in him, and I certainly didn’t live in the land of the rom-com where everything would have ended happily with Savvy marrying Josh instead of me, or me marrying Tony, or even a joint wedding ceremony. I looked at myself in the rearview mirror. “You are going out of your tiny little mind,” I told myself. I saw him come out of the door and leant out of the window.

“Josh, I’ve come to give you a lift.” He looked at me, obviously unsure about what to do.

“Come on, don’t be stupid, we’ve known each other way too long to be like this. Please, I need to tell you something.”

He came over slowly and got into the passenger seat. “Haven’t you told me enough already?”

“I know you’re annoyed with me, but I’m going to do the right thing.” He turned to face me. “So you’re going ahead with the wedding then and forgetting this bloke.”

I have to admit being tempted then and there to lie, just for tonight, just so I could get through the evening and tell Savannah before him. That’s what I should have done, but I couldn’t lie again; it was time to stop running from the truth.

“No, I’m going to tell Savvy tonight that the wedding is off. That’s why I’m here, Josh. I’m not going to lie to you or her after tonight. I just need to get through this dinner for my parent’s sake. So please, I’m asking you to keep quiet so they can have a lovely last evening. I know you’re angry with me; but, although I love Savvy, I don’t think I’m the right person for her. I’m not in love with her; I’m not sure I ever was.”

“So do you love him?”

Did I? I longed to see him. I missed his smile, the touch of his hands, the feel of his skin, the taste of him, the smell of him, the way he fitted into my arms, the sensations he created in my body, the need I felt to be near him, the longing I had to bury myself deep inside him and to feel him come apart underneath me. “I think I’m beginning to. This isn’t just some mad fling, Josh. It sort of snuck up on me when I wasn’t looking. I told you I found myself counting every second until I was going to see him again, and I can do those sums in my head. I wanted to please him; I wanted to get the steps right because he praised me.”

“Shit, have you heard yourself?” He laughed for the first time since we’d spoken about Tony. “You sound like some Disney princess, and I thought Danny had it bad.”

“I do not!” Then I laughed as well. “Okay, maybe I do! Look, we’d better get off. There will be a few of us there tonight. Amy, her chief bridesmaid is coming, as well as Savvy’s father and his girlfriend. Danny and Zach are coming as well, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are. I told him about Tony. I needed his input. He tried to persuade me that these things can happen at any age if the right person comes along.”

I didn’t dare ask if Danny had succeeded. “Thanks, I know this hasn’t been easy for you. I don’t want to lose you, Josh.” Before I got too emotional, I put the car into gear and set off into the evening traffic.

“Danny actually said you’d always pinged his gaydar so he wasn’t surprised.”

“You’re lying; he said no such thing!” I wasn’t sure how I felt about that piece of information or why it mattered to me. Had I really always had these tendencies and just needed someone to bring them out of me? I was even more confused now.

“Nah, I’m not, you ask him. He said he and Zach had always thought you might bat for their team. Zach thinks you’re cute.”

“Zach is built like a bear and is just as hairy. He doesn’t fancy me really, does he?” Now, I was even more worried about how this evening was going to go. I could feel Josh shaking beside me.

“You bastard, you had me going then. I’m already pissing my pants with nerves.” I saw him rub his hands together out of the corner of my eye.

“I think I may enjoy tonight after all,” he said gleefully.

The restaurant was packed; a lot of the customers were old friends of my parents. Papa spent half his time wandering around between tables, and Mama talked about going on holiday for the first time in ages.

“He’s going to miss the place,” I said. “But you both deserve to have more time together. Roberto is going to be so pleased to see you, and you’ll be able to spoil the babies.”

“Won’t it be the first time you’ve seen them for real?” Savvy asked.

“Yes, and they are such beautiful bambinos. And when we return, we’ll have your wedding to enjoy, and both my boys will be settled.”

I looked at Savvy’s face and caught Josh looking at me. He’d spent part of the evening watching Tony serving. Fortunately, he was working the other side of the room so he wasn’t waiting on our table. Every so often I looked over and caught him looking my way. His smile was enough to set off butterflies in my stomach.

Mama continued talking to Savvy. “Have you got your dress sorted yet? You’ve only got eight weeks before the wedding. I wish you’d let me help you, but I won’t be back until just before the big day. I know it must be hard for you not having your own mother.”

I put my hand on her arm. "Mama, it's alright. If Savvy needs help she'll ask. You know the bank keeps her very busy."

"Oh don't worry, Mrs. R., I'll find something off the peg. I'm easy to fit, and I don't believe in wasting money on something you're only going to wear once."

Her father's voice boomed across the table. "You can have whatever you want, my princess, and Gilly will help you look, won't you, my darling; she has such good taste."

Fortunately, Amy started talking about the bridesmaid's dress she'd worn as a child which broke a difficult moment. Savvy wasn't over-keen on her father's girlfriend, and she certainly wouldn't be taking fashion advice from her anytime soon.

"I'm just going to check on something in the kitchen," I said, needing an excuse to get away. I checked on the cake which was going to be presented and then waited in the small corridor for Tony to appear. When he came around the corner, I couldn't help myself. "Just let me put the plates down." He put them on the floor and pressed himself against me. "I haven't got long." I felt my cock harden as soon as he touched me. I kissed him. "I missed you so much last night. I wanted to dance with you. Is that stupid? I really missed having you in my arms. My tango has a long way to go until I'm good enough."

The kitchen door sprang open, and we jumped apart. "You'd better get back to your party," he said, unable to hide the hint of bitterness in his tone. I took his hand. "I'm going to tell her tonight, right." We heard a cough.

"People are wondering where you are." Josh said. "I thought I'd better come and find you, rather than Savvy or one of your parents, or even Derek."

"Sorry, Josh, this is Tony. Tony, this is Josh, my best friend." I was surprised how unembarrassed I felt at Josh catching us.

"I know; I've seen you working here." He looked down, and I realised we were still holding hands. I wanted to kiss Tony again. I wanted to kiss him in front of Josh to show him how serious I was about this man, that this wasn't some mad experimental fling.

"It's alright, Lucca, you need to go, and I need to get the food for table fifteen. Ring me later." I squeezed his hand, watched him pick up the dishes and then disappear into the kitchen. I followed Josh back into the main room and fixed a smile on my face.

"I hope it's not the food," Josh said to the waiting party. "I found him in the toilets." He picked up a piece of pizza and pushed it nearly whole into his mouth. "I have to say it tastes good to me."

"You're disgusting," Danny said, and grabbed a piece himself. Soon everyone was eating and drinking again until the plates were cleared, and it was time for the cake. I nodded to Tony, who minutes later pushed the trolley carrying the cake into the room. "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" rang out around the restaurant as Papa blew out the candles. I gave Papa a knife, and he cut into the chocolate covered sponge cake. Pieces were handed out around the room along with bottles of champagne. Glasses were raised to toast the restaurant and its owner. It really was the end of an era.

"He's going to miss this place, isn't he?" Savvy said.

"Yeah, it's been his life for nearly forty years, but sometimes you need to face up to reality." I heard her sigh, and I put my arm around her. She'd been pretty quiet all evening, just talking in whispers with her friend Amy. "Are you alright?" I asked, not sure I really wanted to hear the answer.

"Yes, I'm fine." I thought she sounded anything but fine. "You are coming back to mine tonight, aren't you, Lucca?"

I took her hand. "I was planning to. You said there were things we needed to talk about." Suddenly, I felt nervous; I'd assumed she wanted to talk about the wedding, but perhaps—no, she couldn't know anything, could she?

She removed her hand from mine. "That's fine then," she said, before looking across the room. "Awww, look at them; your parents are so cute. I'm glad they're going to see your brother and his family; they'll love seeing their grandchildren for the first time."

"Yes, they will." Savvy still didn't look at me. Something was definitely up; we knew each other far too well for me not to notice. Did she know about Tony? I moved to where Josh was standing. "You haven't told her, have you?"

"No, I said I wouldn't. Why?"

"She's just acting a bit strange is all. She's been quiet all night. She can't know; there's no way she can know."

"Well, she will soon, so what does it matter?" I nodded. This wasn't going to be easy. People began to leave, and eventually, there was just our party left, other than the workers. "I'll take Savannah home now," I said to Papa while

hugging him and then Mama. "I'm sorry I can't take you to the airport tomorrow. Ring me when you get there, alright, and have a lovely time."

On the drive home, we didn't speak and the atmosphere was strained. I wasn't sure what the hell was going on with Savvy but something definitely was, and I didn't think it was going to be an easy night for either of us.

"That's a large glass." Savannah poured another glass of wine for herself and then sat down next to me on the gleaming white leather sofa. Everything in the room was in its place; the only thing that seemed out of place was me.

"Are you alright?" I asked. "You seem a bit tense."

"I'm fine. I guess it's just all the wedding stuff. It's getting really near now, but it'll be all worth it once it's over. I guess everyone feels like this, don't they?"

"I think so. Roberto got the jitters before he got married and now look at them with twins and a new life in Australia. He's taken to it like a duck to water."

"That's good." She leant against me and swallowed some wine. I didn't say anything. I didn't tell her I couldn't marry her because I was seeing someone else. She seemed so fragile, vulnerable, and I'd never known her be like that about anything. I sat there in silence listening to her quiet breathing. This was all going wrong. What the hell did I do? I knew the right thing was to tell Tony I couldn't see him. I owed it to Savvy. I could have a good life with her. Other people seemed to be happy. I didn't have to see Tony again except that I wanted to see him. I couldn't leave him just like that either. I wanted one night, and if that was the end, then I'd have to live with it and put it down to experience. He would then hate me as much as I hated myself. I could have one wonderful night and then leave the fantasies behind. I had to face reality. I couldn't be gay, there were my parents and my friends. It was shallow of me, but this would be simpler. I could have one perfect night then tell him the truth. He'd hate me for lying and tell me to leave, but Savvy need never know.

"Are you staying?" she asked.

"No, I've got an early trip in the morning, an audit in Harrogate. I'll ring you tomorrow." I kissed her forehead and got up. She smiled, but the smile didn't reach her eyes. "Sorry, I guess I'm tired. It's been a big night and work is a bastard at the moment. Drive carefully. I love you."

"I love you too." And I did. I just hoped it was enough.

I got into the car and drove off. I felt like the complete shit I was, but it didn't stop me ringing him because once you start lying...

"It's me. I need to see you. I know it's after midnight, but I can be at your house in forty minutes, then we can go to my place."

"Did you tell her?"

"Yes, she knows and the wedding is off." It was easy to say it. I knew it was wrong, but I needed this night with him. "I want to be with you tonight, and my place is a lot more private."

"I'll sit and look through the window. I haven't been able to do anything since I watched you go. I need to see you too, Lucca; I haven't been able to think about anything else. I'm so hard just thinking about you."

My whole body shook, and my cock practically leapt up with excitement. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Drive carefully. I want you to get here in one piece."

I'm not sure how we got to my flat without committing an act of public indecency. He looked so happy when he ran down the steps to my car, and then he kissed me. I put my hand to the back of his neck and pulled him in, thrusting my tongue into his mouth. He did the same, and all I wanted to do was get him out of his clothes there and then. Finally, we pulled apart; my mouth felt bruised. I pushed every other thought out of my head, except the one where I took this man to my bed.

"Hurry! I'm going to make you feel better than you've ever felt in your life."

"That's quite a boast," I said. "I'm looking forward to you proving it."

I put the car into gear and set off. The streets were quiet so I took a few risks, only slowing down for the speed cameras. We fell into my flat and continued the kiss we'd started in the lift. I picked him up. His legs wrapped around me as I carried him to my bedroom. I could feel his hard on pressing into me, and the sensation of his teeth biting into my neck. For a moment I worried about the marks, but I couldn't tell him that. "Oh God, Tony, that feels so amazing."

"Well you're mine now so I'm making sure you remember this for days. I want you to remember this night when you're old and grey." I felt the buttons go on my shirt as he ripped it open, and they clattered onto the hardwood floor

of the bedroom. I fumbled for the light, and he gripped me tighter. "I want to see you," I said. His head came up, and he looked around the room and then towards the bed. At the edge he let go, and I lowered him down. He slowly undid his buttons and removed his shirt. He was stunning, his chest perfectly smooth with just a small trail of hair leading down from his navel. I fell to my knees and began to undo his trousers, desperate to get to what was hidden inside. He must have been as desperate as me, because he lifted his hips, and I pulled everything down, removing his shoes and socks as well, to leave him completely naked. There was something so sexy about being almost fully dressed in front of someone with not a stitch on. I ran my hands down his chest feeling every hard muscle and every ridge. He felt so different from the women I'd slept with; there was no softness here, just a suggestion of strength. I touched his nipple and was surprised when he groaned. "Do you like that?" I asked.

"Yes, my nipples are sensitive." I'd never even considered it before. All of this was a complete learning curve. "D'you like this?" I asked as I took one nipple into my mouth and sucked gently. The nub hardened immediately, and I reached a hand to squeeze the other one. Tony began to squirm and moan and, if it was possible, I got harder. I loved how responsive he was and how good it made me feel. I kept up my assault for a full five minutes, sucking and licking and nipping at both nipples until he was leaking precum against my stomach. "If you keep doing that and rubbing yourself against me, I'm going to come; and I really want to do that with you inside me."

I didn't want this to end. "We have all night. I'm sure we can both rise to the occasion more than once."

"Better if you fuck me first, better for me. I can't wait, and you need to prepare me. D'you know what to do?"

"Yeah, I did some research," I had to admit. I'd also practised on myself with just a finger or two to see what it felt like. I knew not all men fucked, and I wasn't sure if I ever would; but if this was going to be our one and only time, I wanted to do it right and make Tony feel good. He sat up and looked at me. "We don't have to if you don't want to."

"I'm just a bit nervous, that's all. I've never done this before. I don't want to hurt you."

He looked at me with an intensity that threatened to take my breath away. "A little hurt is a good thing; it makes you feel alive. We need a condom and some lube."

“In the drawer.” I reached over and took them out with shaking hands. He took hold of them. “Come on, get up here.” He edged up the bed on his back then spread his legs apart. “Kneel between my legs and cover your fingers in lube then push in one at a time.” I was still trembling as he pulled his knees up. Now I could see his hole; his cock was rigid, lying on his stomach. I covered a finger in lube and pushed against him. “Just push, and don’t worry, I’ve done this a few times before.” Suddenly I felt jealous of every man who’d ever done this. I pushed harder than I intended and found I was fully inside. I moved in and out, fascinated by how it appeared and disappeared. “You still feel tight.”

“I’m good, put in another one.” I squirted the lube and pushed in the second finger. The sound he made went straight to my cock as he bucked off the bed and pushed down on me. “Oh yeah, just a bit further, there, just there. Can you feel it? Oh God, that’s so good. Put in another. Fuck me Lucca, fuck me harder.” I pushed in another finger and he met every thrust. Precum leaked from his cock all over his stomach, and I ran the fingers of my other hand through it and down his hard shaft.

“Fuck me, please.” I pulled my fingers out and rolled the condom down my cock. I rubbed more lube on and then lined myself up. “Do it,” he said. “Fuck me. Just do it, Lucca. Make me come with you inside me. Make me feel it tomorrow.”

I pushed in slowly, but it was like he was sucking me in until, finally, I was buried balls deep. “It feels so good,” I said.

“Then fuck me. Show me what you’re made of.” I pulled back out and slammed back in.

“That’s it,” Tony said. “Keep doing that. You’re a natural.” I didn’t care if he was lying or not; I couldn’t stop myself. I pushed back in again and again until sweat was beginning to pour off me. I did everything I could not to come too soon, but it was just too much. I’d never felt so alive in my life, and I could feel that tingling sensation at the bottom of my spine and the pulling up of my balls. “I’m close,” I said. He took hold of his cock and began to rub himself. It didn’t take more than a few strokes, and then I could feel his arse contracting around me. Jizz splashed across his chest, and I couldn’t contain myself any longer as I pumped into the condom.

“Oh fuck, Tony, that’s...” I had no words to explain it or how I felt. I wanted to cry and scream and shout his name. Sex had never felt like this, every sense overwhelmed, just existing there in the moment. I wanted the

feeling to go on forever; I didn't want to leave him, to disconnect. For those glorious minutes, I'd been part of him; and I didn't want to let go, not yet. I had to pull myself together. I'd lied to him, and I'd lied to her. I was a complete shit, and I knew it; but, for those few minutes, I'd have done anything, lied to anyone. Maybe it would all work out; maybe he wouldn't hate me. I fell down over him and pressed my face into his neck, still breathing heavily. I needed to hear him tell me it was good. I wanted it to be the best he'd ever had. After a few minutes I slipped out of him and removed the condom, letting it fall to the side of the bed. He knew what I was asking when I looked at him.

“That was amazing.”

“Was I alright?”

“Yes, you were alright. I will definitely feel that tomorrow as I sit in my lab. Look at us; we're covered in my cum.” I ran a finger through and tasted it. “Tastes different to mine. I'm sure that you could tell me all about the chemistry of why.”

“They say it depends on what you eat, but I'm not sure I believe that.”

“I'll just get a towel and wipe us off,” I said.

When I came back, he was snoring. I wiped his chest and then went around to the other side of the bed and snuggled in behind him. I didn't want the morning to come. I knew he was going to be angry with me, but I couldn't regret it. I wanted there to be a way to sort this out, but that was just wishful thinking, wasn't it? Just another lie.

I stood under the shower and let the water flow over me, washing away my sins. If only it was so simple. This was such a mess. I'd wanted him to join me in the shower so I could keep him for just a little bit longer.

“No, you're already running late and so am I. We've got all the time in the world to do that again and more. I'll make you some coffee and then get back to my place and shower there. I've an hour or so to get to the lab.”

I shaved and washed my hair and then got dressed. The bedroom was empty so, as I could smell coffee, I guessed that he was already in the kitchen. I looked around puzzled; where was my phone? I searched the pocket of my jacket from last night. Damn! I must have left it in the car when I phoned last night. Fear seared through my brain and I rushed to the kitchen; he was waiting

for me when I got there, my phone in his hand. One look at him and I knew it was all over.

Hi hun, will call later. Going wedding dress shopping with Amy. Kiss kiss.

“You didn’t tell her! You fucking didn’t tell her! You lied to me to get me into bed.”

I moved a couple of steps towards him. “I can explain.” Who was I trying to kid?

“You just wanted to fuck me, didn’t you? What was I? Your little gay experiment before you went off and got married and had two-point-four children?” If he’d put a dagger through my heart, it would have been less painful than seeing the hurt and anger on his face. “And I fell for your lies. I never fucking learn. You’re just like him with his ‘Oh yes, I’m going to leave her’ promises. I thought you were different. Why am I so stupid? Here, you’d better answer her.” The phone hit my chest, but I managed to juggle rather than drop it.

“I will tell her. I just couldn’t last night. I prom...”

“No, don’t do that. Don’t promise. I don’t care anymore. I’m going to leave here, and you’re not going to contact me. If you do, I’ll get a new phone or something. I can’t do this, not again.” He wiped his eyes. “No, I’m not going to shed tears over you. I’m worth more than this; more than being some married man’s bit on the side.”

Alright, I know I was guilty as charged, but you know, I wasn’t the only one. “You do know that you’re not so innocent in all this either. You knew I was engaged. I could argue that you led me on. You’ve no more right to the moral high ground than I have; after all, Tony, it takes two to tango!”

He walked towards the door and then turned and looked at me. “We could have been good together, Lucca. You may have a point, but you didn’t exactly fight me off, did you? I give you and Savannah less than a year; she deserves better than you, too.”

“Tony, I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you.” My heart was breaking, but I had no idea what to do about it. When he closed the door, my legs gave way and I collapsed into a heap on the floor.

The next few weeks passed in a blur of work and whisky. I tried to phone him to begin with, but he did as he threatened, and I gave up. Several times I found myself driving to his house in the hope of just catching a glimpse of him, but each time I turned around before I got there. It should have been the happiest time of my life. Every so often I'd pull myself together enough to try to pretend everything was alright as the wedding got closer and closer. It was pathetic. I was pathetic. I looked in the mirror. There were bags under my eyes; my skin looked sallow because a diet of pizza and whisky didn't give you a healthy glow. I needed to shave. I needed to pull myself together and stop wallowing in my own mess. I picked up my singing phone.

"Lucca, why aren't you at work?"

"Morning, Josh. I've taken a day off. I am allowed to do that, you know." You'd be right in thinking our relationship was somewhat strained at the moment.

"Right, get yourself and the flat sorted. Savannah and Amy are coming around to yours tonight with me. We're going to have a civilised dinner, and then, afterwards, Amy and I will leave, and you are going to tell her because even if he wants nothing more to do with you—and I can't say I blame him—you still can't marry her. Amy says Savvy is as moody as hell as well."

I wanted to be angry with him but I was too tired. "So you and Amy have been talking then?"

"I rang her to invite her tonight. If you don't tell her, I'm going to." He sounded like he meant it. I knew that he was right.

"Alright, alright, I know I can't go on like this. It's not fair on either of us. I just feel like such a despicable shit."

"That's because you are a despicable shit. There's no way you'll come out of this smelling of roses. You're lucky Danny and I are still speaking to you. You've been a shit to her and to Tony."

I slumped on the bed. "I know. You don't have to tell me; marrying Savvy would be disastrous for both of us. I'll see you later. What time?"

"I told Amy I'd pick her and Savannah up at six forty-five and that will get us there about seven thirty. Get in some wine and we can have a Chinese or a curry or something. Just sort yourself out. It's time to grow up, Lucca, and face the music. I'll see you later."

I spent the next few hours tidying up the flat, and it needed it. I washed all the bedding, cleaned the floors and hoovered the carpets until the place smelt one hundred percent better and every surface was clean and sparkling. The activity was good for me; seeing the flat without the film of dust, grease and pizza boxes made me feel a bit better about everything. I hoped Savvy would forgive me; that she'd see it was for the best, that marriage would ruin both our lives. I wasn't sure whether I was going to tell her about Tony. Yes, I was still a coward. As he wasn't around, it didn't matter, but if she wanted a reason... Would she be happier knowing there was someone else, or not? I tried to work out how I'd feel, listing pros and cons, but it didn't help.

When the buzzer made a noise, I jumped a mile. Okay, show time!

In the end, the evening was pleasant, with everyone on their best behaviour. Josh told far too many bad jokes, and Amy had a wealth of stories, about both the children she taught and the staff she worked with, that kept us amused. Of course, Josh and I could recount a few of our own. We ate Chinese and drank too much wine, and it seemed almost surreal that I was going to tell all. The one thing none of us talked about was the wedding. Truth was, I'd missed this, just talking about anything and everything as friends rather than people who were tying themselves to each other for life.

"I need the loo," I said.

"Me too," Josh slurred.

"Just as well I have two then, isn't it?"

We got up together. "And I thought it was women who went to the loo in pairs. We'll start cleaning away." Amy began picking up plates and cartons. "And do make sure you're done up before you come back into the room!"

I headed to my bedroom expecting Josh to go to the main bathroom but he followed me in. "I really do need to go, Josh."

"I know but I wanted to make sure you haven't changed your mind. I meant it, Lucca. I will tell her if you don't, and I'll tell her everything. You need to do this for yourself as well. You only get one life, so get it right. I'm still your friend despite the fact that you're a complete and utter plonker." I hugged him and, without speaking, went into the en-suite. He was still there when I came out. "Thought I'd just wait; I couldn't be bothered to go to the bathroom." I made my way back to the main room, padding barefoot on the wooden floors but stopped when I heard Amy and Savvy talking. They say you should never

listen because you never hear anything good about yourself, but I listened anyway.

“You have to tell him, Savvy.”

“I know but he’s going to be so hurt.”

“But you don’t want to get married to anyone, do you? It’s not even about him. Why the hell you said yes to him I don’t know. You should never have let it get this far.”

“I know, I know, but it seemed like a nice idea at the time. Dad kept going on and I love Lucca; I really do love him. He’s kind and he treats me well.”

“That would be fine if you were sixty or a puppy; but you’re thirty, with your whole life ahead of you, and they might still give you that promotion as well. You know you wanted it, and it’s a chance for a new life.”

I couldn’t listen any longer. I turned when I heard Josh behind me.

“Are you okay?” He must have seen my face. “Yeah, I need to talk to Savannah now. Would you take Amy for a walk around the block or something?”

“Sure. Are you going to be alright?” Having heard what I had, I figured at least Savvy wouldn’t exactly be devastated; telling her the truth would get both of us off the hook.

We went back into the room. “Amy, would you mind just stepping out with Josh for a while? I just need to talk to Savvy.” I saw them look at each other.

“Go on, Amy. It’ll be fine.”

“We’ll just go for a walk around the block then,” Josh said. I waited until they had left the flat and then turned to Savvy.

“Sit down, Savvy, I’ve got something I need to tell you.” I took the seat next to her on the sofa. “I think you know what I’m going to say, so I’m just going to say it. I can’t marry you; it’s nothing to do with you, it’s me. I’m not what you need. I know the wedding is only three weeks away, and I’ll pay for anything that needs sorting but...”

“You heard me talking to Amy, didn’t you? Trust you to try and take the blame. I said you were too good for me.”

I laughed, knowing the truth. “No, Savvy, you deserve better than me. Things aren’t that simple, and you need to know the truth. You think I’m this

really nice guy, but I'm not. I've been living a lie. I should have told you weeks ago, not three weeks before we're due to be married."

"Does it matter now? And better three weeks than three days or three minutes. I'd considered leaving you at the altar; then everyone would be sorry for you and blame me."

"Really?"

"Yeah." She nodded solemnly. I looked at her and couldn't help myself, I started to laugh. "You were really planning to leave me on the day?" She started laughing too. "I know—like some bad Hollywood movie. I thought I might do a *Runaway Bride* and wear trainers under my dress." We were both now laughing with tears falling down our faces. "Oh God, how did we get to this?" she asked. "You were saying something about living a lie. I've got to say, I am a little intrigued by that statement."

I pulled myself up. "I'm just going to say this right out loud. There was someone else."

"Is that it? You had an affair with some woman? You said there *was* someone, so I guess it's over now."

I took a deep breath. "Yes, it was a few weeks ago, but he left me when I didn't tell you about him. I was going to, but I chickened out."

Now she did stare at me open mouthed. Finally, I'd shocked her. "You said he. You had an affair with a man? Sorry, I'm having trouble getting my head around this. I had no idea. I can't believe you managed to keep this from me."

"No, me neither."

"And have you always known you were—what? Bisexual? Have there been other men I don't know about?"

"No, not really; I mean I've never been against it, in theory, but there hasn't been anyone else, not until Tony."

"Tony? Tony from your dad's restaurant?" I nodded. "Well, I have to say it's a better reason for cancelling a wedding than being offered a job in Hong Kong." She looked at me as if she was seeing me in a whole new way. "You're not bullshitting me here, are you? Really? I mean, I did wonder occasionally whether there were other women, but I'd never have guessed that." She shook her head from side to side. Finally, she smiled again. "Oh God, we're such a pathetic pair of idiots."

“Aren't we? Can you still get the job? You deserve it, and it would be a new start.”

“I don't know. Can you still get Tony back? I said he was cute.”

“I've no idea if he'll have me back now. I let him down; I lied to him and to you.” I looked at her again. “Why aren't you yelling at me?”

“Doesn't seem to be any point now, does there?” She poured more wine into our glasses. “Let's get pissed instead. Telling each other is the easy part; telling our parents is going to be the worst bit. At least yours are halfway around the world; Dad is going to throw a wobbler when he finds out, and then he'll tell me you weren't good enough for me after all. Thank goodness he didn't get the magazines involved like he wanted. We're going to have to write to over a hundred people.”

“Shit! Couldn't we just send out the same e-mail?” I leaned my head on her shoulder. “I'm so glad we can be friends. I'd hate to lose you.”

She hugged me and patted my back. “We should never have been anything else really. Shall we phone those two and let them know we haven't killed each other?”

“I suppose so. It's just nice having the two of us here without the big secrets. I'll text them. “

“And then we're going to have to work out how to get you and Tony back together.”

“What?”

“Well, you like him, don't you?”

I nodded. “I think I might more than like him.”

She sat up and grabbed my arms. “Well then, Lucca Romano, Operation Get-Tony-Back begins tonight.”

The first thing we needed to do was find out if Tony was working anywhere new. I checked the restaurant records, but there'd been no request for references, so I struck out there from the beginning. I know I could have simply gone to his house and knocked on his door, but I thought he'd just slam it in my face or get someone else to answer or, even worse, call the police to say I was a mad stalker.

"I could write to him," I suggested over coffee two weeks later.

"Or send him some flowers or a cuddly toy with a sweet message." I looked at her. It had taken a while but we'd finally sorted out cancelling the wedding. Her father had gone ape-shit, and my parents didn't understand. Of course, I hadn't told them the whole truth, not yet. "Too creepy?" she questioned.

"Just a bit."

"I could go and see him and tell him the wedding is off; surely he'd believe me," she said. I put my hand on hers. "You really are too good for me, Savvy."

"I know, but I've only got a few days; and then I've got to go to Hong Kong for a couple of weeks, to meet the people I'm working with and find somewhere to live."

"Is Derek speaking to you yet?"

"Yeah, he sulked for a bit, but, after I told him I'd called it off, he said that he'd never thought you were good enough for me anyway, so that's alright, isn't it?"

The café door opened, and we looked up. Amy and Josh came quickly towards us and sat down. "Ask us where we were last night," Josh said. His eyes were wide, and I couldn't help noticing he was still holding Amy's hand. She was practically jumping up and down in her seat.

"Okay, where were you last night?"

"We went to *Club Argentine*, you know the place just off the Headrow? Amy wanted to go dancing and they had this cabaret on with ballroom dancers. They were really amazing; I might take up dancing myself."

"And?" I said, gesturing for him to get on with it.

"Tony was there, serving behind the bar, but not only that, he performed as well. He and this bloke did an Argentine Tango that was—well, Amy was practically in a pool on the floor."

She fanned herself with her hand. "Bloody hell, he is so hot. The look on his face and how he moved, muscles rippling across his bare chest; I'll tell you, for nothing, the man has quite a few fans."

"I know; he took me there once." I was trying not to get over excited. If he was working there, I could see him somewhere neutral and, hopefully, he might talk to me.

“Anyway, we thought if we all went there tonight with you, he would believe you about not getting married and then maybe he’d let you talk to him. What d’you think?” The pair of them looked terribly pleased with themselves.

“He might not be working there tonight,” I said.

“Oh he is,” Amy said, bouncing once more. “We asked someone if he was performing tonight, and he is. We need a plan, and I need a new dress. We’re going to go out to dinner tonight, and then we’re going to go dancing!”

I will admit I had a couple of glasses of wine over dinner. I was so nervous, I ate very little. I’d dressed carefully, choosing my black silk three-piece suit and white shirt with pale blue braces and tie. I’d treated myself to a new pair of shoes, which were described as perfect for dancing. My hair was slicked back, and I’d groomed every inch of myself.

“Wow, I think I may have made a mistake not marrying you after all,” Savvy said when I met her outside the restaurant. “Isn’t it weird to think that this time next week, we would have been married?”

“Very, and you look lovely yourself. Shall we go in or wait for Amy and Josh?”

“Let’s go in. Am I right in thinking that something is going on there? Has Josh said anything to you?”

“I think he has some hopes.” I too had noticed Josh paying attention to Amy, and a quick phone call to Danny had confirmed my suspicions. I was glad he’d found someone other than Savannah, especially now she was leaving the country. They were already sitting at the bar when we entered. For the next two hours, I tried not to think about what I was going to say to Tony. Naturally, I hardly thought about anything else. I had my script worked out; I’d sat on the edge of my bed and looked into the mirror and said the words over and over again. Of course, all this depended on Tony giving me a chance to say them. All the way to the club, my legs felt like jelly; my mouth was so dry I thought I wouldn’t be able to speak anyway. I’d only had a couple of glasses of wine, just enough for Dutch courage; there was no way I wanted to be slurring my words during what could be the most important speech of my life. We were early so there was only a small queue, and we got in quite quickly. Josh and Amy went to the bar to get drinks, while Savvy and I found a dark corner where I could stay hidden. I looked across but couldn’t see Tony anywhere.

“He’s not here,” I said. “What if he doesn’t turn up? What am I going to do then?”

“You just come back here every night until you see him, so stop panicking. He might be getting drinks or changing a barrel or anything. The night is yet young.”

Amy and Josh returned, and we sat and talked for a while. My eyes rarely left the bar, and then, fifteen minutes later, I saw him. I must have been like one of those gundogs pointing their noses towards their target, because the others stopped what they were saying and looked at me. “You might want to put your tongue in and be a little less obvious,” Josh said. “Your eyes are practically out on stalks.” I didn’t like to tell him that another part of my anatomy had also risen to the occasion. God, he looked so good, smiling at the customers at the bar and shaking a cocktail for one. His dark hair was slicked back once more, and, like me, he wore a white shirt with his red braces. When he glanced in our direction, I hid behind Savvy. “I think it’s a bit dark over here for him to see you,” she said laughing. “I have to say he’s looking drop-dead gorgeous tonight, probably with a cherry on the top.”

“I know,” I managed to croak out. “What am I going to do? I can’t just go to the bar while he’s working.”

“It’s alright,” Amy said putting her hand on my arm. “We asked if he was performing tonight, and he is, so you could try to talk to him when he’s finished. You’ll have the perfect chance, then, to ask him to dance with you.”

“Oh yes, that would be so romantic. You should have got him a flower or something. Don’t they tango with roses in their teeth?” By now she and Amy were truly giggling, and Josh was rolling his eyes. I was looking around the room to see if there were any flowers on the tables. I was prepared to try anything at this point as long as he’d listen to me and let me hold him in my arms again.

There was general dancing for a while. Josh took to the floor with both Amy and Savvy, while I kept to the shadows and watched Tony from afar. After an hour he disappeared, and the dance floor was cleared. He reappeared with another man, and they performed their tango. The routine was different from the one done before but just as intricate and intense. He was beautiful; there was no other word for it. Watching them was like witnessing two people making love fully clothed. The whole room watched in silence letting the music and dance take them over. When they’d finished, everyone rose to their feet and

clapped and cheered. I moved slowly through the crowd to the edge of the dance floor, every part of my body shaking, hoping that I would get to the right position in time. When he turned away from the congratulations, we came face to face. He looked at me, obviously still burning with anger, and tried to push past me.

“I’m not doing this, Lucca. I told you before; I’m not going to be your bit on the side.”

“Tony, wait, please, give me a minute. Things have changed.” He rolled his eyes, and I knew he didn’t believe me.

“The wedding is off. I’m not getting married.”

“So you think that’s it. That all you have to do is tell me you’re not getting married, and I’ll fall into your arms again. And anyway, how do I know you’re not lying to me again?” The music started again, and it was hard to hear. I turned him around slightly and pointed to Savvy, Amy, and Josh sitting in the corner. They waved.

“Can we go somewhere a bit quieter so I can explain?” I said. “All I’m asking for is ten minutes of your time. Please, surely I deserve that much?”

“Alright, ten minutes, but that’s it, and I’m not sure you should have that.” I breathed out and followed him. I had this one chance; I just had to make sure I didn’t balls it up. He took me to a small office near the entrance. “It’s where we change before the performance,” he explained. “Well, I’m listening. Why aren’t you getting married then?”

I wanted to kiss him, but I didn’t even dare take his hand. He leant against the desk arms crossed over his chest so I stood just inside the door, leaving a few feet between us.

“Savvy and I came to the conclusion we shouldn’t get married.”

“Great, so you didn’t even tell her about me. Why does she think you’re here then?”

“No, I did tell her about you. I was all set to tell her, and then I overheard her talking to Amy, that’s Amy with Josh out there. She’s been offered a big promotion by the bank she works for in Hong Kong, and she didn’t know how to tell me, so I told her about you. I could have just kept quiet and said nothing. It’s true, because she’d called off the wedding anyway. That was two weeks ago; I’ve been trying to find you ever since. I didn’t dare come to your house; I thought you might call the police or something.”

"I might have done," Tony said, lowering his arms. I took a step nearer.

"I've missed you so much. I know I was stupid and weak, and I probably don't deserve a second chance, but how am I supposed to dance without you? There's this Tony-shaped space in my arms. This is all so new to me. I had these feelings—sorry *have*—these feelings for you, and you're a man, and that came as a bit of a shock. I'm only human, Tony, and I'm definitely not perfect."

"Well that's certainly true."

"I'm going to make mistakes. I'm going to say the wrong thing and do the wrong things. I've never been in a relationship with a man before, but I know this is right for me. I want us to be together. I'll tell anyone you want me to tell. I'll shout it from the bloody rooftops or put an ad in the *Yorkshire Post*. I'll change my Facebook status and put it on Twitter, whatever you want me to do, I'll do. You want me to get on my knees and beg?" I could see his body beginning to shake and there was a slight turn up at the edge of his mouth.

"Well, I have no problem with you being on your knees, although you do need a bit more practice."

I closed the distance between us. "Am I forgiven? Please say I'm forgiven. If I go out there and say I've ballsed this up those three are going to kill me. I swear Josh is taking bets; and Amy wants to know if you really swing both ways; or, at least, if you'll give her dancing lessons. Savvy is off to Hong Kong tomorrow. She says she'll give me references if you want. I'm just scared you might end up comparing notes." He put a finger on my mouth.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Lucca, please stop talking and kiss me!" I leaned in, and we connected once more. I felt his mouth open to mine, and I just let the taste of him hit my senses. My arms closed around him, and he was back where I wanted him to be. We kissed, changing angles and deepening the connection until our tongues tried to wrap themselves around each other in the same way as our bodies. I nipped and sucked on his bottom lip, and my hands found their way under his shirt. After a few minutes, we parted breathing heavily.

"I thought about what you said on that day, and you were right. This was just as much my fault as yours. Oh, and there's one more thing," he said, taking my hand and pulling me out of the office. I followed him, not letting go of his hand until we got to the main room. He led me onto the floor and put me in position. I could see the other three smiling at me over my shoulder. He turned

my face so I was looking at him. Now, as far as I was concerned, only the two of us existed.

“Just one more thing, you said?” I stood waiting.

“Hmmm, there’s still such a lot I need to teach you, Lucca.” He began to move. “But for now, just dance with me.”

The End

Author Bio

Originally from South Wales, Alexa has lived for over thirty years in the North West of England. Now retired, after a long career in teaching, she devotes her time to her obsessions.

Alexa began writing when her favourite character was killed in her favourite show. After producing a lot of fanfiction she ventured into original writing.

She is currently owned by a mad cat and spends her time writing about the men in her head, watching her favourite television programmes and usually crying over her favourite football team.

Contact & Media Info

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IT'S YOU, THEN BREATHING

By Viktor Alexander

Photo Description

Two men are pressed together in a corner, both are wearing white T-shirts that are wet and white briefs, but no pants. One is blond and the other has black hair. They appear to be either outside or in an outdoor shower, but they are wet and are close together, the blond is touching the shorter black-haired one's stomach intimately.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I don't know what to do. How to feel. We just won the World Series. The whole locker room is going crazy, champagne is spraying everywhere. And here I am, in the corner. I'm watching him. The smile on his face, his wet hair plastered all over his face, the muscles in his arms flexing as he soaks our rookie centerfielder. I should be happy. But, I'm not. Not really. I love him. And now the season is over, and everyone will go their separate ways. I love him. And I can't tell him... Can I?

Sincerely,

Holly

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: sports, friends to lovers, baseball, teammates, closeted, violence, Spanish, exhibitionism, family, gay bashing, athletes, interracial, HFN

Word Count: 17,963

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IT'S YOU, THEN BREATHING

By Viktor Alexander

Chapter One

Carlos Herrera stood on home plate, his gloved hands wrapped firmly around the baseball bat and his gaze trained on the pitcher from St. Louis. He could hear the deafening roar of the crowd all around him but he tried to block it out. He couldn't let himself get distracted. He had to focus. This was his big moment. The bases were loaded. It was the bottom of the ninth inning and they had two outs. He was the last hope for his team.

The pitcher shook his head at whatever signal was given to him by the catcher, then glanced out of the corner of his eyes as David "Big Papi" Ortiz took two steps off of third base, watching him carefully. *He's not going to steal, bastard. Make the pitch.*

Everyone knew that Big Papi was an excellent ballplayer, but he was also all about the team. He wouldn't do anything that would jeopardize the Red Sox. He would take those two steps and he would stop. Right in the man's line of sight. Distracting him.

Make the pitch.

The pitcher returned his gaze back to the catcher and nodded. Here it was. The ball he was waiting for, *the* pitch. The butterflies that had been fluttering steadily in Carlos's stomach began flying around in his gut like mad, crashing into each other. Carlos swallowed the bile that rose in his throat as he prepared for the ball to come sailing across the plate, adrenaline thrumming through his veins. The first ball was a little off center. He pulled back on the bat. *No. Don't swing.*

"Ball," the umpire shouted.

Carlos stepped out of the box and exhaled, rolling his neck to relieve the tension that had gathered there. He could do this. He *would* do this. His team was depending on him. His family. The whole of Boston was placing their trust and hopes squarely on his shoulders. He would not let them down.

"C'mon Hercules! You got this!"

Carlos turned to look toward the Red Sox dugout and grinned widely, his heart beating out a maddening rhythm of "A Thousand Years" by Paramore in his chest as he stared at the man smiling back at him. One of his biggest supporters. His best friend and teammate, Burke Thornton. Carlos nodded and

stepped back into the batter's box, returning his attention to the pitcher and away from Burke. He couldn't think about Burke. Thinking about his friend was dangerous. Carlos had to focus and Burke was a distraction. A major, major distraction.

The Cardinals pitcher spit into the grass and scowled at Carlos before concentrating back on the catcher. Carlos ignored him too and focused instead on the ball. The pitcher wasn't important. His hand wasn't important, neither was the way he hurled the white spherical object. The ball was important. The ball was Carlos's fixation right now, the center of his world in that moment. He noticed the dance the pitcher did again. Passing on two different signals before nodding. Carlos tensed, but he forced his shoulders and hips to relax, keeping only his arms tight, ready for the swing. He twisted his hands around the handle of the bat. This was it. He didn't know how he knew, he just did. This was his pitch. And he couldn't just hit it. He had to get under it and drive it as far out as he could.

The crowd faded away, everything around him blurring as the pitcher released the ball and Carlos brought down the bat in a low arc, his eyes never leaving the sight of those red stitches painstakingly sewn on the side of that pristine white ball. As the two kissed in a powerfully hard connection of wood against rubber and cork, the vibrations traveled up through his hands and arms, spreading through his body. Carlos never let go of the bat, following through with the hit with his right arm, pulling it all the way up. His eyes followed the trajectory of the ball as it went up, up, up sailing past the pitcher's head, flying by the outfield and over the back wall.

Carlos stood in shock for a moment. He'd done it. He'd fucking done it. He could hear the roar of the crowd growing louder. Hear his coach yelling for him to run, but he needed a moment. Just one goddamn moment to savor this reality. He'd hit a homerun. No. Not a homerun. He'd hit a motherfucking grand slam.

"Hercules! Move your fucking ass, *Boricua!*" Burke yelled.

Burke. If anything could get him moving it was Burke's voice. And, as if someone had popped the bubble surrounding him, the sound of the crowd screaming came to him in an instant and Carlos let out a whoop, jumping in the air, pumping his fist as his team ran onto the field. He started running the bases, waving to the fans, smiling at them. He looked up into the Skybox and waved at his parents, their images displayed on the big screen, his mother's eyes filled with tears as she applauded and waved. He was her baby. The youngest of eight

children. The only one who didn't end up working as a teacher. The only one who was gay. He hoped that he'd finally made her proud.

He rounded third base, shaking hands with the third base coach, and saw his team waiting for him at home plate, celebrating, hugging each other, tears flowing down their cheeks. It had been a hard year, but they'd made it. They had won. They were champions. Carlos ran toward them, leaping onto home plate and tossed himself in the middle of the fray. Right into Burke's arms. His friend lifted him up, spinning him around, laughing. Carlos held up his hand screaming at the top of his lungs as he tried to ignore exactly how close Burke's face was to his groin. How close the man's hands were to his ass. *Oh god. Sweet torture. I've got to get out of his arms. I can't do this.*

Carlos pushed out of Burke's embrace and dropped to the ground, shoving on his friend's shoulders, chuckling. He scratched the back of his neck and shook his head.

"Good job Hercules! You did a good job, Little Man," Ortiz said as he slapped Carlos's back, making him stumble forward and collide with Burke.

"Thanks, Big Papi," Carlos choked out.

Burke chuckled. "You need another spine there, Herc?" Burke asked.

Carlos wiggled. "Maybe a new spleen too," he told his friend. Burke let out a snort and Carlos joined him in a laugh. When their sounds of amusement calmed, Carlos's stomach clenched at the look of intensity he saw in Burke's eyes. He opened his mouth to ask him what was wrong when he heard his name being yelled. Turning, he saw a reporter heading his way. He glanced back at Burke to tell him that they would talk later but Burke had already walked away to celebrate with the rest of the team.

Damn.

What the fuck did you think you were gonna do back there, Thornton? Declare your love for Hercules in front of the whole goddamn world? Stop thinking with your dick for once! Burke continued to berate himself mentally even as he smiled and congratulated the rest of his team, posing for pictures with fans, teammates, the owner, and conducting interviews. The entire time, his mind fixed on Carlos Herrera. His teammate, his best friend. A man.

Oh, he knew what the world thought. That he was straight. That he was a ladies' man. He'd gone to great lengths to make them think that way. He and

his best friend, Holly, from college, had carefully constructed the lie. One where they were a couple who were madly in love with each other and they would get married when it was legal for “everyone in the world to get married regardless of sexual orientation.” It made everyone think they were the greatest, most liberal, socially conscious couple in the world. Next to Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, of course. Those overachievers. But no one knew that the excuse they gave was really just so he and Holly would never have to take that ill-fated walk down the aisle. What with Burke being gay and Holly madly in love with a man her family didn’t approve of, they had the best of both worlds.

Sort of.

Except Burke was in love with his best friend, and while he’d caught the occasional glances from Carlos, he wasn’t sure if they were the “I’m interested in you” glances or the “I know your secret and wish you would tell me so this would stop being awkward” glances. Burke was pretty sure that his super awesome gaydar broke the instant he signed his contract to play professional baseball.

“Yo, Thornton! Man, we are going out to party tonight! You are *definitely* coming! You hear me?” his teammate, Jacoby Ellsbury, yelled at him. Burke turned to look at him and felt his stomach flip. Jacoby and Carlos could easily be related. Though Carlos was a shorter, slimmer version of Jacoby, both men were lean with toned muscles and had short, dark brown hair, light brown eyes and a square jaw dusted with a goatee. Though Jacoby didn’t have a slight bump in the middle of his long, thin nose, like Carlos, they were still practically twins. Jacoby also didn’t have Carlos’s pink lips, with the bottom one fuller than the top, or his wide smile. And no one in the world had Carlos’s muscled thighs, thick calves, or his high, round ass.

Burke cleared his throat and returned his attention to Jacoby. He nodded. “Yeah.” He cleared his throat when he heard how husky his voice sounded and tried again. “Yeah, man. I’ll be there.”

“Cool, man! And bring Hercules! I swear the two of you are joined at the hip. Like an old married couple,” Jacoby laughed boisterously and turned to conduct another interview, completely unaware of how much he’d flipped Burke’s world on its head. Could it be possible that Carlos felt something for him? That he was gay too? Should Burke try... no. No. He couldn’t, because if he was wrong he wouldn’t only make things uncomfortable for them on the team, he would lose the greatest relationship in his life. He would lose his best friend.

No, he wouldn't tempt fate and risk it. He would just continue to yearn for Carlos from afar.

Even if doing so was making it harder and harder for him to breathe.

Chapter Two

When Carlos was a little boy there were two things that he'd known to be true. He wanted to be a professional baseball player like Babe Ruth, Satchel Page, Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, and Ty Cobb. The other fact of his young life was that while his older brothers, Ramon, Pedro, Jorge, Angel, and Miguel were all attracted to girls, damn near obsessed with them, he didn't like girls. Oh, he thought girls were pretty. His best friends were girls actually, a fact his brothers loved because whenever Carlos brought his girlfriends over his brothers descended on them like vultures, circling and picking the girls off one by one until Carlos was left sitting alone in the corner, watching as they all flirted and giggled with each other. But while Carlos liked to sit around with the girls and talk about *Beverly Hills 90210*, and debate about why Dylan and Kelly were a much better couple than Dylan and Brenda could ever hope to be, he never once looked at Brenda and Kelly with an eye toward sleeping with either one of them.

He wanted to sleep with Dylan. Dylan was hot.

Which made for a very confusing childhood. Especially growing up in a Catholic household with a very strict, very religious, very manly father. His father was all about being a man. Being "machismo" or *hombruno*. The very first time Cesar Herrera had walked in to find Carlos wearing his mother's heels and the tiara she'd won for being Miss Puerto Rico, his padre's face turned the darkest shade of red before he'd raged. He'd yanked the crown out of Carlos's long brown hair, that had grown to below his shoulders at the time, and pulled him until he'd tripped out of the shoes, out of the bedroom and down the hallway. Carlos had been too afraid to cry at first, until he found himself standing outside in front of his brothers with his father pointing at him and declaring that no son of his would be a *maricón*.

Carlos hadn't known what the word truly meant. Hadn't known how bad it was until he saw his mother's face. She'd burst into tears and began making the sign of the cross. Carlos's older brothers had gotten angry and told his father that they would straighten him out, and his father had nodded. He'd told them to start with his hair, before turning to walk away. He hadn't looked back, not even when Carlos yelled his name. Carlos's mother had taken his two sisters inside, tears rolling down her cheeks, rapid prayers in Spanish falling from her lips, as she refused to look at him as well.

Carlos's older brothers surrounded him, Jorge going to get a pair of scissors from the house. Carlos turned to run but was unable to do so. He was the youngest. The smallest, and they used their height and bigger bodies to hold him down while they cut his hair short, until only an inch remained. And when that was over, they took him into the backyard and beat him black-and-blue.

Carlos never wore his mother's shoes or her tiara again.

But the desire for men never went away. No matter how hard he tried to ignore it. No matter how afraid of his brothers and his father he was, the need for a hard body to be pressed against his own filled him. To love and be loved by a man. He dreamt of touching another man's cock and having his own cock wrapped in the firm grip of a strong-jawed, male member of the human race. He'd prayed about it. Gone to confession repeatedly and yet the desires never left him.

And then his senior year rolled around and his father died. As if an oppressive cloud had been lifted from the family, they moved from Miami, Florida to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to stay with his *Tía* Constanza, his mother's sister. Carlos was floored by the beauty of the city when he got his first view of it, and then rocked down to his core when he saw two men, walking down the street, holding hands. His eyes followed them. When he heard his older brother, Pedro, curse them beneath his breath, Carlos's face had flamed, and he held his bag in front of his groin where his erection pressed obscenely.

Tía Constanza's slap against the back of Pedro's head startled him. "Your estúpido father is muerto. If you want to join him, you just continue to have an attitude such as that in my house," she said.

Pedro's eyes widened, as did everyone else's, but Constanza merely smiled and walked into the house. It was at that moment that Carlos knew that she would become his favorite person in the entire world. Oh, he loved his mother and his siblings, but Constanza was his touchstone. When he kissed his first boy, the quarterback of the football team, it was his Tía that he went and told. When he and that same quarterback, Billy, had sex for the first time, without a condom, it was Constanza he'd gone to, and she was the one who'd taken him to have his first HIV test. When he finally decided to come out to the rest of his family, Constanza had held his hand, offering silent support. She'd also been the one to comfort him when he'd sobbed for hours after his brothers had cursed him and stormed out of the house, and his mother had asked him why he didn't want to spend eternity with her in Heaven.

When Constanza introduced him to her “partner”, Amy, Carlos finally understood why she’d been so sympathetic to his own plight, and the two of them had grown closer. And even though her job as a journalist prevented her from coming to every last one of his games, he was glad she was at this one. Even if she did have to sit in the Skybox with his mother and stepfather, the Conservative Republican lawyer his mother had married two years after they’d moved to Cambridge.

“Hercules!” Jason Varitek’s boisterous voice pulled him out of his walk down memory lane, and Carlos turned away from the crowd of well-wishers to grin at the broad-shouldered bear of a man as he came barreling toward him. Carlos braced himself for impact, Varitek or “Tek” as he was known to those who knew him well, did not know how to hug anyone lightly. Carlos let out an oomph as Tek slammed into him and Carlos wrapped his arms around the man’s broad shoulders. He laughed as Tek tossed him over a shoulder and jumped up and down before setting him back on his feet. Carlos shook his head to clear it of the dizziness and punched Tek in the stomach.

“Asshole,” he yelled.

Tek shook his head. “I’m not saying I lost faith in you, Herc, but there was a moment there where you seemed a little unfocused. I’m glad you got your shit together. I knew you could do it, Little Man!”

Carlos growled. He was really sick of everyone calling him “Little Man.” He knew he was a little shorter than everyone else. Varitek was six feet two and Big Papi was six feet four so of course anyone was shorter than them. Carlos, at five feet eleven was shorter than most of the guys on the team and they never let him forget it. Not even Burke, who was only six feet one.

“I am not your Little Man,” Carlos grouched.

“Awww,” Tek mocked him, pinching Carlos’s cheeks. “Is the baby cranky?”

Carlos shoved him away laughing. “Shut up, jerk!”

“Hey. What’s going on over here?” Burke’s voice interrupted Carlos and Tek’s conversation, and although to the outside observer Burke’s tone sounded pleasant, Carlos could hear the tension wrapped thickly inside of it. Carlos quirked an eyebrow as he stared at his friend, wondering what was wrong with him, and shook his head.

“Oh nothing. Tek’s just teasing me about being short again,” Carlos said, shoving at Tek’s shoulder.

Varitek chuckled and wrapped his arm around Carlos's neck, rubbing his knuckles over his head. "You're just so cute."

Carlos let out a yell as he felt the burn and friction against his skull. "Hey, bitch! Let me go!"

"Alright, you two," Burke laughed. "Hercules needs to go and accept the MVP award."

Carlos stood up, his eyes wide. "I'm getting the MVP?" he gasped.

Burke nodded. "Of course you are. You are the Most Valuable Player, Hercules. Trust me. There's no one more valuable than you."

Carlos took a few steps forward before Burke's words sank in and he froze. Turning, he stared at his friend. Was Burke only talking about being important to the team or was he talking about something more? Could he be talking about being precious to him? Could Burke be curious about the two of them? Would Carlos be okay with that?

"And now your most valuable player, Carlos Herrera!" the announcer called.

"Go, Hercules," Burke said, gesturing with a nod.

"But," Carlos said, shaking his head, wanting to ask Burke about the look on his face, wanting to talk to him about what he'd said.

"Go."

Feeling as if he'd missed an opportunity, Carlos turned and headed for the podium placed at the pitcher's mound. The applause of the crowd was deafening, and yet it wasn't loud enough to drown out Burke's words as they replayed in his mind.

Chapter Three

“So, when do you plan on telling Hercules that you’re in love with him?” Veritek’s voice was low and speculative, and even though it was soft, it might as well have been shouted because of the way it shocked Burke. He jumped, his heart pounding so hard it almost burst through his sternum, and he turned to face Jason.

“W-what?” he stammered.

Veritek held up his hands. “It doesn’t mean a fucking thing to me. I mean, except that you are one less man trying to bone my wife you know? But if I were gay and in love with a man like Hercules, and looking at him the way you just were, I damn sure would tell him. Especially with us all about to go on break. Anything can happen on break, man, and you don’t want to come back for Spring Training and find out that you missed your shot, you know?” Veritek shrugged. “And that’s all I have to say on the matter. I ain’t fucking Doctor Phil.”

Burke stared after Veritek as the man shrugged and walked away, his mind reeling from the man’s words. He’d always thought he’d been much better about hiding his feelings for Carlos, but apparently he hadn’t been. Or maybe Veritek’s gaydar was just extremely honed. It didn’t make any difference. Burke may be gay, but Carlos certainly wasn’t. Was he? Burke shook his head mentally. While he’d never seen his friend with a woman, that didn’t necessarily mean that Carlos hadn’t had one. Burke, himself, had spent too much of his free time with Holly, keeping up the pretense of being a happily committed, straight man to worry about if Carlos was occupying his time with anyone else. It would have been too painful to see the man entering a hotel room with a woman, or a man for that matter.

While he knew there were many in the GLBTQI community who would be disappointed in him for not being out and open about his sexuality, they didn’t truly understand what it was like to be a professional athlete. Homophobia ran rampant within the locker room. Slurs against men who loved other men were the norm, falling from the lips of not only the players and the coaches, but the owners as well. And anyone who was perceived as being slightly gay, or even looked as though they were having a homosexual thought, was bullied and harassed until they inevitably quit, or were traded and learned to hide such things from everyone around them. It was something Burke had learned at a young age.

He was twelve years old the first time he'd gotten an erection looking at another boy in the locker room. It had been after a Little League game, where his team had beaten the Moline Falcons, and he and the rest of the Davenport Eagles had gone back to shower before heading out for their pizza party. Burke had been the last one to enter the showers, the coach having stopped him to give him some pointers on his game, and when he'd entered the open showering area, there had only been one open showerhead. Right next to Aaron Davis. Burke had gone over and turned on the shower and started to wash without paying much attention to the roughhousing the other boys were engaging in. He'd always been that way, usually taking a few moments after the game to go over every play to see where he could improve, where he'd made any mistakes, where he'd excelled, things like that. But this time he'd gotten distracted when Aaron had been shoved into him by one of their other teammates and Burke had been snapped out of his internal musings. When he'd looked over at Aaron he'd found himself growing aroused for the first time. That was the moment he'd realized he was different from everyone else.

He'd begged to get off attending the pizza party and gone home where his parents found him curled up in the back of his closet, clutching his baseball glove, tears streaming down his cheeks. When his mother tried to talk to him he'd only cried harder. His father had taken one look at him and sighed. He'd crawled into the closet with Burke and closed the door, trapping them in the darkness.

"What happened after the game, Burke?" he'd asked.

"I don't know, Pa," Burke lied.

"Don't you lie to me, Burke," his father said firmly. "You know I don't tolerate you lying to me."

Burke sniffled. "I got a stiffy," he whispered.

His father chuckled. "You got an erection. It happens to all of us, son. It just means you're growing up. It's nothing to be afraid of and certainly nothing to cry over. Were you thinking of one of the cheerleaders?"

Burke shook his head, though he knew his father couldn't see him. "No. I was looking at Aaron."

His father had gotten silent then, and the silence in the closet had grown stifling, making Burke cry harder. When his father gathered him into his arms and patted the back of his head, Burke felt the tension and fear seep out of his body. His father always knew how to make him feel better. "Well, Burke, I

won't admit that I know how you feel, I can't say that I do. But your Ma and I? We love you anyway. There will be people who may not understand or really like the fact that you like boys that way, so you be careful, but just know that we are always here for you."

Burke nodded, not fully understanding why anyone would care who he liked, but just like that he'd felt better. When his father had suggested that they head over to the pizza parlor to join the rest of the team, Burke had agreed and was glad he had. It was the last time he'd hung out with the team.

The next time they had a game, they'd lost, and even though they were a bunch of preteens, tempers flared, all of them seeking someone to blame. Aaron hadn't been playing well, their pitcher, Terry, had hit a number of players, and Burke, their best hitter, hadn't delivered, striking out a number of times. Everyone was angry when they walked into the locker room, and perhaps that was why Ricky, who was already a bully, noticed the way Burke kept looking at Aaron.

"Yo, Thornton! You some kind of fag or something?" he shouted across the room.

Everyone grew still and turned to look at Burke, and his face grew hot as he spluttered at the question. "W-what?" he asked. "Why would you ask that?"

"My daddy says that if a man keeps looking at another man then he's a fag and he deserves to have his ass kicked. You keep looking at Aaron like you want to kiss him, so that makes you a fag." Ricky sneered at Burke as he walked toward him slamming his fist into his palm. "So that means you need to have your ass kicked."

"I'm not a fag!" Burke yelled looking around the room. He noticed that his other teammates seemed to be either too scared to get involved, confused about what was going on, or joining Ricky. Burke rose from the bench and turned to run, hearing Ricky and the rest of the guys chasing him out of the locker room. He ran directly to the coach's office, slamming the door behind him.

"Thornton! What's the problem?"

Burke pointed. "Ricky's calling me a fag and trying to kick my ass, Coach!"

Coach Eckhart blinked and his face grew dark red. He rose from behind his desk and walked around it, grabbing Burke's arm in a firm grip, he stepped out of the office, facing the rest of the team. He let go of Burke, crossed his arms and gave them all a no-nonsense glare.

“First of all, there will be no profanity or name calling in this locker room, Ricky, you know better. Let your parents know that you’ll be staying late after practice next week to run laps,” Coach Eckhart said.

Ricky’s mouth dropped open, then he nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Second of all,” Coach Eckhart said. “Let me let you all in on a secret. There is no way that anyone in this room is a gay. Gays can’t play sports. They’re too delicate. The good Lord made sports for men, and gays are not real men. Burke here is an excellent ball player, and a great athlete so there’s no way he is a gay. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” everyone chorused. Coach Eckhart nodded and patted Burke on the back. “Now. Go home. All of you and enjoy your week because practice next week is going to be brutal.”

Everyone groaned as they started to grab their bags and filed out. Burke watched Ricky and his friends turn around to head back to their lockers, his Coach’s words swirling around in his brain. Was the man right? He was a good athlete so if gays weren’t, then he couldn’t be a good athlete. Maybe him getting an erection while looking at Aaron was just a one-time thing.

But when he went outside to the car and told his parents what had happened, they pulled him off of the team and he soon found himself playing for the Moline Falcons, against the Davenport Eagles. Against Aaron and Ricky. He’d learned then to keep his mouth shut and all of his desires for other men as close to the vest as he could.

At least until he got to college and met Holly, then the rules changed completely.

“Thornton?” Carlos’s voice pulled him out of his memories and Burke blinked down at his friend, the shorter man staring up at him with concern, sweat glistening at his brow. “You okay?”

Burke nodded. “Yeah. Just caught up in a trip down memory lane.”

Carlos grinned. “Yeah that’s been happening to me a lot today too.” He jerked his head toward the direction of the locker room. “Come on. Let’s go get cleaned up. I hear there’s a party going on and we’re actually invited to this one.”

“We’re always invited to the parties. We just never go.” Burke laughed.

Carlos shrugged. “Yeah, well. Same thing.”

Burke shook his head and slung his arm over his friend's shoulder as he walked with him toward the locker room, waving toward the fans who were still cheering over their win. His stomach clenched as he thought about the fact that they were heading to the showers. Together. And the idea that they would be the last ones there.

No. Nothing was going to happen. He wouldn't let it. He'd spent years keeping the "fag" out of the locker room, and no matter how hot Carlos was and how much Burke wanted to sink his cock inside the man's hot ass, he refused to break that rule.

Chapter Four

Carlos could feel the way Burke suddenly stiffened next to him and he wondered what was going through his friend's mind. He wanted to ask him but at the same time he didn't want to call any attention to Burke's tension, he was too busy enjoying the way the man's arm felt wrapped around him. Call him selfish, but it was the truth. He pressed his left arm tighter against Burke's side shivering slightly at the brush of the man's uniform against his skin. He was playing with fire, he knew he was, but he couldn't help himself.

"Carlos! *Mijo!*" His mother's voice was like a bucket of ice-cold water being dumped on his head and Carlos groaned. Never in his life had he wanted to shout out at the heavens more than in that moment. He and Burke stopped and turned. He smiled at his mother to see her and the rest of his family rushing toward him, big grins stretched across their faces as they surrounded him, all speaking excitedly in rapid-fire Spanish.

Carlos nodded, not really paying them any attention, his eyes flickering back and forth from their faces to Burke's as his friend stood against the wall, an amused expression shining in his dark brown eyes. Carlos had a hard time not staring at Burke's broad shoulders and tall, lean, toned body with his thick biceps, trunk-like thighs and muscled calves. His short, dark blond hair that was styled in an elegant crew cut, perfectly accentuating his square jaw. Carlos's eyes moved over Burke's thin nose, the dimple in his chin and his high cheekbones. Burke looked as if he had been sculpted from marble and more than once Carlos had lain in bed fantasizing about licking every last inch of his friend's body. Sucking on his thin lips, especially the bottom one, which was fuller than the top. Whenever Burke wasn't smiling, there was still a slight tilt to the left side of his gorgeous lips. Carlos wanted to feel that wrapped around his cock. He wondered if it felt different from every other mouth out there.

"Carlos!" His mother snapped her fingers in front of his face, and Carlos blinked and cleared his throat, blushing as he realized that he'd been lusting over his best friend in front of his mother, stepfather, sisters, aunt, her partner, and the rest of his family. "Did you not hear me?"

"*Lo siento, Madre.* My mind was wandering," he apologized, leaning down to kiss his mother's cheek. His mother was only five feet three and though she was pushing sixty, she looked thirty and dressed like it as well. Her black hair was thick and currently flowed around her shoulders in waves, her makeup

flawless and she wore an elegant pink and grey skirt suit. She preened as soon as Carlos kissed her and reached up to pat his face. These were the moments when he thought that perhaps she actually was proud of him, but they were usually snatched away from him when she would inevitably say—

“Such a good boy. I don’t know why you can’t find a good Puerto Rican woman to marry. I will even accept *Gringo*. But you are getting so old, *Mijo*. It is time for you to settle down, get married and have babies. I want to be an *abuela*,” she said.

Carlos chuckled. “*Madre*, you already are an *abuela*. You have *trece* grandchildren already. Why do you need more?”

His mother huffed and waved her hand. “I do not have any from *you*. I must have grandchildren from all *mis hijos* before *Dios* takes me away from you all.”

Carlos just shook his head again and lifted his mother’s hand to kiss the back of her fingers. It was an old argument between the two of them. She refused to accept that he was gay and he refused to marry a woman just to satisfy her and give her beautiful Latino, or half-Latino, babies. While he could use a surrogate and had considered it more than once, he didn’t want to be a single father. He wanted to have a partner, someone to share the burden of changing dirty diapers, and four a.m. feedings, and paying for college, and paying for the wedding, and one day, becoming grandparents, themselves.

He wanted a marriage. A family. And he wanted it with the one person he couldn’t have. So, until that feeling passed, he wouldn’t be having it with anyone.

Refusing to look over at Burke to see what he thought about the conversation going on between him and his mother, Carlos stood to his full height and stepped back. “*Madre*, I told you when I meet the right person, *person*, then I will give you as many grandchildren as you can stand. But not a moment before. Now. Burke and I have to go and shower so we can go out and celebrate with the rest of the team.” He emphasized the word for her twice, not giving his future partner a gender so as to not mar their happy moment, but the slight dimming of her hazel eyes let him know that she knew he meant when he met the right *man*.

His mother gasped. “You are not going to come and celebrate your win with your family?”

Carlos winced as he looked at the disappointment and the sadness on his mother’s face. How she managed to display both expressions on her face at the

same time, he would never know. He looked over at Burke and scowled when he heard his friend choke on a laugh. Feeling a thread of evil revenge pulse through him Carlos looked at his mom and grinned sweetly.

“Okay, *Madre*. Burke and I will go to the party for a little while. Just to say hi, because you know we have to celebrate with the team, but then we will come and meet you at the house and have dinner with the family,” he said. He could see Burke’s mouth drop open out of the side of his eye and had to bite his lower lip to stop himself from bursting into laughter.

His mother pouted. “You cannot come for the whole time, *mijo*?”

“Alma,” his stepfather, Thiago Perez interrupted with an indulgent grin. “Leave the boy alone. Let him go and have fun with his friends. He had a hard day and played a good game. He will come over after a while and we can talk to him then.”

His mother nodded and smiled up at Thiago, patting his chest, though confusion and dread filled Carlos. Talk to him? Talk to him about what? And why did his stepfather insist on calling his career “having fun with his friends”? It irritated Carlos to no end. Carlos cut his gaze over to his *Tía* to see if she knew what was going on but the small shrug she gave let him know that she was just as in the dark as he was.

“Okay. Well, I’ll see you later, *Madre. Padre*.” Carlos was the only one of his mother’s children who called Thiago father instead of by his name. Perhaps it was because of the way his own father had treated him after that fateful day with the heels and the tiara, but Cesar had ceased to be his “*padre*” after that. When his mother and Thiago had married, Carlos and Thiago had gotten close. It had been Thiago who had practiced with Carlos all hours of the day and night when he’d told the man that he wanted to be a professional baseball player. And it was Thiago who had discouraged him from blowing all of his money from his first signed contract on cars, houses and lavish gifts. Carlos had invested wisely and tripled his money. Something he was extremely grateful for.

Thiago may not have agreed with Carlos being gay but he was more of a father to him than Carlos’s own father had ever been.

“Si, *mijo*. You will come to the house, soon, *jes*?” His mother’s accent always got really thick whenever she was excited or upset. Carlos’s eyebrows lowered. He couldn’t figure out which one she was, so he merely nodded.

“Sí, *Mamá*.”

“*Enhorabuena, hermano,*” his sisters, Camila and Fabiana said simultaneously as they leaned over to kiss his cheeks.

“*Gracias,*” Carlos thanked them with a smile, waving at his brothers-in-law, Adam and Marco, as they led his sisters away. He watched as his family, his loud, boisterous family, walked back the way they’d come and turned his head toward Burke when the man walked up to him.

“Man, I’d kill for your family,” Burke sighed.

“You want ’em?” Carlos deadpanned. “I’ll sell ’em to you for fifty cents. All of them except my *Tía*. She’s priceless, man.”

“Sold.”

Carlos shook his head and sighed. Spinning around, he headed back toward the showers, his arm brushing against Burke’s, missing the feel of the taller man’s arm wrapped around him. Damn his family for interrupting them. It didn’t matter. He had enough stroke material to last him for a while. And besides, his family stopping them had, hopefully, delayed Carlos and Burke enough that by the time they finally stepped into the locker room, the rest of the team would be gone and they would be able to shower alone. Then Carlos would *really* have something to masturbate to. Burke. Naked. Wet. With his cock covered in soap.

And there went Carlos’s cock. Plumping up in his pants. Fuck.

Carlos bit his lower lip and swallowed the moan that tried to bubble up out of his chest.

“Man, you joke, but I swear, your family is awesome.”

Carlos laughed. “No, man. Your parents? They sound like they were the coolest people in the world.” He looked over at his friend and saw the way the blond smiled softly. The expression was so full of love and care. What Carlos wouldn’t give, sacrifice and *bleed* to have Burke look at him that way, or to know that the expression on his face meant that the man was thinking of him. Just once. All he needed was just one time. He could die happy if Burke looked at him like that just once.

“Yeah. They were. But, the problem with having parents who love you like that, is when you lose them at such a young age, like I did? You spend the rest of your life looking for someone to love you like that. Or looking to love someone that way. And the sad fact is, a lot of people just aren’t worth it.” Burke sounded so disappointed and sad by this statement that Carlos couldn’t take it.

Without thinking, Carlos reached out and grabbed Burke's hand. The two of them stopped right in front of the locker room, turning to face each other. Carlos found himself staring up into his best friend's expressive gaze, his heart pounding and his mouth going dry. *Kiss me, Burke. Please, kiss me. I can't kiss you. I don't want to ruin this, but if you kiss me then I'll know it's okay.*

He couldn't say those words out loud though, so instead he said, "I think it's just a matter of finding the *right* person to love that way, who will love you back just as much. It's not so hard when it's right, you know what I mean? You'll just sort of fall into place with each other. It's effortless. Like breathing. And then you don't have to look anymore."

Kiss me, Burke. I want to breathe again. I stopped breathing the second I saw you. Please, kiss me so I can breathe again.

Chapter Five

Please kiss me, Carlos. I need you to keep me breathing. I'm drowning without you. If you kiss me I'll know that it's okay. I'll know that you're thinking and feeling what I am, but I won't act first. Please kiss me. Help me to breathe again.

Burke stared at Carlos, the air still around them as if all of nature was waiting for one of them to do something. Was it him? Carlos? What was he supposed to do? Was he supposed to do anything? His palm grew sweaty where it lay pressed against Carlos's and Burke had the urge to squeeze his friend's hand. Could he do that? Was that allowed? Would Carlos know then? Would that be such a bad thing?

Carlos's eyes darkened and his lips parted as if he were preparing for something. A kiss, maybe? Or maybe he was getting ready to say something. No. He looked like he was getting ready to kiss someone. Who? Burke? Wait. Was he leaning forward? Why? Burke's mind was swirling with the implications of his friend's actions when he realized that he was leaning forward himself.

Holy. Shit. Was he really going to do this? Right here? In front of the locker room? Where anyone could see them? What the fuck was wrong with him?

Loud laughter caused both Carlos and him to jump and back away from each other. Burke rubbed the back of his neck. Embarrassment sweeping through him and for the first time in over a decade... shame crawling through his veins like sludge. He didn't understand why he felt such an emotion, though. Why should he feel ashamed about such a thing? Plenty of men hid their sexuality in the majors. He wasn't the only one. Not only that, he had to think of Holly. He couldn't do anything that would look bad on his relationship with Holly.

"Don't you dare try to blame your sorry state of singlehood on me, Burke." His last conversation with Holly played in his head like a parrot mocking him. *"If you're single, it's because you want to be. I'm sure you can find some gorgeous guy who needs to be in the closet just like you, who would love to be in love with you. Or more than that. I just know that there's a guy worth you coming out for. That's what I want for you. A guy you love so much that you throw yourself head first out of the closet for, hangers, shoes, boxes, skeletons, costumes, tuxedos and all."*

Burke snorted. His best friend was colorful in her descriptions but she always got her point across. He needed someone he wanted, no *needed* to come out for. Was Carlos that guy? Could he be that man? Burke opened his mouth to say something to Carlos. Maybe to apologize for pulling away, he didn't know, but the door to the locker room opened and some of their teammates started to walk out, laughing, shoving each other, celebrating their big win.

"Yo! Herrera and Thornton! Man, you guys better get in there! The party is getting crazy," Mike Napoli, laughed drunkenly as he stumbled, his arm wrapped tightly around Ellsbury's neck as the two men made their way from the locker room.

Burke's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Napoli, you sure got slammed fast."

Ellsbury shook his head and chuckled. "Napoli here didn't tell anyone that he was on pain meds before he decided to be set up for *Sox Race*."

Burke winced. That particular drinking game could drop a man even if he wasn't on prescription medication. He reached out to pat Napoli on the shoulder. "Go home and sleep it off. Roli-Poli."

"Yeah, go take a nap, Napoli," Carlos laughed.

Burke and Ellsbury both groaned while Napoli swung out feebly at Carlos, who danced away. Burke laughed at the two men and shook his head. He loved his teammates and was seriously going to miss them during the off-season. Would they all be back on the team next year? He knew that many times players were traded after great seasons, which made no sense to him whatsoever, but it was a part of life. He just hoped that it wouldn't be one of his buddies.

He could only hope it wouldn't be him or Carlos.

His eyes drifted over to Carlos, and he watched as his friend continued to tease Napoli, mocking the man, and he felt a lump rise in his throat. What would he do if he and Carlos were separated next season? He knew that his game would be affected. There was no way he'd be effective as a ballplayer if he had to play *against* Carlos. Besides, he was used to looking over and seeing Carlos's grin, feeling the man's shoulder against his own, looking at his bubble butt encased in the pants of the Boston Red Sox uniform. There was no way Burke would be able to continue to play under different circumstances.

He shook his head mentally. He was borrowing trouble. He knew he was. God, why was he suddenly so morose? He hadn't been drinking anything so he

couldn't be drunk. There was absolutely no reason for his thoughts to suddenly have taken a turn in such a direction.

“Come on, Thornton. Let's let Ellsbury and NAPoli go on home. We've got a celebration to go to. I want to get inside and see if Coach is drinking,” Carlos said with a wide grin splitting his caramel face.

Burke nodded and looked back over at Ellsbury and Napoli, and he lifted his hand to them. “We'll see you guys later,” he said.

“So you guys are coming to the party then?” Ellsbury said.

“Yep,” Carlos answered. “We can't stay for too long though. My mom guilted me into coming over to her place to have dinner. Apparently, her and my dad want to talk to me about something, and I'm dragging Thornton with me for backup just in case I need an excuse to leave. But we'll be back over if the party's still going.”

Ellsbury nodded. “Excellent. We'll see you guys later.” He walked away with Napoli draped over him, his face pressed against Ellsbury's neck and Burke tilted his head to the side.

“Kinda makes you wonder,” Carlos muttered beneath his breath. Or at least that's what Burke thought he said.

“What?” he asked.

Carlos shook his head. “Nothing. C'mon.” He turned and led the way into the locker room. Burke followed behind him, his mind split on the final image of Ellsbury and Napoli, and the sight of Carlos's ass moving in his uniform pants.

Damn.

When they stepped into the locker room, Burke had to rub his eyes to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. The room was filled with the players of the Boston Red Sox team, in various state of undress, all of them soaked in—water or liquor, Burke wasn't sure what it was—all of them hanging on each other, laughing, singing at the tops of their lungs.

“What the fuck are they singing?” Carlos whispered next to him.

Burke chuckled. “Danny Boy. It's an old Irish song.”

Carlos shook his head. “Isn't that a song you sing when someone dies?”

“Yep.”

“Crazies.”

“You got that right.” Burke nodded. No sooner had Burke agreed than the song abruptly changed to an Irish jig and everyone instantly picked up the words. Even the more *ethnic* members of the team. He watched as champagne was sprayed on various team members, drunk straight from the bottle by some, or poured into the pants of others.

“It’s like a weird Dionysus party in here,” Carlos mused. “I wonder if they acted like this when they won back in ’04.”

“We were worse then. We had Pedro and Manny, and they are worse than everyone here put together,” Ortiz said loudly from next to them and Burke jumped. He turned to look at the large black man standing at his left. “Now, come. You join the party.” Ortiz slapped Burke on the back and Burke stumbled forward right into the middle of the crowd. He turned to find Carlos, but lost sight of him as his teammates surrounded him. A champagne bottle was shoved into one hand and a cup filled with... yeah, that was Scotch... was put into his other. He swallowed the Scotch and laughed as he celebrated with his team. He didn’t need to worry about Carlos. They were friends. Teammates. They weren’t lovers, or partners. They were buddies. Pals. That was it. They would never be anything more.

Yeah. Maybe if he kept saying that to himself he might actually start to believe it.

Chapter Six

Carlos stood in the corner, barefoot, dressed in only his undershirt and his uniform pants, soaked in champagne, Gatorade, and water, and watched Burke as he sang drunkenly with the other teammates. They were singing “Firework” by Katy Perry at the top of their lungs. It sounded like a bunch of cats being tortured. Brutally. If Katy heard them she would probably sue them all for butchering her song. Even in the locker room where no one could hear them.

He took a shuddering breath as he lifted the bottle of champagne to his lips and took another deep gulp. He was well and truly plastered. He knew that he was. He also knew that he was going to have to sober up if he had any plans of going to see his mother in a few hours. There was no way she would allow him to come stumbling into her home intoxicated. And Burke was much worse than he was. He snorted as he imagined his mother’s litany of Spanish expletives if he and Burke walked into her home smelling of liquor.

I do not want to experience that. Not again.

The sound of a male shout caused him to look up in shock. He let out a harsh laugh as he watched Burke spray their rookie center fielder, a dry, clean, Ellsbury, who was obviously returning from escorting Napoli home. Carlos shook his head. The man should have stayed away. Why he would change and come back was a fool’s errand, everyone knew that.

“Goddammit, Thornton! I just took a fuckin’ shower!” Ellsbury shouted.

“Well ’at was a ’tupid t’ing to do now wann’t it?” Burke slurred. The rest of the team laughed and Carlos merely shook his head. His friend was beyond sloshed. It was time to call a halt to the drinking. Maybe. Or maybe this was the perfect time for Carlos to make his move. When Burke was this drunk he let down his guard, lowered his inhibitions, and tended to forget things the next day. Carlos could tell the man that he loved him. Find out why Burke had been looking at him so intently all day. See if maybe there was the possibility for something more and if so, he could try again when they were both sober, but if not, then never try again and keep their friendship intact.

It was a brilliant fucking idea.

Carlos nodded his head and pushed away from the corner, stumbling slightly as the room tilted. *Holy fuck. Who was moving the room and why were they shaking it when he was trying to walk? That wasn’t cool. Not cool at all.*

He rested his hand against the wall of the shower where he'd been hiding from everyone and waited for the world to stop spinning, closing his eyes, just for a minute, and when he opened them again, everyone was gone. How had he ended up sitting on the floor of the showers? He looked around dazedly, before glancing down at his legs that were spread wide, his arms hanging limply at his sides. Putting two-and-two together he realized that he must have passed out and sank to the floor and been left to sleep it off by the rest of the team. *Nice. Everyone abandoned me.*

Well, not everyone. Burke was still there. But everyone else was gone.

Music was playing in the background. Someone had turned on the radio that they kept in the locker room and it currently played the classic rock station, which served to heighten the tension that was currently tightening Carlos's belly. He looked at Burke, who suddenly seemed a whole lot more sober than he had just a minute before—it had only been a minute, right?—as he pulled off his shirt and walked toward the showers.

“Glad to see you're not dead, Herrera. We thought maybe you'd died in the showers and we were gonna have to find ourselves a new third baseman,” Burke said, his eyes never leaving Carlos's face as he dropped his hands to his waist and started to unbutton his pants. He pushed himself to his feet shakily as he watched his friend with an intense gaze.

“Uh... N-no... O-of course n-not. I was j-just um... r-resting before the um... p-party tonight. Yeah.” He nodded and stammered, lifting his hand to wipe the drool that he could feel rolling down his chin at the sight of Burke's rock hard pecs and corrugated stomach, as well as that deep vee that led down to what Carlos could only imagine was a long, thick cock. *Dios, please, I don't come to you and ask for much, and it's probably sacrilege for me to be praying to you and asking for such a thing, but please let Burke be gay and let him have a big dick. Please, please, please... SCORE!*

Carlos's eyes widened and he wondered how he and Burke had gone so many years without ever seeing each other naked. Oh yeah, he'd been diligent about never being around the other man naked just in case he'd sprung a boner. But why was Burke practically putting on a strip tease for him now? What had happened? What changed?

“Th-Thornton?”

“Did you know you talk in your sleep, Herrera?” Burke asked nonchalantly, as he bent over to pull off his pants and boxer briefs, ignoring his hard cock that was leaking pre-cum, making Carlos's mouth water.

“I-I do?”

Burke nodded. “Yes. You do. As the guys were leaving to head out to the party and I was walking over to wake you up, I heard you say the most interesting thing. Well. You didn’t say it so much as moan it.”

“M-moan it?” Carlos watched as Burke stalked toward him as a lion would its prey, his steps slow and measured, a slow grin spreading across his face, his eyes twinkling in the overhead light.

“Oh yes. You moaned it as if it were giving you immense pleasure and I almost called the guys over to hear, until I heard what you were saying. Then I knew that I had to hurry up and get them out of the room so that you and I could talk about it... alone.”

“A-alone?”

Burke nodded and lifted a hand to place it beside Carlos’s head, against the wall. “Do you want to know what you said?”

All of the air in the room seemed to have escaped and Carlos suddenly couldn’t breathe. He struggled for air, but all he could smell was Burke, all he could see was the taller, broader man. Burke was his priority. Burke’s words, his scent, his taste, his body, his touch, his pleasure. For Carlos in that moment, it was Burke, then breathing.

He nodded in response to Burke’s question and watched as the man grinned wolfishly down at him.

“Breathe, Carlos.”

And just like that, as if his lungs had been waiting for permission, Carlos took in a sweet lungful of life-saving air. He inhaled deeply, feeling lightheaded and reached up unconsciously for Burke’s shoulders to steady himself, shivering at the deliciously hot but hard, silky feeling of Burke’s muscled, broad skin beneath his fingertips. He jerked his fingers away at the sound of Burke’s groan, breathing harshly, before looking back up at his best friend.

“You were moaning my name, Carlos. Whimpering, whining, groaning and begging for me to fuck you harder and faster. Pleading for me to give it to you,” Burke told him, his voice harsh.

Carlos jerked at his friend’s tone and blushed, the dream he’d had while passed out flashing across his mind in Technicolor quickly.

“Oh, God,” he breathed out.

“So is that what you want, Herrera? You want me to give it to you hard and fast?” Burke leaned down and pressed his mouth against Carlos’s ear causing him to groan, and his half-hard dick to thicken swiftly in his uniform pants and release a spurt of pre-cum, wetting the fabric. “Because I will. I’ll fuck you so hard and so fast that you’ll be walking funny and feeling me for days.”

Carlos let out a shuddering breath and ignoring the voice that told him that he was putting his friendship on the line, that things may not work out between them, that he could possibly ruin his career, he said the only thing he *could* say:

“Yes.”

Chapter Seven

Burke released a sigh of relief and lowered his head to take Carlos's lips in a hard kiss. He lifted his other hand to press it against the tiled shower wall on the other side of Carlos's head, not trusting himself to touch his friend just yet. He was sure that if any part of his body touched Carlos beyond his lips, he wouldn't be able to be gentle, and he had to be gentle this first time. He *needed* to be gentle this first time because he was certain they would do this again, he would make sure of it, and he in no way wanted Carlos to think he was some kind of animal.

But when Carlos bit his lower lip and tugged on it, Burke felt his thinly held control snap. Lowering his hands to Carlos's undershirt, he grabbed the collar and pulled it down and apart, pulling it off completely. He flung the torn pieces aside, all while pressing his mouth against Carlos's harder, licking inside, dueling with his teammate's tongue. The sound of the fabric ripping set off a fire inside of Burke, lighting him up inside and he growled, hearing Carlos's echoing groan as the man wrapped his arms up around Burke's neck tighter, burying his fingers in Burke's hair and tugging on the strands.

Burke pulled his mouth away from Carlos's lips, grinning at the sight of them red and swollen from his kisses, and at the sound of Carlos whimpering and begging Burke to kiss him again. Instead, Burke turned his attention to Carlos's naked torso. Licking his lips, he started kissing Carlos's chin, tasting the champagne, Gatorade, water, and the unmistakable, yet extremely intoxicating bouquet that made up Carlos's chemical DNA. Burke moaned as the different tastes rolled around on his tongue and sticking out the muscle, he trailed it down over Carlos's neck until he got to his Adam's apple. He sucked on the lump, nipping on the skin there for a moment, before trailing the tip of the organ down to Carlos's clavicle, squatting as he did so.

He settled his hands on Carlos's waist, his fingers lightly tracing the top of his uniform pants as Burke set about licking and sucking on Carlos's skin.

"B-Burke. P-please," Carlos pleaded.

Burke lifted his head and stared at Carlos. "Please what?" he asked.

"Stop teasing me," Carlos said.

Burke shook his head. "I'm not teasing you, Herrera. I plan to deliver. Trust me. I'm just making you wait. Don't you know by now that waiting for the

right pitch always makes the homerun that much sweeter? Hell, sometimes you get. A. Grand. Slam,” he said, punctuating the words with a small bite and a lick along Carlos’s torso. When he was finished, Carlos was panting, whimpering, and trembling. Burke wanted to grin. His friend seemed as if he were on the verge of having his first orgasm.

Not without his cock in my mouth, he’s not.

With that thought in mind, Burke lowered his hands to Carlos’s uniform pants and unfastened them, keeping his gaze locked on Carlos. He was glad that Carlos had thought to remove his shoes and socks before going off to the showers to sulk, otherwise Burke would have had to stop to remove them and that would have just slowed him down, something that he really didn’t want to have to do right then.

He shoved Carlos’s pants down to his knees and pulled out the waistband of his boxer briefs with one hand, far enough for his other hand to slip down inside. He moaned at the feeling of the silk-covered, steel pipe that his friend was carrying in his pants, and stroked his hand up and down Carlos’s shaft slowly, watching Carlos as pleasure swamped his face. Pre-cum slid down Carlos’s shaft, sliding between Burke’s fingers, making his stroking easier, turning him on more and he bit his lower lip as his own cock gave a twitch in the open air of the locker room.

“B-Burke,” Carlos stammered.

“I know, Carlos. I’ve got you,” Burke promised. *I’ll always have you.*

Shoving down Carlos’s underwear he lowered himself to his knees before his friend, his teammate... his lover, and licked around the base of his shaft before licking up the length of his erection to the head. His eyes rolled as the taste of Carlos burst on his tongue, and he listened to the symphony of Carlos’s moans and whispered pleas for more. Giving in to Carlos’s prayers, especially because it was something he wanted just as much, Burke opened his mouth and sucked the head of Carlos’s cock into his mouth and licked beneath, his hand stroking simultaneously.

“*Oh, Dios mío,*” Carlos prayed.

Burke tried not to snort in laughter as his friend began to babble incessantly in what had been coined “Spanglish,” a mixture of Spanish and English words and phrases, and focused on what he was doing, driving the man crazy. He tugged on Carlos’s balls, sucked on his dick and choked and gagged which made the man groan loudly. He collected the excess saliva that dripped from his

mouth and rubbed on Carlos's tight pucker, loosening his hole and slowly pressing his finger inside. The guardian muscle of Carlos's hole gripped Burke's digit and his dick twitched in blissful agony, desperately wanting to be inside.

Patience, my friend, all in due time.

He lifted his mouth off Carlos's shaft, flicking his tongue over the bundle of nerves beneath the mushroom head that appeared almost purple in color. He pulled his finger out of Carlos's hole until only the tip remained lodged inside before pushing it back in. Twisting his forefinger slightly, he sought out his lover's prostate, grazing it.

The harsh groan that escaped Carlos's throat as he shoved his hips forward, let Burke know that he'd found it. Burke wanted to let out a howl of triumph, but instead he doubled his efforts on pegging that gland, thrusting his finger faster and harder within Carlos's body, sucking harder on the man's cock.

After a moment, he pulled his mouth off Carlos's dick, ignoring Carlos's protests, especially when he removed his digit from the tight passage. Burke rose until he loomed over Carlos and stared down into his friend's eyes. His chest rose and fell rapidly as he tried to pull air into his lungs, adrenaline pumping through his veins at what he was about to do. At what was about to happen between them. Reason tried to worm its way into his mind. Its elbows sharp and bruising as it shoved aside passion, lust, and the haze of desire, to remind him that he was putting his career on the line, his friendship, all for a stolen moment in time. All for an orgasm.

And just when Burke might have opened his mouth to change his mind—might have asked Carlos if he was really sure that he wanted to do this—Carlos lifted his head and kissed him. Burke had been kissed plenty of times before. Hell, Holly kissed him in front of the cameras often enough, but this was different. This wasn't a meeting of the mouths. This wasn't the fiery conflagration of passion that they'd had earlier. This wasn't the explosion of passion and lust. This wasn't the atomic bomb of desire between them. Though the current of attraction was still there, blazing strong between them, it was being held back by something much more powerful.

Love.

Holy shit.

This was a kiss with emotion behind it.

When Carlos's hands came up to bury themselves in his hair, Burke's arms wrapped around Carlos's waist and he pulled the other man tight against him. He tried to pull Carlos inside of him so they would never be separated. He wanted to breathe him in. He never wanted to inhale or exhale without knowing that his lungs would be filled with Carlos, that his mouth would be tasting his lover. His tongue dueled lazily with that of the gorgeous, amazing man's. This man who had been hiding his feelings for Burke just as Burke had been hiding his feelings for him.

Burke trailed his hands down Carlos's back to the tight, round globes of his ass and palmed them, squeezing them. He kissed his way back down Carlos's neck but stopped when Carlos grabbed his hair and jerked his head back.

"Enough of the fucking foreplay, Thornton. I'm ready, okay? My goddamn pussy is wet. The flower has bloomed. The hole is open. The fields are ready for planting. Get to it already."

Burke chuckled but stopped abruptly at the sight of Carlos's narrow-eyed glare. He nodded. "Yes, dear."

"And cut out all that bullshit. You better have lube and a condom, because you are not going in raw and bare." And with that Carlos turned and presented his ass to Burke.

Burke took a moment to admire his friend's glorious-looking posterior before he remembered what he was supposed to be doing. *Condoms. Lube. Right!* He turned away from the delectable sight of Carlos's naked body and hurried to his locker, glad that he'd opened it ahead of time. Reaching in, he grabbed his wallet and fumbled inside for his trusty condoms. *Never leave home without the Magnums.* With the condoms in hand, he hurried back to the showers and came to a halt, his mouth falling open. If he had been a cartoon character, his tongue would have rolled out of his mouth and his eyes would have been bugging out.

Carlos was bent over, his face pressed against the tiles of the shower. His right hand was stretched up pressed against the wall as well, though the fingers were curled in as if he were clawing at the tiles. Carlos's legs were spread, his hairless testicles pressed obscenely against Carlos's left arm, which was between his legs. Three fingers of his left hand pushing and pulling in and out of his hole. Burke stood at the edge of the shower area and watched as the guardian muscle stretched and retracted around Carlos's fingers. He reached down and gripped the base of his own erection to stave off his orgasm, the sight

so erotic, so dirty and so *goddamn fucking hot* that he was having a hard time holding off the jizz that ached to shoot out from the head of his cock.

When he felt sufficiently in control, Burke walked over and noticed the body wash on the floor, smirking when he realized it was Ellsbury's. Jacoby was always leaving his body wash behind in the showers. Usually they bitched at him about not putting it away in his locker, but this time Burke and Carlos would reap the benefits from it.

Pouring some of the slick liquid on his fingers, Burke rubbed his fingers together and stepped up right behind Carlos, his cock resting against the man's arm.

"Need some help?" he asked huskily.

When Carlos started to withdraw his fingers, Burke stopped him. "Leave them." Carlos tensed for only a moment before his entire body seemed to melt. Burke rubbed his hand over Carlos's back before pressing one finger alongside Carlos's. The thin, but tight muscle of Carlos's anus resisted the intrusion at first, but he was patient, and he rubbed around the rim of Carlos's hole, loosening the muscles. He poured more body wash into Carlos's crease, groaning as he watched Carlos's slim fingers press the liquid into his tight channel. Feeling Carlos's pucker relax enough, Burke pushed first one, then two of his own fingers into Carlos's body alongside the man's fingers, shivering at the knowledge that they had the equivalent of an entire hand inside of Carlos's ass.

Fuck.

His balls tightened and he knew that if he didn't get inside of Carlos's body soon that he would blow his load against the wall, and that was *not* where he wanted it.

Slowly sliding his fingers out of Carlos's hole, the muscles trying to hold them deep within that tight, wet heat, Burke reached down and picked up the condoms he'd dropped onto the shower floor. His ears were ringing with the sounds of Carlos's moans and shouts of pleasure, and he was almost positive that one thrust was all it was going to take for Carlos to fall over the edge. Ripping open the golden packet with his teeth, Burke rolled the latex down his erection, hissing at the sensation and reached down to tap on Carlos's ass.

"Ready?" he asked, his voice rough, as if he'd been gargling rocks.

"I'm past fucking ready." Carlos's voice was just as harsh and he slid his fingers from his body.

Burke smacked his friend's ass again for his smartass remark before lining up the head of his dick with the hole in front of him. Sliding within the warm, welcoming depths of Carlos's body was like coming home, and Burke exhaled on a groan as he slid balls deep. His head tilted back and a shiver worked its way from the tips of his toes up to his head and back down before exploding throughout his body. *This* was what it was supposed to feel like to have sex and they hadn't even gotten to the good part yet. But already, *already*, Burke wanted to shout out to the heavens that he was right where he wanted to be. That he would never give this up.

He was finally breathing.

Chapter Eight

“If you don’t fucking move, I’m going to kick your ass, Burke,” Carlos growled. And he meant it too. He was *right there*. One thrust, maybe two, and he would have the orgasm of a lifetime. He wasn’t sure how Burke had known that Carlos liked to have his ass stuffed like that, but *holy shit*. Carlos shivered as Burke pulled his hips back slowly, his long, thick dick grazing and caressing all of the nerve endings in Carlos’s passage before he slammed his hips back forward.

“Yes! Goddammit! Yes!” Carlos yelled. He wanted rough. He *needed* rough. There was a time for soft and sweet, but this wasn’t it. He wanted bruises. He wanted to be walking funny. He wanted to be in fucking pleasurable pain when he sat down, but he wanted to be smiling because of it. He pushed his hips back as Burke pressed forward again, groaning as his balls pulled up toward his body, a tingling wrapping itself around his spine.

Burke’s hands on his hips tightened and Carlos knew, though he wasn’t exactly sure how, that the man was about to set up a punishing pace. He wrapped his left hand around his cock and stroked it in time with Burke’s thrusts, his mouth open as he yelled himself hoarse with shouts and prayers to the saints, to God, even to the Holy Mother. He pleaded with Burke to give it to him harder. When Burke’s hand came up and wrapped around the back of his neck, and he slammed his dick into Carlos’s body while groaning his name, that was all it took to send Carlos careening over the edge.

“Oh, God, I love you, Burke!” he shouted as his orgasm rushed over his body, squeezing the very breath from him, his white spunk splattering the tile in front of him as he shook violently. His ass squeezed Burke’s cock within him and he felt the moment Burke tensed behind him at his words, but he was too engrossed in the wondrous, blissful sensations coursing through him to apologize.

His right hand slid down the wall until it hung limply at his side, only his face pressed against the shower wall as Burke continued to ram his cock in and out. Burke’s rhythm was erratic as he chased his own orgasm and seconds later, he let out a roar, wrapping both of his arms around Carlos’s torso, squeezing tightly. He shook violently, babbling incoherent words, sweat making their bodies slick. Carlos’s legs were too weak to hold them up and he collapsed to the floor, Burke on top of him.

They panted for long moments, neither one of them speaking and Carlos studiously avoided looking at his friend... sweat and his orgasm making his inebriation fade away quickly. Rationale returned with sudden clarity. What the fuck had they just done? What had he just confessed to his best friend? His arm twitched at the touch of Burke's finger and he looked over his shoulder at his... lover? His teammate. His *friend*. Holy shit. His *straight* friend.

Fuck. Goddammit to fucking hell.

"We need to talk," Burke said.

Carlos nodded. "Yeah." He cleared his throat. "We... uh... probably should have done that before all of..." He gestured to their naked bodies, "this."

Burke chuckled and shrugged. "Probably." He sighed and rubbed a hand down his face and groaned when he smeared body wash into his eyes. Carlos choked on a laugh when he started to blink rapidly, his eyes no doubt burning. "Maybe we should shower and then talk?"

Carlos nodded. "Might be a good idea." He grinned mischievously. "Wanna use Ellsburry's wash?"

Burke smirked. "I think that's a good idea."

Minutes later they were clean and dressing in their street clothes. Neither one of them looking at the other. The air tense between them. Just as he'd wanted, Carlos's ass was sore. No. Not sore, it fucking hurt like hell.

God he loved it.

He bit his lip and groaned softly as he bent over to pull up his jeans, his hole twinging deliciously at the movement.

"Goddammit, Herrera, you've got to stop it with the noises over there if you want me to keep my head so we can talk," Burke grouched.

Carlos turned to look at him and quirked an eyebrow at him. Burke's eyes were trained on his ass. He looked down at Burke's groin and he was surprised to see the man's cock was hard again, pressing against the front of his zipper. Carlos smiled and rose, pulling the jeans up his legs slowly, turning and caressing his own burgeoning erection as he stared into Burke's gaze. He shivered at the desire he saw darkening his friend's eyes. God, how had he not noticed the man's attraction for him before?

Burke stepped over the bench and stalked toward him, pressing him roughly against the locker, thrusting his hand into Carlos's jeans. Carlos groaned as

Burke's hand gripped his balls and squeezed them before twisting them slightly. He hissed, lifting up on his toes.

"Stop playing with fire, Herrera. We need to talk," Burke warned, lowering his lips to Carlos's neck and licking the skin over his Adam's apple before biting it hard and sucking on it, marking the skin. Carlos whimpered and nodded his head as much as he could. Burke released him and stepped back, pulling his hand out of Carlos's pants, adjusting himself and crossing his arms over his broad chest. He cleared his throat, blushing slightly. "Holly is my beard," he blurted out suddenly.

Carlos blinked, his brain still muddled by passion and lust.

"Whut?" he asked. How the hell did they get on to Holly?

Burke smiled softly at him and lifted a hand to Carlos's cheek, caressing the side of his face. "Holly. I've known her for years. She's dating a black man that her family doesn't approve of. She's in love with him and he's a gardener. He's my gardener actually. He used to be a high school football coach and played college football." He took a deep breath and scratched the back of his head, shrugging his shoulders. "So she gets to be with him like she wants and in return she helps me out by pretending to be my girlfriend for the cameras."

Carlos's mouth dropped open. "So you're not straight?"

Burke shook his head. "No, Carlos. I'm gay."

Carlos glanced down as he zipped up and fastened his pants, anger surging through him. How could Burke lie to him all these years? Why wouldn't he tell him? He thought they were friends? Best friends at that. Why would he keep such a huge secret?

Carlos gasped when Burke shoved him against the lockers again, placing his hands on either side of his head against the steel of the locker doors.

"You don't get to be angry at me, Carlos," he said, his voice trembling with emotion. "You kept secrets from me too."

"I did not—"

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up. You did too."

"Like what?"

"You didn't tell me you were gay either," Burke pointed out.

Carlos opened his mouth and then slammed it shut. While he hadn't been parading around with a girlfriend on his arm like Burke, he hadn't come out to anyone either. It was a lie by omission. He was just as guilty.

“And not only that. You never told me that you loved me.” Burke shook his head. “Why not?”

“I thought you were straight! You’re gay, you know that it’s like an unwritten rule in the gay man’s handbook to never fall in love with the straight guy!” Carlos tilted forward.

Burke leaned down and took Carlos’s lips in a bruising kiss. It wasn’t the sweet, gentle kiss they’d shared before. This was a kiss of possession. This was Burke owning Carlos, staking his claim. Marking him.

He fucking loved it.

When Burke lifted his head, Carlos was panting again and he had to blink a few times to clear his blurred vision. Wait. What had they been talking about?

“I’m not straight and fucking hell, Carlos. I love you too,” Burke said, leaning his forehead against Carlos’s.

Carlos inhaled sharply and looked up at Burke, his eyes burning.

“Really?”

Burke nodded. He stepped back and held out his hand. “Now. Let’s go. We’ve got a party to get to.”

Carlos grinned. “Yeah. That’s right. We did win the World Series after all.”

Carlos gripped Burke’s hand and followed him out of the locker room, both of them grabbing their sports bags, and his heart pounding in his chest at the possibility of anyone seeing them. At the door to the locker room, they released each other’s grip by unspoken agreement and Carlos felt a vice squeeze his lungs, the air leaving him in one fell swoop.

They stepped out of the locker room, and Carlos pulled on his Ray-Ban sunglasses, turning at the sound of a feminine squeal. He wanted to shove Holly away when she launched herself into Burke’s arms, wrapping her slender, tanned ones around his neck. Her blonde hair was blowing in the Boston breeze and her white and yellow sundress flared out behind her, as her yellow heels rose in the air. God, they looked like an ad for the perfect American family. Carlos glanced over at the broad-shoulder African American man, who wore a plain red T-shirt, stretched tight across his muscled torso and a pair of jeans. As he held the woman he loved in his arms, his bald head shining in the fluorescent lighting of the hallway, Carlos wondered if the other man was wishing all manner of evil thoughts on Burke.

“Oh, Burkey! You played great today! I’m so proud of you. And I knew you guys would win!” Holly grinned as Burke set her down on her feet. She clapped and lifted her lips for a kiss, the epitome of the athlete’s fiancé.

“Holly, I told Carlos the truth about us. You can drop the act,” Burke told her, amusement tingeing his words.

Holly dropped her face and sighed. “Oh, thank fuck,” she said, rolling her eyes. She opened her purse and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, lighting one and looked over at Carlos with a wink. “Hey, sexy. Glad you finally know the truth. Playing the besotted girlfriend to this queen is exhausting.”

Carlos’s mouth dropped open as he watched Holly walk over to the large black guy and cuddle up to him.

“You need to stop smoking,” the man said, his voice deep and powerful like thunder.

Holly sighed. “I know. I will. Just as soon as Burke comes out and doesn’t need me anymore. Playing beard is stressful and smoking keeps me calm.”

“I thought having sex with me keeps you calm?”

Holly laughed. “Having sex with you keeps me sane.”

Burke covered his ears. “Um, eeww. No one wants to hear about your unnatural heterosexual relations. God did not intend for men and women to lay together.”

Carlos stood in stunned silence as they all laughed, still trying to process what he was seeing. He’d known that Holly was just pretending to be Burke’s girlfriend. The man had told him as much, but knowing it and seeing it was two totally different things.

Holly laughed. “Burkey? I think your friend’s in shock.” She pointed at Carlos.

Carlos jerked at Burke’s hands on his face. “Carlos? You okay?” Carlos looked at Burke and nodded. He inhaled, Burke’s scent wrapping around him. That was what he needed. Burke.

“Yeah. I think it’s all sort of sinking in now. You’re really gay.”

Burke chuckled. “Yeah. I really am.” He wrapped an arm around Carlos’s shoulder and faced Holly. “Holls? Carlos is more than a friend now.”

Holly tossed up her hands. “It’s about goddamn time! So what are you two going to do? Are you going to go public? Are you going to keep it under wraps? What?”

Carlos looked at Burke and then back at Holly, the questions floating around in his brain. What were they going to do?

“We haven’t actually talked about that,” Burke admitted.

Holly sighed. “Men.” She shook her head. “Well you need to, because you know what? This is when everyone starts to get cut and traded, and you guys need to know what you’re going to do. Where you’re going. What you mean to each other. On your list of priorities, where do you rank the other? Because that will let you know how to handle the rest of it.”

Burke grunted. “Thanks, Holls.” He dropped his arm from around Carlos’s shoulders and walked over to Holly to hug her. “I’ll call you later. We’re heading to a party and then to Carlos’s mom’s for a dinner.”

“Have fun,” Holly said. She waved at Carlos and he waved back, suddenly feeling bereft without Burke’s arm around him, Holly’s words rattling around in his brain.

In his life what were his priorities? There was his family, his career, his relationship with Burke, which up until about a few hours ago had been just a friendship, his friendships with other people, his goals for the future, a house, a family of his own, retirement, his beliefs, his values, his legacy, his philanthropic endeavors, and his business ventures. But how would he prioritize those things?

“Hey? You ready to go?” Burke asked, interrupting Carlos’s thoughts.

Carlos blinked and looked at the other man, his eyes moving over his strong features, those lips that had brought him such pleasure earlier, but always gave him encouragement and wisdom as well, to those hands that had taken him to such soaring heights of bliss but were always there to help him with anything he needed. Burke was more than a lover. He was a friend. A teammate. A partner.

He was the total package.

Carlos nodded. “Yeah. I’m ready.” He smiled at Burke and walked with him out to the team parking lot. They both chuckled at the sight of all the cars still there.

“I guess a lot of taxis and drivers had to be called,” Burke noted.

Carlos snorted and gestured. “You think?” He shook his head. “I bet Coach had his hands full.” A cold sense of dread flooded his body as he turned to look

at Burke with wide eyes. “Was Coach in the locker room or his office when we... when we were um... during...” He gulped and his face grew hot under Burke’s assessing gaze.

His body grew tense as Burke walked toward him with a predatory gait. “No. Do you really think I would do anything with you with Coach in the next room?”

Carlos swallowed and shook his head, his cock hardening at the rough growl in his lover’s voice. He wanted to kneel at Burke’s feet in that moment and suck his cock in apology, and wasn’t that a new experience for him? What was it about the other man that made Carlos feel so damn trembly? So fucking submissive? He knew he was a bottom. He accepted that. Hell, he *gloried* in that knowledge. There was nothing better than the feeling of some big, thick cock pounding inside of his ass, but being around Burke, thinking about him, made Carlos want something more. Something naughtier. Almost more illicit. Carlos thought about being restrained, rough sex, public sex, Burke teasing him in public, cock rings, and having Burke manhandle him in every delicious way he could think of. Even more than that, he kept thinking of them in the locker room, his hole stretched wide open and wondering, imagining Burke’s fist pushing in and out of his body. Filling him. Making him scream.

“Carlos?”

Carlos blinked and cleared his throat, snapping out of his fantasies to focus on the conversation. “S-sorry,” he stammered out an apology.

Burke shook his head, a smirk on his lips. “It’s no problem. Whatever you were thinking about seems to have made you really happy,” he remarked with a nod toward Carlos’s groin. Carlos glanced down and noticed his erection pressing obscenely against the front of his jeans and groaned.

“Yeah. Well. I bet you wish you knew what I was thinking about, don’t you, *gringo*.”

Burke laughed and led them to his car. “As I was saying.” He pressed the key fob to unlock his grey 2014 Cadillac Escalade and waited for them both to be inside the vehicle with the doors closed before he continued talking. “I would have only approached you to have sex, with Coach in the next room, if you knew about it and were okay with it.”

Carlos gasped and turned to look at Burke. “You would have let him watch?”

Burke shrugged. “Only if you were okay with it. I sort of have a little kink about putting on a show for people every so often. I haven’t done it in a while. Actually, a long time, ever since I joined the Majors, but before then?” He grinned over at Carlos. “Yeah. It turns me on to know that people are watching me and wanting to be where I am. And if they were watching us together, I know that they would all want to be with you, but they wouldn’t have the opportunity.”

Carlos wanted to be horrified. His Catholic upbringing practically demanded it. All of the saints were glaring at him in that moment. The Holy Mother, Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit, hell, his grandparents were all looking down at him from above and commanding him to condemn Burke to the lowest recesses of Purgatory, leap from the SUV and race off to the nearest cathedral to make confession. But he couldn’t do that. He didn’t *want* to do that. His hands were trembling, sure, but not from fear of hellfire and brimstone raining down on the car or from the ten plagues of Egypt being visited upon them in the parking lot of the Green Monster. No, they were trembling from... excitement.

Anticipation.

He could imagine him and Burke fucking in the middle of a nightclub and being watched by a crowd. He could even see them having sex in a car or the floor of an office being renovated. A thrill shot through him and he inhaled deeply, shivering slightly. It felt as if every nerve in his body was coming alive, as if his lungs had been breathing synthetic air for decades and were finally inhaling pure oxygen.

“That sounds. Hot,” he admitted.

Burke grinned. “I was hoping you’d say that.” He turned back to the steering wheel and turned the key in the ignition. “What do you say we get this party and dinner out of the way, and then see what other—mysteries—we can discover about each other?”

Carlos chuckled. “I can’t wait.”

Chapter Nine

By the time they got to the party, it was already in full-swing. Burke stepped into a room that was packed with Red Sox players, their wives, girlfriends, celebrities, coaches, the owner and his family, and other movers and shakers. He smiled and waved when he heard his name being shouted across the room. This was it. He and Carlos would see how they could handle being out in public with other people given the state of their new relationship, without giving anything away.

He looked over his shoulder at his lover and noticed Carlos's gaze wasn't on the crowd of people in front of them, instead it was trained on his shoes, his bottom lip clenched in between his teeth. Even though he had a look of worried concentration on his face, Burke's cock started to fill at the sight of Carlos's plump bottom lip. He thought of pressing his erection between those lips in front of everyone there and swallowed the groan that threatened to rise up out of his chest.

"You okay?" he whispered to Carlos instead of uttering the words that were rolling around in his head, *if you want something in your mouth I've got nine inches of a cream-filled treat for you in my pants.*

Carlos blinked and glanced up at him. "Whut? Yeah. Yeah. I'm fine." He nodded. "Just thinking." He rolled his shoulders. "I'm good. Let's do this."

Burke stared at Carlos for another moment before inclining his head and turning back to walk through the crowd. He had to fight the urge he had to take Carlos's hand, which was a new feeling for him since he always had Holly reminding him to take her hand whenever they went anywhere. Perhaps it was because he knew that Holly wasn't really his but Carlos was. And he was, wasn't he? They had established that, right? Burke looked back for the man but didn't see him. He turned in a small circle, surrounded on all sides by well-wishers and partiers who randomly shouted out "Red Sox Nation!" whenever the music got quiet. When had he and Carlos gotten separated?

"Hey, man," Dustin Pedroia, their second baseman, walked up to him, his steps a little unsteady. He had one arm around his wife, Kelli, the other around another woman. "Where's your shadow?"

Burke rolled his eyes. "He's not my fucking shadow, man. If anything, I'm his shadow." *Because I want to be a part of him whenever I can be.* "And I

have no idea where Herrera is. He was right behind me when we came in, but he disappeared on me.”

Pedroia turned to the unnamed woman and dropped his arm, shrugging sadly. “Sorry, Zoey. I’ll try to introduce you two later.”

Burke watched the statuesque brunette woman pout before spinning on her heel and walking away. He scowled at her retreating back then turned to Pedroia. “What the fuck was that about?” He asked throwing a thumb in her direction.

“Oh that? Me and the fellas decided that to commemorate our win and Herrera’s Grand Slam, what we’re calling the H.A.G.S., by the way, that we’re going to get him a girlfriend. We’re sick of him being alone all the time and always tagging along with you and Holly. He needs a broad of his own.” Pedroia nodded, grunting when his wife elbowed him in the side. “I mean, a woman to treasure and care for.” He looked at Burke and rolled his eyes.

Burke couldn’t find it in him to be amused by the interplay between Pedroia and Kelli like he usually did, he was too busy digesting the man’s words. What the fuck was up with everyone trying to set Carlos up with someone? Didn’t they know the man was taken? And gay?

No they don’t, dumbass. He’s in the closet just like you because of your careers and remember? You have a “fiancée” named Holly, so who exactly is Carlos taken by?

“Fuck,” he breathed. Should Carlos get a fake girlfriend too? Should Burke and Holly breakup? What was the right step forward?

He needed to find Carlos and talk to him as soon as possible.

“I’ll go find him for you,” he told Pedroia. He turned to walk away but stopped after a step. “Pedroia? H.A.G.S.?” He lifted his hands in a WTF motion and grinned when Pedroia started laughing.

“Yeah. Herrera’s Awesome Grand Slam.”

Burke shook his head and spun on his heel to find Carlos. They needed to figure out, seriously consider, what they were doing here, because if they decided to stay together and remain closeted, then they would have to be extremely careful. There were too many ways for their relationship to be destroyed—jealousy, exposure, miscommunication—and Carlos meant too much to Burke for him to let that happen. He needed Carlos. Needed him to stay sane.

Needed him to breathe.

Carlos hadn't planned on escaping out onto the balcony when they'd showed up at the party. It had just happened that way. One minute he'd been behind Burke, saying hi to everyone, ribbing and teasing the other players, winking at some of the female celebrities, when he caught sight of one of the female roadies slipping her number into Burke's pocket. Burke probably didn't notice. He never did until he went to put something into his pocket later, but seeing that motion had startled Carlos.

He was trying to have a secret relationship with a teammate. His best friend who was also in the closet. It was career suicide. It was stupid. His family was going to be devastated. He could lose his sponsors. His teammates may feel uncomfortable playing with him. It was idiotic for them to continue. It would never work. It would never last.

It was the most thrilling thing he'd ever done in his life and he was going to ride it until the end.

It was that thought which had sent him out the nearest door, down the hallway and out onto the balcony of Ellsbury's home. He inhaled the sweet, slightly chilly winter wind, pulling the refreshing air into his lungs and exhaling. His body trembling as his skin prickled with goose bumps at the temperature. He braced his hands on the balustrade and lowered his head as he considered everything going on in his life. Once again, he thought of his priorities and tried to figure out where his relationship with Burke fit on that list.

While he loved his family, he knew that they didn't agree with his "lifestyle choice", not all of them, but most of them. Their love was important, their care was a priority, but it wasn't a big one. They all had their own jobs and he didn't support them.

He went through each of his priorities, turning them over in his mind, determining their importance and placing them on a mental list, until all that remained were his career and his relationship with Burke. As he knew it would. It always came down to playing baseball and now, the very real idea of being with Burke, the man he'd been in love with for years.

Just as he'd gone through each thought, point, line, issue and debated with himself the wisdom of being with Burke, the door to the balcony opened and he heard footsteps on the tile behind him.

"I should have known I'd find you outside, away from the party," Burke's voice was low, sexy, seductive and thoughtful.

Carlos didn't speak, he merely nodded. He wanted to know what Burke had to say first then he would know if he'd made the right choice.

"So, we need to talk," Burke said.

Carlos turned and watched as Burke walked over to join him at the railing. Once he was there, Carlos spun back around until he was facing Ellsbury's expansive backyard.

"Talk," he said after a while of silence.

Burke chuckled and sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"*This?*" Carlos quirked an eyebrow at Burke.

Burke gestured back and forth between them. "This. You and me. Us. Are you sure? We'll have to keep our relationship hidden from your family, our team, our friends, except the ones we know can't be swayed by money, religion, or fame. We'll be sneaking around." He grunted and leaned on an elbow to face Carlos. "You'll have to watch me with Holly, pretending to be the loving, doting, devoted boyfriend, and not react or get angry."

Carlos grinned and faced Burke. "And if I get a girlfriend, you'll have to watch me do the same." He shrugged. "Or you know I could keep up my womanizer image and just keep bouncing from woman to woman. Bed to bed..." He let the rest of the sentence hang there and watched as Burke's eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. He lifted a hand and pointed laughing triumphantly. "Ha! See? Of the two of us it's you and your jealous, possessiveness that would be the biggest give-away. You need to work on that, Thornton."

He shook his head when Burke blushed, and glancing inside to make sure no one could see them, he placed a hand on Burke's stomach and leaned up to place a quick kiss on his lips, stepping back when Burke would have tried to deepen it.

"I want this. I want us. It's all I've been thinking about for what seems like forever, Burke. We can do this. It may take some getting used to and we may have some bumps in the road, but I know we can do this until we're both ready to come out."

Carlos's phone beeped, and he pulled it out to see he had a text message from his buddy Ashton:

Dude! Did you hear the news?

Ignoring the text for now, Carlos put his phone back into his pocket, noticing that Burke was putting his away as well, looking confused at it.

“Ashton?” Carlos asked.

Burke nodded. “He’s a weird little shit.”

Carlos laughed. Their friend was a strange bird but he always seemed to know everything that happened before everyone else. Carlos shook his head mentally. He would deal with Ashton later. He had to tell Burke how he felt and he had to tell him now before he lost his nerve.

“So, you were saying?” Burke asked with a small smile.

Carlos chuckled. “What it boils down to is this, Burke Thornton. I love you.” He watched as Burke’s eyes widened, and if the conversation hadn’t been so serious, he might have laughed. He would laugh later. Right now, he had to make sure they were on the same page. “I put all my priorities into order and while my career is important, it’s not the thing that makes me smile throughout the day or makes my bad day better. I didn’t hit that Grand Slam today for my career. I hit it for you. Because you believed in me.” He stepped closer to Burke and looked up into his eyes, hoping he could see the truth in his gaze. “If I didn’t need to breathe to live, Burke, my priorities would go like this: it’s you, *then breathing*, then baseball. In that order.”

Carlos was pulled into Burke’s arms and kissed fiercely, their lips bruising the other, tongues dueling, teeth nibbling, their breathing in sync and Carlos gloried in it. And while it felt like they’d been kissing for hours, he knew it had only been seconds before Burke pushed him away gently, caressing his cheek.

“I love you too, Carlos.”

Carlos’s heart expanded at Burke’s words and he grinned. He knew that things weren’t settled. They were professional baseball players who were gay and attempting to hide their relationship. They were asking for *TMZ* to find them. Then there was his family and whatever harebrained scheme his mother had cooked up, but Carlos wasn’t worried about any of that. Not when he had Burke, their love for each other...

And the ability to breathe.

The End

Author Bio

Vicktor Alexander (everyone calls him “Vic”) is a southern gentleman by day, and a writer and purveyor of steamy, sticky, hot man on man (sometimes on man on man on man on man on man) sex by night. He started out writing about his sister destroying the world with her breath, went on to writing steamy, erotic interracial historical romances in the middle of his classes but noticed the guys seemed to enjoy each other’s company much more than being with the women. He now enjoys writing about shifters, humanoids, cowboys, firemen, rent boys, fairies, elves, dancers, doctors, Doms, subs, and anything else that catches his fancy, all sexy men falling in love with each other and having lots of naughty, dirty, man-on-man sex. He is a huge fan of the “happily-ever-after” ending, but while all his characters all ride off into the proverbial sunset, all sexually satisfied and in love (because it’s the least he can do), they all bear the scars of fighting for that love, just like in real life. Out and proud, he doesn’t believe that love only comes in one form, one race, one gender and that not only is gender fluid, but sexuality as well. He loves to make people laugh (and guys hot) and when he’s not writing, or rather, procrastinating in writing, he’s reading, playing the Sims 3, talking to his adopted daughter whom he calls Chipmunk, seeking the man or men who can handle his crazy, stressful, soap opera-esque life and being distracted from said writing by pictures of John Barrowman, Charlie David and Shemar Moore. All interested men in the role of “Future Husband(s)” may apply, auditions are being held every night... multiple times.

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JADEN'S HONOR

By Sassy Lane

Photo Description

A pregnant male falls to the floor in pain. He is completely covered in fine clothing with only his face and fingertips visible. He is clutching a heavy curtain for support, and there is no one around to help him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“He’s coming!” I fall to floor as ripping pain seized me. “Oh, Jade... If only you could be here... I’m so sorry...”

I’m fairly open to whatever the author wishes. I see this as a royal birth, potentially on a far-away planet where there is some kind of conflict among houses/planets/enemies; and “Jade” (you can change the name if they speak to you) is out fighting. He could be on the opposite side if that suits you. Maybe they had a fight that morning? Maybe it was a sudden war with neighbors? Maybe it’s twins? Bonus points if you can work the quote in and/or expand upon it. Angst is fine too.

Science fiction and/or fantasy please. Prefer HEA or HFN, but not BDSM or too kinky. Well, it can have some kinky but not too much. :)

Sincerely,

Eloreen

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: m-preg, soulmates/bonded, gods, magic, mild violence, non-explicit, age gap, royalty, warrior, men with pets.

Word Count: 26,585

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Author's Note

No story happens in isolation. Thank you to the ladies from my Amazon readers' group. They beta'd the story and helped to make it reader friendly. A big *Thank You!* to my patient editor, who put up with my total inability to understand Google Docs and found a way to make it work.

JADEN'S HONOR

By Sassy Lane

Jaden knelt before the altar in a small forest temple, his thick blond hair dark with sweat. He laid down his sword and wiped his face with a dampened rag. The cool stone floor of the temple was a blessing after an unexpected skirmish on the low mountain hills.

Long, sleek muscles burned lightly from recent use. His side ached where an arrow had grazed him, but Jaden set that aside and soaked up the quiet peace of the room. After a long moment, he removed his ruined shirt. Wetting the rag again, Jaden placed it over the long wound on his side. He donned his vest and fastened it closed over the rag. It was a makeshift bandage, but it wouldn't be needed for long.

Jaden was a weapons master and a devotee of the Warrior Goddess, Ashriel. Though it had once been considered an honor to follow the Warrior's Path, the necessary skills and training had fallen out of favor in a population slowly turning from the old ways. He was the last of his kind.

Jaden's childhood had been spent training with his grandmother. The fierce old woman had been determined that the knowledge and skills that had long served their clan would not be lost to the next generation.

After his grandmother had passed, Jaden had roamed the kingdoms, searching out anyone who could add to his training. Now, at forty-seven, he was in his prime and acknowledged to be unsurpassed in fighting skills, the very reason he had been sent for by King Raidon of Vostek. Jaden considered the letter he had received from the king several days before, requesting a meeting.

Vostek was a rich country. Deep seas on the eastern border and low mountains in the west cradled a fertile land, and there was little true poverty here. As a king who understood the motivations of his people, Raidon had originated a unique apprenticeship program that was open to any of his subjects; making it possible for anyone who wished to learn valuable skills.

During his reign, Vostek had become a plump prize. Too tempting for the Dal of the southern kingdom of Arkon to resist, it was now a kingdom under siege.

Jaden stretched broad shoulders and brought his thoughts back from their wandering. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, clearing his mind. A wisp of breeze caressed his cheek, further cooling him. It happened occasionally during his meditation, a friendly ghost of air against his hair or face as if the Goddess was checking on him.

Jaden let out another breath, quickly slipping into a state of light vigilance that he could maintain for marks, and waited for the king.

An elderly man tottered through the palace halls, focused in his intent. Finding the door he was searching for, he burst inside. "Prince Lin..."

Prince Lin Aterios looked up at their priest, Dagen, just as an explosion rocked the halls. He jumped up and grabbed the old man to keep him from falling.

"Dal Varent has breached the walls. We must leave, quickly!" the priest gasped.

Lin nodded, dark eyes dancing around his room. Moving decisively, he went to the bed and pulled two pillows from their covers. Into one cover he shoved some clothing, a pair of boots, and his small case of jewelry. Into the other, he put a wrapped parcel of seeds he had intended as a gift to a visiting counselor. On top of the parcel, he placed food from a nearby table: fruit, stuffed bread, and some cheese he quickly wrapped in a bit of cloth.

Glancing at Dagen, Lin grabbed two cloaks. He was a little taller than the priest, but they were close in size, and the old one would need the warmth. He ushered the frail priest ahead of him. "We must get to the stables."

Two sets of soft slippers were silent on the palace floors. The men moved cautiously through the halls as sounds of fighting were heard in the distance.

"Where is my father?" Lin asked, when they stopped to peer around a corner. "I thought he was to meet the warrior, Jaden, this morning."

"He had been delayed by the Cawley delegation. He was readying to leave when he received word of Dal Varent's approach. He sent me to find you and warn you to get out of the palace."

Reaching the stable after long moments of wary vigilance, the pair stepped inside. Lin glanced around quickly. He looked at the priest for a moment and made his decision. He threw a light saddle over a dark-colored, powerfully built

gelding. Another small saddle soon graced his favorite, a pale, long-legged mare.

Lin loaded the mare with his burden of sacks and cloaks and tied her reins to the saddle of the gelding. Stepping into the saddle, he reached a hand down for the priest.

“Give me your hand,” he demanded when the priest hesitated. “I won’t leave you here.”

Lin hauled Dagen up and across his lap sideways, supporting him with his arms around the priest’s waist. Tapping his heels lightly into the gelding’s flank, Lin headed for a small gate that led to the dense woods at the rear of the castle grounds.

“Where was the meeting to take place?” Lin questioned, knowing the old priest was a confidante of his father’s.

“There is a small, abandoned traveler’s temple in the forest near the border,” Dagen answered.

“Do you know the way?”

Dagen nodded at Lin. “I can take you there.”

Marks later, Prince Lin’s arms were exhausted. His dark, chin-length hair was hanging limply in his face. He had been holding onto the older man for half the day it seemed, keeping him in the saddle as he dozed. They had not dared to stop, making careful way to the small temple, deep in the forest.

The gelding’s head came up, and he snorted, startling the priest awake just as the building came into sight. Round shaped with a tiny room stuck to the back like a small tick, the temple looked as if it had been abandoned for many turns, though some recent repair work could be seen.

“I am not sure I can get down on my own, Prince Lin,” the old man rasped, as they stopped.

“Allow me to help, Elder.”

Lin’s head shot up at the deep voice. A tall, lean man was stepping from beside a tree. He was wearing dark leather clothing and knee-high moccasins covered his feet. A fitted vest left long arms bare, and hair the color of fine honey was tied back from a strong face. Lin could hear no sounds as the man walked towards them.

“Warrior Jaden?” he asked hopefully.

“Indeed, but you are not King Raidon,” the warrior answered.

“Please, can we speak inside?” the prince asked. “We have been riding for marks, and we would really like to get down.”

Jaden nodded at the prince and gently helped the old one from the saddle. Lin got down and followed as the warrior carried the small priest off to the sleeping room at the back of the temple. Gently, he set the priest on the cot at the side of the room and went back outside.

“Rest a moment, priest. I will be back.” Lin knelt by the cot and waited until Dagen nodded at him before going out to care for the horses.

Prince Lin was stiff and sore, but he took the time to pull water from the old well. He poured several buckets into the trough for the thirsty animals. Jaden had already tossed their gear over the little fence rail and given them a quick brushing to remove the worst of the sweat and dirt. Lowering the bucket a last time, Lin pulled more water and made his way back to the sleeping room.

Inside the small room, Jaden was tending a small fire when Lin returned. He had brought in Lin's bags and covered the dozing priest with the cloaks.

Lin quietly thanked the warrior when he took the heavy bucket, poured water into the waiting kettle and moved it over the fire.

Jaden stirred the contents of a second kettle as Lin sat heavily on the floor by the hearth with a small groan. Jaden glanced at the prince, then dipped a rag into the remaining water and handed it over. “Will you tell me your story now, Princeling?”

Lin accepted the rag gratefully and began.

“In the palace, we have heard much about you and your company of mercenaries. Traveling bards sing the praises of a fierce warrior who fights in battle like a wraith of the Gods. You command a force that is known throughout the lands. It is said that you could have any number of rich commissions, but that you choose to help others at no gain to yourself if you believe the cause is just.”

He rubbed the rag over his face as he continued, “My father listens avidly to news of the various squabbles and wars that are happening across the kingdoms. Whenever possible, he sits and has dinner with the head of the Guard. He has great respect for your skills and has been following your story for many turns now. A few mornings ago, he informed me he had dispatched a letter requesting to meet with you.”

Lin glanced up. The warrior was sitting very still, watching him with a steady gaze. He suppressed a small shiver at the focused attention he was receiving and began wiping his hands as a distraction.

“I thought my father was simply looking to hire your company. The neighboring Dal’s troops have been harassing our border for some moons now. We have increased the border guard and are recruiting heavily. Yesterday, Father informed me that he has received several offers from Dal Varent for a marriage alliance. He has refused them all. Dal Varent is a poor ruler of his people and Father would never allow him to gain a position of authority here. We thought to have more time but early this day, troops forced their way into the palace. He sent the priest to warn me to leave. A fight was raging as we left.”

Jaden was quiet, listening. When the prince was done speaking, he nodded and scooped small bowls of the light soup he had prepared before the pair had arrived. After handing a bowl to Lin, he placed a gentle hand on the knee of the priest, waking him. Jaden handed over the second bowl and sat thinking for a moment before he spoke. “I have heard rumblings from Arkon before this. In the last turn, the holdings of several lesser nobles from that area have been swallowed up. Dal Varent is an ambitious man, as are most Dals. They are mercenary men who rule through military might, so I can see him wanting ties to Vostek. Your land is rich and has broad sea ports that would be very attractive to someone seeking to gain a position of power.”

He paused thoughtfully, then mused aloud, “While it is not unheard of for kings or male nobles to marry in order to strengthen kingdom borders or settle a political situation, this is mostly the case when there is no living heir, and there are no other branches of close familial ties. It is a stabilizing gesture to prevent high-ranking families from destroying themselves through war, while successors are being chosen.”

Looking at Lin, Jaden continued. “This is not your situation. You are young and could easily marry and have many children. While he could try for a military takeover, Dal Varent has nothing to gain from a marriage with you. Even if something were to happen to King Raidon while you were married thus, any of the higher-ranking families could challenge for rule. For a true alliance of kingdoms through marriage contract, there must be an heir.”

“There would be an heir, Warrior. Prince Lin is the Bearer.”

Jaden could feel the blood leave his face. He glanced back and forth between the old priest and the lean young man, stunned.

“The Bearer,” he whispered softly. “There has not been a Bearer in hundreds of turns, before even my great gran’s gran-dam.” His gaze moved back from the princeling to the Elder.

The old priest nodded, understanding Jaden’s awe. “It is true, Warrior. The prince bears the mark on his stomach.”

“It has been a closely kept secret between my father, me, and a few servants. The mark appeared just over a turn past. Dagen is our priest, and he sent to the High Priest for advice, though we have yet to hear from him. We have been in shock and not certain what steps to take next. Dal Varent seems to have acquired the knowledge somehow, and he is determined to use it to his advantage,” the prince said sadly.

“Were I to enter into a marriage with the Dal, and it then became public knowledge I was the Bearer, he would have incredible power. Dal Varent is erratic and a bad ruler. He cares nothing for the lives of his people and uses them up like cattle. Can you imagine what he would be like if he were in a marriage to the Bearer? The world could not contain his greed.”

They were all silent for a time.

“There are some things to consider, Princeling.” Jaden ticked off points on his fingers. “If Dal Varent is in control of your castle, he can simply attempt to claim the rule by takeover. He might have to fight off the high-ranking families, but if his military is in place, he has a chance. He might claim you were wedded before disappearing. The papers would be easy to forge. He could also claim you were kidnapped and offer a large bounty to whichever person can return you to him. You would find yourself a hunted man. Lastly, there must have been some sort of proof that Dagen sent to the High Priest. If Dal Varent has that, whether he has taken the castle or not, he might simply make an announcement claiming you as the Bearer. Kings, Overlords, Dals, nobles greater and lesser, anyone who has ever had any pretensions of rule would be searching for you. It would throw the kingdoms into chaos, and no one at all would be concerned over what happened to Vostek.”

The prince turned grey before Jaden’s eyes. Quickly, he grabbed the young man by the back of the neck and forced his head down.

“Take a slow, deep breath,” he commanded. “Again.”

Jaden was carefully watching the princeling when the priest spoke up. “You could put an end to this, Warrior. You could bond with Prince Lin.”

“WHAT?” All right, shouting at the old one was not going to help. Jaden tried again. “I’m sorry. Elder...”

“It IS a solution, *Warrior*.” Dagen was insistent. “Perhaps the best of all solutions,” he mumbled to himself.

Bonding... Jaden couldn’t believe the elder would suggest it. Bonding was a matter of deep gravity. It was a literal joining of the souls and could only be accomplished by a high priest. The oaths between the two people being bonded were sworn directly to the Gods.

An ancient custom from a time when the Gods ruled directly over their people, bonding was absolutely unbreakable, a matter of highest consequence. Even rarer now, when it *was* sanctioned, it was usually to avoid massive loss of life, or at the end of a long and bloody battle to seal a truce. The very life-forces of those swearing the bond were irrevocably tied together even through death and into the next plane.

Jaden stood and began to pace. “This is not...”

“I would be willing to bond with you, *Warrior Jaden*,” Prince Lin said quietly from near the floor.

“*BONDING IS NOT DONE LIGHTLY!*” Jaden said with great heat. “Honoring the Gods may have fallen out of favor in recent times, *BUT I DO!*”

Jaden turned and faced them both, hands on hips, legs spread in a strong stance. “I am a dedicated *Warrior of Ashriel!* I live every day of my life working to uphold standards that honor the old ways. I will not make a mockery of a Gods-blessed *BONDING!*”

The princeling stood and faced him, cloaked with great dignity.

“My entire life I have known that I must enter into a marriage contract and continue my line, though admittedly I thought to be married to someone’s daughter. I care deeply for my people and have been groomed to understand that I would be required to make sacrifices for them. Whether it was wedding some stranger to build alliances or entering into a contract with someone I despised didn’t matter. The possibility that Dal Varent could bring war to Vostek, could ruin my people, is untenable. The only thing of importance is to make sure my people are cared for and protected. The. Only. Thing.”

“Do you understand, young prince, that I have over twice your turns? That if you bonded with me there would NEVER be another. No shy glances or flattering words from courtiers. No deciding later you made a mistake. You

would be *MINE!*” Jaden threw his arms in the air. “I am a possessive man. I would...”

“Would you honor me?” Lin interrupted. “If we were bonded, would you put *me* first? Would you care for and protect me, our children, and my kingdom?”

Jaden was stopped mid-rant by the prince’s words, and he considered them well.

“With everything I have and everything I am, Princeling. With my very last breath, it would be so,” he said quietly.

Prince Lin took a step closer and gently touched Jaden’s chest. “Then I would accept a bonding, Warrior of Ashriel.”

“SO BE IT. The bonding is accepted!”

Jaden felt all the hair on his body stand on end. He and Prince Lin both jumped as the bodiless voices made their pronouncement. The princeling’s eyes were wide, the white clearly visible until a blinding flash of light forced them both to turn away and cover their faces. Blinking furiously and shaking his head to clear the tears from his eyes, Jaden reached out to Prince Lin.

“Are you all right?” he demanded.

“Yes. Yes, I am fine,” Lin assured him. “What... are we...?”

A snicker, quickly becoming a hearty chuckle, had them both looking through watery eyes towards the Elder.

“Well, you ARE at a temple.” The old one chortled as he slowly faded from view. “I haven’t had this much fun in *ages*...”

Jaden turned to Lin: “We need to leave. Now.”

Lin nodded rapidly in agreement.

Three transparent beings appeared in the small temple. The first appeared to be a dark-blonde female with silvery, glowing eyes. She was dressed in leathers, her hair tied back from her face. The second had short brown hair and similarly glowing eyes. He was dressed in a simple tunic, sandals on his feet. The third was in the form of the old priest, now standing straight and tall.

“You made interesting choices this time,” the woman spoke to the third form.

The old one smiled. "They will do well I think. The older one is pure forged steel, hard and strong, his honor defines him. The younger is compassionate, softer, but there is strength in him. He will hold."

The second man waved his hand, returning the room and surrounding area to its original, neglected-looking state. "I hope so, Brother. It took us hundreds of turns to pull them back from the brink last time. We were barely able to start over."

"Tradition was upheld during the last Opposition. It was time to try something new." The old man shrugged.

The woman spoke again. "The planets will be aligned in less than a turn. We will know then."

The three beings faded out, and the temple was silent once more.

Jaden helped Lin down from the saddle and pulled him close before he fell. Lin had been riding since early that day and was barely able to stand at first. They had left the forest temple two marks ago as the sun was setting, eyes still watering from the bright light at the temple. He rubbed his hands firmly up and down Lin's back, trying to help ease the stiffness he knew the prince would be suffering from. Lin groaned softly and buried his head under Jaden's chin.

Jaden gave him a small hug and patted him on the back. "We are stopping for the night, Husband. The innkeeper here makes a respectable meal and there will be a tub to soak in."

Husband. BONDED.

Jaden still found it hard to believe everything that had happened that afternoon. He had been dedicated to Ashriel since he was a child and had great respect for the other deities, but this was not something he had come to expect from the usually quiet and sober Gods. He was uncertain what all of this meant for the future.

Lin lifted his head, and Jaden's stomach tightened. His eyes traveled Lin's face. The right side, from forehead to cheek, was marked with a strange silver design. From the gasp he heard, Jaden guessed his face was similarly marked.

"We need to stable the horses and find the innkeeper," Jaden said pragmatically. "I have no doubt the marks will still be there after a meal and a bath."

“I am feeling quite overwhelmed right now, Jaden,” the prince declared firmly.

“I understand, Princeling.” Jaden sighed, gathered the reins of all the horses and walked into the stable; he could already imagine how the innkeeper would react.

Jaden watched through the doorway as Lin dried his hair. The tub of water had been steaming hot, and Jaden had poured some strongly scented liniment oil into the water to help ease Lin's muscle aches. Lin had soaked for at least a mark before the cooling water had convinced him to leave the tub. It had given Jaden plenty of time to get cleaned up and check the bandage on his side. As he thought, the wound was already healed. Increased ability to heal was one of the Goddess's blessings, and he was very grateful for it.

Jaden was sitting at the table, one of his saddle packs opened and bits spread out, when Lin finally came out of the bathing room. He felt himself grin as Lin stopped at the small side table to take a bowl of thick stew and hungrily began to eat. Lin hopped up to perch on the end of the bed frame while he ate. Fingering another dangle and some more beads over into a small pile, Jaden watched the prince.

“Are you feeling better now?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you. The bath helped immensely,” Lin answered between bites.

Dressed in a simple shift borrowed from the innkeeper, and freshly scrubbed from his bath, Lin looked very young. Jaden felt a wave of protectiveness towards him.

“What are you doing?” Lin asked as he ate.

“I am El'oreen,” Jaden said simply.

Lin nodded his understanding.

Jaden originated from one of the nomad clans that ranged on the north side of the Oreen Mountains. There were a number of clans in that area that held to the old ways. Well-trained and skilled warriors, the few clansmen and women who chose to leave the mountains were in high demand as bodyguards and soldiers.

Being a people highly skilled in war, the El'oreen had also become skilled in ways to avoid confrontation. Over time, the clans had devised a visible

marking system, a style of beading that was practically a language in itself. Since he was no longer an eligible person, Jaden was going to weave the appropriate beads and dangles into his hair. The long lock would be separated from the rest of his hair and worn at the side of his face.

“Oh, wait a moment.” Lin knew that part of the Oreen marriage custom involved wearing a token from one’s partner. He set down his bowl and moved over to his pillow-cover bags, pulling out his small jewelry case. Bringing it to the table, Lin removed a necklace made of beautiful green stones. The pieces were all individually mounted in silver settings and Lin separated several.

“Would you add these to your hair?” he asked.

Jaden smiled warmly at him. “I would be pleased to do so, Husband.”

Lin watched as Jaden separated out a portion of his hair and began weaving different bits into the section he had separated.

“I didn’t see beads when we first met. Were there beads in your hair earlier? Are you wearing only the marriage beads? Is there a certain order the items have to be in?” Lin queried like a curious cat.

Jaden nodded. “You are correct. I was not wearing beads this morning, but I wish to acknowledge our bonding. I want everyone to know that I am claimed, and that I claim another. In doing this, I not only honor the traditions of my people, I create additional safety for you. There are few who will challenge an El’oreen warrior, let alone one who is a Warrior of Ashriel.” He tapped a finger next to his eyes.

“Why do you tap your eyes?”

“Come closer, my prince, and look at my eyes,” Jaden invited. “What do you see?”

Lin moved close and leaned over Jaden. He could feel the warmth of Lin’s body and smell the liniment he had soaked in. Jaden could tell the moment his husband realized what he saw. Lin stiffened and breathed out slowly in awe.

The irises of Jaden’s eyes were a dark brown color, but radiating out in a starburst pattern from the center of each eye were silver shapes like teardrops.

“I was taught Ashriel’s way by my grandmother,” Jaden explained. “I was a child when she left this plane, and I chose to honor her by dedicating myself to the Warrior Goddess. My dedication was made in all seriousness, though I was but a youngling. When I was older, had mastered all of the old forms, and had a

better understanding of what it meant, I renewed my dedication. Ashriel accepted me and marked me as hers. When I am in battle or angry, I am told my eyes have a silver glow. It is fair warning to any who would challenge me that I carry the scales of a Goddess's justice."

He held up three tri-color pieces. "These beads are from my clan. They show that I have completed my training and attained manhood. They are the beginning. Other bits come from battles or significant periods of my life, in the order they happened. These," Jaden held up the green stones Lin had given him, "These will complete the braid. Any further events in my life will be recorded on different weaves. "

Lin sat softly on the edge of the chair near the table. "This is a very big thing. The Bearer being tied to a Warrior of Ashriel. I knew being the Bearer was significant in ways I did not understand, but this," he waved between the two of them, "this is more."

"It is," Jaden agreed. When he finished with his lock, he picked up several more beads and moved to kneel beside the chair where Lin was quietly eating the last of his stew. Jaden carefully added the beads to a small section of Lin's hair.

"Do you think the silver markings on our faces are simply saying that we are bonded, or do they mean more?" Lin wondered. "That old priest had been at the palace for over two turns now. Why would he stay so close and in mortal form if he was more?"

Jaden shrugged. "I do not know. It has been a very long time since the Gods were this active. We will search out a scholar as soon as we are able to do so."

Jaden gently captured tapping fingers. "In the morning, we will start towards Wolf's Den. It is the winter holding for my company when we are not in action. I will send someone to the palace to learn the situation there before we decide our next step. While we wait for word from my scout, we will find a scholar and see if there is any understanding to be had."

He took the empty bowl and set it on the table. Pulling Lin lightly to his feet, Jaden walked around the large bed with him. "Come, rest. There will be plenty of time for worry tomorrow."

Jaden lifted the covers up for the prince and climbed in after him. He pulled Lin close against his side and kissed the top of his head. "Sleep well, Lin."

Lin woke slowly, aware of the large frame next to his radiating heat. It was still dark out, though one ambitious bird was already chirping loudly. Comfortable, he let his mind drift.

So much had happened in a relatively short period of time. He was still adjusting to the fact that the Bearer's mark had appeared this last turn. Waiting for word from the High Priest; accepting that he would marry a male. It was a position he had never thought to be his. As the only child of a royal, Lin's duty was to continue the family line, and his only marriage option had been with a female. Before the bonding... his mind skittered a little here. The happenings at the temple were overwhelming, and he let those thoughts go for now.

Lin turned his head a bit and studied the warrior sleeping next to him. Thick hair hung loosely over a large shoulder. His skin had light-colored scars from various old injuries, but was otherwise darkly tanned all over, a stark contrast to Lin's own smooth, pale skin. Large veins ran over his arms. Jaden was not bulky like many swordsmen. He reminded Lin of one of the big plains' cats, all sleek, heavy muscle. Even in repose the warrior exuded power. Lin wanted to stroke the fine hairs that lightly covered Jaden's arms, legs, and chest to see if they were as soft as they looked.

He had heard so many stories about Jaden from his father and the bards. He was said to be intelligent and decisive, ruthless in battle once engaged. It was also said that he was considerate of those who could not help themselves; gentle and generous even. That Jaden had great respect for the old ways, Lin had seen firsthand. He had been glorious in that moment at the temple, standing so strongly, eyes flashing...

Eyes flashing; Lin gasped as he recalled Jaden's eyes. He had been marked *twice* by the Gods. They *both* had been marked *twice*! This did not bode well for the future. His stomach tightened with worry over what it all meant, and he began to breathe faster. Suddenly, a large hand reached out to pull him closer to the furnace that was Jaden.

"Whatever worries you so, let it go, Husband." Jaden's sleep-husky voice admonished, "We prepare ourselves for the eventualities we can foresee, and when the Gods are done laughing, we deal with what is. The day will bring what it will bring."

Lin sighed, comforted by the solid warmth next to him. He tried to relax, making a conscious choice to trust the man he had willingly bonded with. Wiggling into a more comfortable position, he went back to sleep.

Jaden was awakened by soft sounds coming from the hall outside. He opened the door to see a tray set with two bowls of porridge, one of dried fruits and nuts, a small pitcher of honey, and a larger one of milk. He picked up the tray and snorted softly. Usually a garrulous fellow, the innkeeper had taken one look at them the night before and couldn't get them into their room fast enough. A superstitious soul, the innkeeper wanted nothing to do with the goings-on of the Gods.

Lin poked his head above the blankets as Jaden turned back into the room. He held up the tray so Lin could see it. "The innkeeper wishes us an early start to our day, Husband."

Lin snorted softly and turned over to stretch. Jaden eyed the slender length of him. "I alluded to your age earlier, but I would like to know. How many turns do you have, Lin?"

"I celebrated my twenty-fourth a few eves ago," Lin said quietly. "Does the difference between us bother you?"

"I would not have searched for a spouse as young as you are," Jaden answered honestly. "*However*, you are the Bearer. I believe we were bonded because there is no other who would be able to offer you the level of safety I can provide."

Jaden set the tray on the side table and moved to sit on the side of the bed near Lin. Gently, he brushed the hair back from Lin's face. "Already, I have strong feelings of protectiveness towards you. I have no doubt other feelings will grow. I am yours, as you are mine. I do not regret our bonding."

"I feel like a mimic-bird, but I am overwhelmed by the speed of everything that is happening," Lin said sadly.

"It is something we all feel at times, Lin," Jaden assured him. "You are certainly not alone in your feelings, but remember this, YOU were chosen. We may never understand the reasoning of the Gods, but something is happening that is important to them, and YOU were chosen to fill their need. It is no small thing, Lin."

Lin held Jaden's eyes for a long moment, and then nodded. "Thank you for that. If there is anyone who could understand what I feel, it would be you."

Jaden smiled and patted Lin's thigh. "Come, let us break our fast. We have a long day's journey ahead of us."

Snagging a handful of dried fruits and nuts from the small bowl, Jaden winked at his husband and said in a high-pitched, querulous voice a granny might use, "Eat. You're too skinny."

It was fully dark by the time they arrived at Wolf's Den. The sentry had looked at them curiously but waved them past, recognizing Jaden.

Lin was sound asleep in his arms. They had been riding hard since early that morning. They had made good time, able to avoid stopping because of the extra food Lin had packed along. Just past dark though, the princeling had started nodding and swaying in the saddle. Jaden had pulled Lin over to his mount, and he promptly slid into a deeper sleep.

It had taken a moment, but Jaden had been able to tie the gelding's reins to his saddle. The horse followed along placidly, unlike Lin's brat of a mare, Belle. That horse had far too much energy, and the silly mare had made a game of finding anything possible to spook at. Even now, she was prancing as lightly as if she had just woken up.

At Jaden's command, his horse lowered to the ground. Carefully, Jaden dismounted with Lin still cradled in his arms.

"I may need to make the next trip, Jaden. You seem to have found a prize." Nava, one of his scouts, appeared from the shadows as Jaden's horse rose back up.

"I have 'found' a husband, Nava. Be respectful," Jaden warned.

"A husband?" Nava was shocked. "When? How? You were gone less than a handful of days."

"As the Gods will it, Nava, it shall be. Take the horses to the stable and wake Jaston. I will speak with you both when I have settled my husband."

Nava nodded and hurried off with the horses, whistling for the stable boys.

Jaden sighed and took Lin inside the building that housed the sleeping area for singles. He passed the room that sufficed as his office and pulled open the door to his sleeping room. Laying Lin on the bed, Jaden carefully removed his boots and cloak. Jaden removed a thick duvet from his chest and tucked it around Lin, who promptly cuddled in and began snoring softly. He stroked Lin's hair for a moment, then headed to his office to meet with Nava and Jaston. He had barely taken two steps inside the door before Nava dropped the cup he had started to pour mulled wine into.

“You have been marked *again*?” Nava swallowed nervously. “It is rare enough a God or Goddess will mark a person anymore, but you have been marked twice now. Does this have anything to do with the husband you brought home?”

Jaston turned from his place by the window. “You married?” He moved around Nava until he saw the markings on Jaden’s face and the beads in his hair. “Who? When?”

“Please finish pouring the wine, Nava,” Jaden said. He really wanted a drink before he started this conversation. Nava and Jaston were two of his best scouts, but they could be dramatic old uncles at times.

Nava handed him a cup and sat. Both men were watching Jaden closely.

“You know I went south to Vostek to meet with their king?”

Both men nodded at him.

“Lin, the king’s son, showed up at the meeting place instead, with an old priest in tow. Apparently, there was an attack on the palace and King Raidon sent the priest with a warning to Lin that he needed to escape. Dal Varent’s troops had gained entry to the palace by then. It is unknown whether the Dal succeeded or failed in his attempted coup at the castle. It is also unknown whether King Raidon is alive or dead.”

Jaden took a long drink from his cup. “Oh and while we were at the old forest temple, Lin and I were bonded directly by the Gods. It seems the old priest wasn’t actually a priest after all.”

There was dead silence in the room. Jaden rubbed his face with his hands before he finished. “Lin has also been marked twice. He is the Bearer.”

Jaston, stunned, whispered the old children’s rhyme,

“The Bearer comes in time of need; there is danger to us all. He bears a child granted by the Gods—Guard him well. Guard him well. His safety is our first concern—Guard him well. Guard him well. The Bearer comes in time of need; there is danger to us all.”

“Sweet Mother,” Nava swore softly. “What is happening?”

Jaden shrugged. “We have no idea at this time. It has been so long since there was a Bearer that I know little of the lore. The only thing I do know is that something is coming and we need to be alert.”

Jaden stood and paced a few steps towards the large map on the wall. He stared at it for a moment then turned back to his scouts.

“You two are the best suited for gathering the information that I need, so I am sending you both to Vostek. I need to know the situation at the palace and whatever rumors may be floating around the castle town. I need to know if the king is deceased or alive. If he is alive, does he need to be rescued? What condition are the town’s people in? Take whatever coin you think you will need and try to keep out of trouble. I do not want to have to retrieve you from the Dal or a cell.” Jaden stared pointedly at Nava, who huffed at him. “In the interim, the prince and I will hunt down a scholar. At the very least, we need to find whatever information we can on the Bearer.”

Jaston spoke up, “The ale house in Kenta is a good place for you to start, Jaden. There is a decent information broker there. If there is something he does not know, at least he will be able to get you started in the right direction.”

“I may be able to get into the palace proper,” Nava commented. “I know one of the cooks, if he is still there.”

“Be very careful, both of you,” Jaden said sternly. “Something is afoot, and at this point, we know neither the players nor the rules.”

The two men clasped arms with him and left. Jaden moved towards the window and looked around at the familiar buildings, shadowed now in the darkness. His mind unsettled, he headed out into the brisk night air to his favorite secluded spot. Letting the peace and solitude fill him, Jaden breathed deeply for a moment, and then began the forms that would clear his mind and focus him.

Jaden awoke early as was usual for him. He made it a point to share as many meals as possible with his company and those of the townspeople who chose to eat with them in the large main room. He gently shook his husband awake. Lin sat up rubbing his eyes.

“The morning meal will be served soon. I usually eat it in the main room with the others. While I would choose to give you more time, there is no doubt that the news that I returned with a husband will be all over the town by now. It will be easier to deal with them all at once than to be hounded by small groups throughout the day,” Jaden said apologetically.

Lin nodded. If there was one thing he understood, it was the need to make appearances. “Do not worry, Husband. It will be well.”

And so it was. Instead of being mobbed, there was a constant stream of people who made their way to the head table. Lin greeted everyone easily,

remembering names and engaging in small talk that included all those around. What could have been awkward was instead pleasant, as Lin skillfully guided the conversations and made everyone comfortable.

Jaden reached under the table and squeezed Lin's hand. His husband had done well indeed.

Cerron was making cryptic notes in his ledger when two men in hooded cloaks entered the tastefully decorated room he used for business. He was used to being approached at odd times by all manner of persons. Having established the most successful messenger-bird and information brokerage in the West Kingdom, his knowledge of rumors and other tidbits was highly sought after.

Cerron studied the men discreetly before looking up. The first one was of average height and slim, a tall boy or younger man. The second was tall and broad shouldered, his movements loose and easy, definitely a man used to fighting. Both were wearing well-made cloaks and boots, but the younger man's were of a finer sort. He was possibly a rich merchant's son or young noble and his bodyguard, very interesting. Cerron sat up.

"Gentlemen, how may I help you this morning?" he inquired smoothly.

The larger man spoke. "We are searching for a scholar or old scrolls that have information on the Bearer," he stated.

"The Bearer." Cerron settled back into his chair. "That is an unusual request."

He played with the ring on his first finger. "I am not sure that is something I can help you with, sirs. Scholars of rare topics are solitary at the best of times, and any scrolls on the subject would be ancient and difficult to locate."

The pair simply stood quietly, watching him.

After several long moments, Cerron casually offered, "I may have heard of a scholar who collects and studies the oldest scrolls. He spends all of his time traveling from one moldy place to another in search of information. He is currently studying a small group of priests with some odd ways. They keep themselves isolated and choose only one new member each turn. All of their time is spent learning old history and traditions. Nothing is written down. All the knowledge is passed on orally. They learn by chant, it is said they have prodigious memories."

The larger one casually tossed a gold royal onto his desk. "Where are we to find these chanting priests, Cerron?"

"Perhaps I am not interested in your money," Cerron suggested, his eyebrow raised.

"What is it you seek, Trader of Secrets?" the second one asked in a soft tone.

Ouch, the young man was definitely a noble with that understated insult.

"I wish to know why a youngling came with his bodyguard to find information on the Bearer."

"He is not my bodyguard, though he guards me well," the young one responded. "He is my husband."

Cerron crossed his arms and stared at the pair. "I find that difficult to believe. I have heard no information regarding a recent marriage in a noble house."

"Choose your words carefully, Cerron." That was definitely a warning from the larger man. So and so, there *was* something between this pair. His interest in these two was piqued.

"Do you believe in the Gods, Trader?" The youngling had taken a step closer to his desk.

Cerron shrugged, thrown off by the question. "Like most, I attend the Festivals."

"Then it is time to believe again."

The youngling pushed his hood back, and Cerron's eyes widened. Silver lines and shapes scrolled around the right side of his face, in sharp contrast to black hair and eyes. Clan beads hung from a lock of hair at his temple, though he was obviously not of clan descent.

"Gods-touched," Cerron barely breathed the words. He moved slowly around the desk, his hand reaching reverently towards the young man's face.

The large one stepped in front of the youngling and lowered his own hood. He too, was Gods-touched, and a fully weaved lock decorated the blond hair that fell past his broad shoulders. "Bonded," he said firmly.

Cerron carefully drew back his hand, making no sudden moves that could be misconstrued by the El'oreen warrior. His eyes flicked between the two men

several times, bits of information coalescing into a pattern, but that couldn't be. He swallowed hard. "Tell me what you need to know."

Jaden watched as Belle sidled sideways and Lin easily straightened her out. The same way Lin had handled meeting his people during the morning's meal break and the information broker in Kenta. Despite the way the men and women in Jaden's company had clamored over his bonded and Lin's claim of being overwhelmed a few, short days ago, Lin had shown nothing but calm ease throughout the entire day.

Lin either had no worries in his head, or he had a formidable public mask. Jaden grunted softly. Who knew that the young prince of a farmer nation could be so... princely?

He considered the situation and made a decision. Kneeing his mount to the west, they left the small road that would lead to the barracks town. It was several heartbeats before Lin looked up.

"What is going on?" he questioned. "Why are we headed towards the mountains?"

"We are making a detour. There is something I want you to see."

Jaden led the way up the mountain and through a small pass. It was growing considerably colder, and the horses' hooves crunched through old snow. Finally, they turned behind a large boulder, but instead of being forced to stop, the narrow passageway opened up.

Off to the side of an area almost entirely walled in by the surrounding rock, a small body of water steamed gently in the cold air. Lin gasped and dismounted to kneel beside a group of tiny bell flowers. A gentle finger brushed against delicate heads hanging heavily from thin stems.

He looked around, taking in the beauty of the small oasis. "It's a lovely place Jaden. Thank you for bringing me here."

Jaden smiled at his husband, pleased that he approved. Dismounting, he put a bit of grain down for each of the horses and removed two hair sticks from his bag before removing his cloak.

Hidden by the surrounding hills and protected from the wind, the small hot spring made an inviting sanctuary. Jaden had removed his shirt and boots before Lin looked away from the little plants growing nearby.

“You are going to freeze and get sick,” he warned.

Jaden shook his head and continued to undress. “The water is quite warm, Husband. It is a good place to relax for a while.”

Lin walked over and dipped his fingers in the pool. “It is amazing,” he said softly.

“You have never seen a hot spring before?” Jaden asked, as he removed the last of his clothing. He deftly twisted his hair up off of his neck and secured it with one of his hair sticks.

Lin stared quietly at Jaden a moment before lowering his eyes.

“The castle grounds are a half mark’s ride from one end to the other, a bit more from top to bottom. If there were no meetings or visiting highborn, I was free to do as I pleased. I would often ride or study with the Master Gardener, but I had never actually left the grounds before Dal Varent attacked us. I am my father’s only heir. He took no chances with me.”

Jaden walked to Lin and cupped the side of his face. He nudged Lin’s chin up and placed a gentle kiss on his husband’s lips. “Your father showed his love and concern. There is no shame in that.”

Lin ducked his head and Jaden moved behind him. A soft touch pulled Lin’s hair around and up. Tucking the hair stick securely into Lin’s hair, Jaden tugged at the fastening to his cloak. “Come, join me and relax a bit.”

Jaden tossed Lin’s cloak over a nearby rock and started working the ties to his pants.

Lin blushed, batting his hands away. “Go soak. I will join you in a moment.”

Jaden kissed the back of Lin’s head and moved to the spring, sinking to his neck in the steaming waters. He sighed in pleasure and watched Lin carefully remove his shirt and boots, setting them aside. Lin was fussing, cheeks still flushed with embarrassment, and Jaden decided to share a story.

“When I first left the mountains, I apprenticed with a sword master whose clan lived at the edge of the Iraci plains. There is a reptile there with lines of bright color decorating its skin.”

Lin looked over at him, interest in his face.

“I had never seen anything like it, and I asked one of the clan elders what it was. He told me that it was a painted lizard.” Jaden shrugged and grinned a

little. "I was horrified that someone would treat a creature so. The next morning, they found me at the river with a small sack of the lizards. I was trying to wash them clean."

Delighted peals of laughter rang out against the rocks, and then there were splashes as Lin joined his husband in the warm waters.

Gathering Lin close, Jaden nuzzled him with small kisses and light hands. Soft sighs were barely heard as Jaden gradually encouraged his husband to release his stress.

Lin sat on the middle fence rail along the side of the horse pasture. Lazing in the morning sun, his feet curled under the bottom rail and his arms thrown over the top, he was quite comfortable.

He wished it were spring; he missed feeling the earth and grass beneath his feet. He loved to sit on the grass in the sunlight, his fingers curled in the blades. He remembered lessons from the Master Gardener, who taught him the importance of caring for the land. As he learned how all growing things were interconnected, Lin had imagined lines of energy connecting everything that surrounded him. Lin himself was the spider tending the web, creating order out of chaos. He smiled, remembering his childhood fantasy of reaching out with the energy to heal various animals on the grounds.

Lin loved animals. Earlier that morning, he had made friends with the heavily pregnant kitchen cat. He had cuddled her in his lap and felt the tiny lumps squirming in her stomach. She would be birthing her kits in the very near future. Lin rubbed a hand across his flat stomach, wondering what it might feel like. Once again, his thoughts traveled to Jaden.

Lin had been spending a lot of time thinking of Jaden since they had first met. Jaden treated him with a gentle kindness that made Lin want. He had been feeling awkward about it, but sitting here in the sun he took the time to consider the situation. The warrior was his; his husband. His *bonded*. There was really no reason to feel hesitant; they would have a lifetime together. Two lifetimes actually, they were bound together in this plane and the next one.

Lin smiled, thinking of Jaden's kindness at the hot spring when he shared an embarrassing story from his youth to make Lin feel better. The gentle teasing and soft touches made Lin feel safe and cared for. He was developing strong feelings for Jaden, and it was time to do something about it. Lin understood that

Jaden's vow to put him first meant that he would have to make clear his desire. So be it. Lin hopped down from the fence and stretched. He had a big El'oreen to claim.

Jaden had positioned himself so that he could keep an eye both on his men training and his husband on the fence. Lin seemed content to bask in the sun so Jaden turned his attention back to the training taking place in the courtyard.

The small wars, skirmishes and raids that typically kept mercenaries busy during the fair seasons were decidedly lacking in the rougher ones. Highborn tended to stay tucked away in their manors and castles when the weather turned, so mercenaries were mostly found spending their earnings in towns and cities during these times.

Jaden, however, did not disband his company through the harsh snowy season, nor did he follow the custom of letting those under him laze through the winter. His company was moderately sized, usually numbering between sixty to eighty men and women. They were a disciplined and well-trained group, easily able to take on larger numbers. When the seasons changed, Jaden brought everyone back to Wolf's Den, a small town populated by former soldiers and their families who had useful trades. Gear was cleaned, repaired, or replaced, and the animals and people were able to heal up and rest for a bit. Then the training began all over again.

The company and town followed the same type of hierarchy to be found in most mountain clans. They were all responsible for each other in the way of a large, close family. Though few were related by birth there were sibs to harass, aunts and uncles to keep order, and elders to learn from.

If someone did not fit within their family, that person was invited to leave. The skill level of the fighter was not a consideration at that point and the fact that Jaden treated his people as a family first, made his company wildly popular with the clans. The large clan base and tight bonds his troops enjoyed were two of many things that set Jaden's company apart from the others.

“AHHH...!”

Jaden looked over in time to see his second, Ande, land hard on his back and winced. He had warned Ande not to harass Kai, a small Breccan who had recently joined them. Lean and wiry as a whole, Breccan fighters were notorious for their wicked, hand-to-hand fighting style and their incredible speed. Ande was, it seemed, determined to learn the hard way.

Lela and Lala, twin sisters who shared an earthy sense of humor, approached from the side. "Heyla," they said in unison. "We are going to start the staff exercises," Lela started. "You are going to be busy," Lala continued.

Jaden looked at them for a moment and followed their gazes back to Lin, who was now moving with purpose towards the three of them. He was quite focused on Jaden. One of the women shoved him lightly, and they both laughed.

"You are newly married, brother. Go pay attention to your husband."

Jaden turned towards Lin, who stopped and waited for him to approach.

"Are you alright?" Jaden asked.

"We are married," Lin stated. "You are mine."

Jaden tilted his head at Lin, waiting for him to finish his thoughts.

"I want a kiss," Lin demanded, narrow eyed. "A real kiss."

A slow smile lit Jaden's face. "You do?" he teased. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Lin said firmly and nodded.

Reaching out with both hands, Jaden gently cupped Lin's face. He felt Lin's hands grasp his waist as he lowered his mouth slowly to his husband's. Brushing his lips softly, Jaden lipped and teased Lin's mouth until he opened up and then kissed him, deep and slow.

Soon Lin's hands had moved to circle his neck. He was leaning fully into Jaden, who had lost himself in the sweet heat of his Lin's mouth until loud hoots and teasing calls brought his attention back to the courtyard. All exercises had stopped, and everyone was watching them.

Jaden leaned forward, touching his head against Lin's for a moment, but Lin jumped up and wrapped his legs tightly around Jaden's waist. Reaching out automatically to catch him, Jaden now found his hands full of Lin's bottom.

He grinned widely. "As you wish, Husband."

Pressing a short, hard kiss against Lin's mouth, Jaden carried him off to their room. He was surprised by the prince's forwardness, but he approved of Lin's honesty and his directness. His husband was demanding his due, and Jaden was determined to give him everything he deserved.

Lin climbed the ladder to the loft. Aki, the cat, had birthed her kits up here a few evenings ago, and Lin took every available opportunity to spend time with them. He found a comfortable spot in the sun where he could watch the kits without disturbing Aki and tried to relax. His mind invariably moved between two sets of thoughts. He was either worrying about his father and the state of the palace, or the evenings he spent enjoying his husband.

And enjoy he did. None of his previous encounters with courtesans and courtiers had prepared him for bed play with Jaden. Jaden was lusty and teasing and intense and... *playful*. Lin was amazed at the sheer joy in life that Jaden expressed each day. Jaden had explained that part of the Warrior's Path was to do everything to the fullest extent possible. It didn't matter if you were fighting in battle or aiding the helpless, or simply existing in the day, it meant giving your best at all times. Whether he was making Lin mindless with sweaty pleasure, or sitting in the sun repairing a saddle, Jaden was right there, laughing and sharing with him.

Lin's feelings for Jaden were growing stronger each day, and the pleasure he received from his marriage made the guilt of not being at the castle that much worse. His stomach tightened, and he startled when Aki jumped into his lap to be petted. Cuddling her close, Lin concentrated on his little friend and her tiny kits.

Jaden stepped outside, glancing around the courtyard. Ande, Bron and Lala were standing together near the pasture fence. They looked over at his appearance, and Lala tilted her head towards the stable. Jaden nodded and headed in that direction.

It seemed that whenever he could not find Lin, all he had to do was go into the loft above the stable. Lin was enamored of the kitchen cat and her kits and popped in to check on them regularly. As expected, Jaden found Lin curled up in a sunny spot, petting the cat.

Lin looked up as Jaden's head and shoulders rose above the ladder. "Have you heard anything yet?"

They were both fretting. Jaden wanted desperately to learn the lore surrounding the Bearer as well as any information they could discover on the Gods' unusual level of recent activity. He was growing quite fond of Lin and was determined to protect him. Lin equally wanted news of his father and the goings-on in his kingdom. They had delayed nearly half a moon; it was as long

as they could safely wait. Lin had agreed that even if there was no word by the next day, they would leave to find the chanting priests Cerron had told them of.

“The sentry just sent word. Nava and Jaston will be at the gate shortly.”

Lin quickly set down the cat and moved towards the ladder.

They made their way to the eating area. Jaden's stomach was twisting, and he did not understand his feelings of dread. He was beginning to think that he was feeling Lin's fears. It was the only thing that made sense to him, but such a thing should not be possible. They *needed* to find those priests and speak to the scholar. There was no telling how much trouble they could unknowingly get themselves into.

Jaston and Nava cantered through the gate and directly up to Jaden, attracting attention from several others. Both men looked tired and worn. Jaden motioned for someone to take the horses and care for them. He herded the two men towards a table and pulled Lin close. It did not look like there was going to be good news forthcoming.

Someone brought a tray with a large pitcher of cider and several mugs. Jaston handed a mug to Nava and began.

“Dal Varent now controls the palace. He is saying that he entered into a marriage contract with Prince Lin after the prince wrote to the Dal asking for his protection. The Dal said that Prince Lin was afraid of an assassination threat made by one of the highborn families. He claims that when he arrived to retrieve his husband he was attacked, and while he was fighting his way to the prince, persons unknown took the prince from the palace.”

There were rumblings from around the table as Nava began his part of the story.

“I was able to see my friend, the cook. King Raidon has supposedly collapsed from the stress of Prince Lin's disappearance. He is sequestered in his private rooms. The Dal and his guards have taken members from each highborn family as 'guests' to ensure the compliance of the highborn against the threat to the kingdom. They are being kept under close watch in a private area of the castle. Dal Varent says that he will not leave until Prince Lin is returned safely to him. The town is being systematically searched for signs of the 'kidnappers'. All strangers are being detained and interrogated. Several of the townspeople trapped us at the inn before we were able to leave. We managed to get out of the room we were in before anyone came to question us, but there are now at least two men they have the excuse of searching for.”

Nava took another drink. He was obviously troubled by what he had seen and heard. “The castle servants are nervous and rumors grow wildly. Several servants are said to have disappeared, not to be found anywhere. My friend, Abel, said that when he took a tray ordered by the Dal to the throne room, Dal Varent was drawing strange symbols over all the walls in what appeared to be blood.”

The room was crowded as more people tried to fit inside to hear the news, Jaden could feel the tension increasing.

“We weren’t able to come straight back,” Jaston picked up the story again. “We knew we needed to get this information to you, but there are riders out over all of Vostek. Heralds are visiting the towns and villages with Dal Varent’s proclamations while his soldiers search. It has taken us three days to make our way west and get back here to warn you.”

Jaden bent to pick up Lin before he collapsed and hugged him close to his chest. He needed to get his husband out of the room, but he took a moment to look around first.

“We are evacuating Wolf’s Den. Everyone is to be ready to leave by mid-sun tomorrow. Do whatever you have to do.”

He carried Lin to their room and focused on his husband, trusting Ande and the others to do what needed to be done.

Jaden leaned into the back of the small wagon to check on his husband. Lin had been in shock last night, responding to little. Eventually, Jaden had the cook bring a mug of warm milk with a generous portion of apple brandy, honey, and spices stirred in. It had taken several tries, but Lin finally finished the milk and fell asleep.

Lin was currently tucked into a little nest of bags and blankets where he could not be easily seen. He was still quiet, but much improved over the previous evening. He and Jaden had discussed their options and agreed that there seemed to be a link between Dal Varent’s actions, and Lin being the Bearer. Their search for knowledge had become imperative.

Though Lin was worried about his father, the Dal could not harm him without proving his lies, so he was probably safe for a time.

Ande and several others approached as Jaden tossed the last pack into the little wagon.

“We were able to fit all of the weapons and gear into the false bottoms of the wagons. Nothing is out except for a few bows and staves as you ordered. The livestock has been divided so that the groups look like traders or travelers. There are a dozen groups that number ten to fifteen each, as requested, and the fighters and scouts are mixed in with the townspeople. There is one group of elders that has requested to stay together. I will take them to one of the closer plains clans. Everyone is ready, Jaden,” Ande informed him.

Jaden nodded. “Good. I need six volunteers to sweep the town. Have them secure and cache whatever food stores and or other items of importance that could not be taken with us. They can go to Kenta as traders or workers when they are done and blend in with the locals there.

“I want everyone else to make their way north to one of the Oreen Mountain clans or the high plains clans in the northwest. The Dal might try to search that far but it will do him no good, and the smaller groups can be easily absorbed by individual clans in those areas. Does at least one person in each group have a clan marker?”

They all nodded at him.

“Be safe then. I will send word as soon as we figure out what we are doing next.”

Ande and the others clasped arms with Jaden and left. Several minutes of orderly noise and bustle followed. Jaden was about to mount his horse when Lin moved to get up.

“Jaden, the cats!” he called out. “We can’t leave them.”

Jaden moved to make sure Lin stayed in the wagon, and Lala came over. “We will check for you Lin.”

Lala headed towards the stable, and Lela followed her with a lidded basket. A few minutes later they returned. Lela leaned into the wagon to hand the basket to Lin and ruffled his hair. “They are all safe inside, Lin.”

“Thank you.” Lin leaned back into his nest, clutching the basket and smiling at the women.

Mounting his horse, Jaden took in the ones that had stayed with him. “Let’s go.”

They were seven days into their journey north, and the trip had been uneventful so far. Their small wagon traveled easily across the broad, flat

plains. Dark trees with long, slender branches dotted the grasslands, and lightly wooded areas could usually be found near a stream or other source of water.

They were nine now, searching for information that would explain the strange goings-on. Traveling with Jaden and Lin were Lela, Lala, Nava, Jaston, Foss, Kai and Bron.

Lela, Lala and Nava were from mountain clans like Jaden's. Jaston was from a plains clan and Kai, Bron and Foss were from the far desert. Kai and Bron were Lin's age, with the same dark hair and brown eyes. Lala and Lela were a few turns older with streaky, dark-blond hair and tanned skin like Jaden's. Nava, another blond, was a dozen turns older than the twins. Foss and Jaston were of an age with Jaden but with darker coloring and greying hair. With their small wagon, eleven horses, and clan member looks, they appeared exactly like the trading nomads they were pretending to be.

If everything went perfectly, it would be just over a half-moon before they finished crossing the Iraci plains. Several more days would be needed to reach the edge of the Seneff Mountains. They should find the isolated priests soon after that.

They had finished setting up camp for the day, when Jaden was startled by waves of satisfaction coming from Lin. On the other side of the wagon, Lin was sitting in the waning sunlight with the kits squirming in their basket nearby. Barefoot, with his eyes closed and his hands on the ground, Lin looked completely content despite the coolness of the day.

Jaden sat on the grass nearby and allowed the quietness of the moment to run through him. Eventually, Lin moved closer and stretched out with his head in Jaden's lap. Jaden stroked his fingers through Lin's hair. "What were you smiling about, Husband?"

"I was thinking how angry I am with Dal Varent," Lin answered easily.

"Thinking how angry you were made you smile? I do not understand."

Lin turned over to look at Jaden. "I was smiling because I imagined reaching out to all of the insects and vermin that live near the castle. I was encouraging them to harass the Dal and the troops that had invaded their space."

Jaden stared at Lin, who was wearing an innocent smile. He pulled until Lin was straddling his lap. "I think that I can come up with much better things to make you smile."

Lin laughed softly and nipped at the strong neck in front of him, licking the bite to soothe it. His hands slipped under Jaden's vest, feeling the powerful muscles underneath. He leaned fully into the heat of Jaden's body.

"That's a fantastic idea, Husband," he purred against Jaden's skin, and they rose together to find a more private place.

Kai, Foss, and Lela were sitting in the early sun with Lin when Jaden and Nava came back from the morning's scouting trip. The three of them were laughing at the antics of the kits, a moon old now and bravely nosing and nipping the grass just past the edge of their blanket.

The group had developed an easy routine. There were usually two acting as sentries for the camp. Two or three would stay with Lin, and the rest would split the camp set-up and other chores. They switched duties as the mood took them, traveling a good distance during the day and making swift camp in the evening.

Jaston approached them as they tethered the horses. "Do we still have visitors?"

"Yes. They are keeping out of sight in the tree lines and tall grasses, but we are being watched," Nava answered.

"If it was the Iraci, we would already be dealing with them," Jaston said thoughtfully. "These may be a cousin clan. They will probably watch us until their elders decide whether or not they are willing to tolerate our presence."

Lala walked up as they were talking. "Bron found a mineral lick that shows signs of much animal activity. He is setting some snares now."

"We will spend two more days here," Jaden decided. "We can let the horses rest while we hunt. I want two deer, three if possible. We will dry as much of the meat as we can, but I want to leave at least half a deer and all of the skins for the watchers. Maybe that will win us some goodwill."

As the others walked off to begin the needed preparations, Lin walked up to Jaden and tilted his head for a kiss.

"Do we have time for a walk?" Lin asked. "I have been craving greens, and that wooded area behind us may be good for fern fronds."

"Put the babies in the wagon and grab the basket. We will go look," Jaden told him.

Lin ran off to grab the kits. Jaden eyed his form appreciatively before he grabbed his bow and quiver from where it was leaning by the side of a tree. Lin returned with kits in hand, petting each one as he set it down inside the wagon, telling them to be good and stay on the pillows until he returned.

Jaden shook his head, smiling, and reached back behind the tree for one of the packs he had stashed there. Casually removing a tiny flask of oil, he slipped it into one of the pockets on his leathers and went to get his husband.

They finally neared the edge of the Iraci plains. Jaden was relieved to be on the final part of this journey. Two small delays meant they were nearly a moon into the trip, and Lin's behavior had become a concern. He tired easily, taking long naps in the wagon. When he was awake, he was rarely hungry and looked like he might be losing weight. In the evenings, Jaden would sit with Lin half asleep in his arms, encouraging him to eat, but it didn't seem to make a difference.

Foss had searched for and found a beehive, built a smoky fire under it to calm the bees and collected a large amount of honey. Kai made a weak tea sweetened with a good bit of the honey, and Jaden made sure Lin stayed hydrated with it.

Lately, Lin would wake in the late afternoon and begin brushing things: the cats, the horses, Jaden's hair; it didn't seem to matter. Jaden had learned that when Lin became cranky, handing him a soft cloth and a kit would divert him nicely. It was funny watching the kits come running when Lin called, small tails straight in the air as they bounced their way over to him. They would sit nearby, waiting their turns while Lin brushed them until their coats gleamed. All the while he would be chattering at them, telling them how smart they were, what good hunters they were going to be or whatever else came into his head.

This morning, Lin popped up off the blankets he shared with Jaden, full of energy. He had straightened his clothes and brushed his hair before Jaden even had time to fold the blankets. Walking to the kettle, he scooped a bowl full of breakfast grains, added a measure of honey, and quickly ate.

Jaden eyed his husband, unsure what to make of Lin's sudden energy but pleased to see him eating.

Lin walked to Belle and removed her from the tether line. At this point, everyone in the camp was watching Lin curiously. Moving just outside of camp, Lin brushed out Belle's mane and tail and checked her ears and eyes.

“There you are love. You are beautiful once again. Now go run for a bit while I brush the other horses. Do not step on any of the kits, and do not step in a hole. Give yourself a good workout and I will give you a proper cleaning when you get back. Now shoo.” With that, Lin slapped her on the flank and Belle took off running.

Everyone was on their feet now, breakfast forgotten, as they watched Lin chase off his horse. Jaden carefully approached Lin as he walked back to the tether line.

“What are you doing, Husband?” he asked softly as Belle raced off.

“Belle is used to a lot more exercise than she has been getting lately. She was bored and needed to run,” Lin replied calmly.

Bron walked over to the tether line to join Jaden, Kai trailing behind.

“Lin, I left a clean pair of pants and a tunic on your blankets. You are welcome to borrow them if you want to bathe in the creek and wash your things.” Bron was completely casual as if it were of no importance.

Lin instantly switched gears and grinned hugely at Bron. “Thank you Bron. That would be amazing,” he said appreciatively. Lin took off, scooping up the borrowed clothes and heading towards the creek.

Belle raced past the camp a second time; head up, ears forward, mane and tail flying straight back with her speed. Jaden wondered when things had gotten out of hand and looked questioningly at Kai and Bron.

Bron’s shoulders lifted as he shrugged. “My older sister was crazy in the early part of being pregnant too. It will pass.”

He and Kai each went to a horse and started brushing them down so that Lin would not be distracted from his bath and come back to “help”.

Jaden stood for a moment, briefly stunned. Lin’s behaviors now made perfect sense. He shook his head; he was going to have to keep up. His husband seemed to be one step ahead of him, and Jaden knew he could not protect Lin from behind.

He approached Lala and Nava later that day. Those two had the greatest knowledge of herbal medicine, and they quickly provided Jaden a list of foods that Lin should be eating. As soon as Lin realized what they were talking about, he was able to help.

Lin’s knowledge of farming and plants was vast. He knew about the types of earth and minerals needed to grow the specific herbs Lala and Nava wanted

to add to his meals, and he was able to find the areas where those herbs would most likely be growing. Between the three of them, they were able to provide a healthy diet for one who was bearing.

Jaden had insisted that Lin now ride in the wagon, which initially caused a problem with his strong-headed husband. Jaden had been backed by the entire group, but none of that would have mattered if Bron had not taken Lin aside.

Lin had listened with respect to Bron as he was widely acknowledged as a master with horses despite his youth. Bron had explained the danger and been very firm about the fact that being pregnant meant no riding, and that was that. Lin wasn't thrilled, but he stayed in the wagon. As a compromise, once a day, the group would spend a mark traveling at a snail's pace so that Lin could walk and stretch.

One night at the fire, Lin shared his concern that they needed to find a nursing mother to feed the babe when it was born. Jaden smiled and shook his head, coming up with odd alternate suggestions. Lin was working up a good bit of annoyance, the others watching with amusement, when Nava broke into the conversation.

"He is teasing you, little brother. It is not uncommon for a mother to lose her milk in the clans. Accidents happen as well. Most any clan we come across will have feeding cups we can use for the babe. They are easy enough to come by."

"What are feeding cups?" Lin asked, as he reached out and pinched his husband.

Jaden laughed and leaned away as he explained. "They are tiny cups of carved wood or polished metal. They are about three or four times the size of a thimble with a little curved edge that sticks out. You hold the babe upright and sit the cup at the edge of its mouth, tilting it just enough that the babe can reach the milk with its tongue. The babe will take a small amount in and quickly learns how to drink. An elder will keep an eye on the person feeding the babe for the first few days, to make sure it is going well. Though it is important to keep the babe calm, it is fairly simple."

Lin glared at Jaden. "You couldn't have said that from the beginning?"

Smiling, Jaden pulled his husband closer and apologized with kisses.

Lin was floating quietly above the camp site; he was having a most unusual dream. He seemed to be a transparent shade of himself. The world around him

looked curious too, like he had double vision. He could clearly see the camp and surrounding area, but everything was outlined in a soft, pale blue.

Fascinated, Lin reached out and pulled a leaf from a nearby branch to examine it more closely. The blue glow quickly faded as the life left the leaf. A small bit of blue welled from the branch where he had removed the leaf and Lin understood. He gently stroked the branch, healing the injury he had caused.

Lin floated higher. From here, he could see how everything was tied together. Where the plants and grasses were healthy and abundant, the faint blue collected into small streams the thickness of a string. These traveled down to connect with other strings, becoming larger and brighter. All of the life in the plains was interconnected like a beautiful spiderweb, just as he had imagined.

Floating over to an area of bare ground, Lin noted the missing energy lines. Studying the web, he found where some of the spider strings had become tangled; causing a knot. There was a small pool of energy there that had a brownish cast. Lin viewed the detail of the surrounding pattern and encouraged several tendrils to change their course, reconnecting that section of the pattern.

Pleased with what he was doing, Lin moved back towards the camp. He floated over the horses and the cat and her kits, stroking them as he passed. They were all glowing with health.

He went through the camp. Kai and Bron were vibrant so he moved to check Lela and Lala; they too were good. Nava's color was strong so he was passed by as well. Jaston's color was a bit faded; Lin paused here. Very gently, he nudged and encouraged Jaston's life force to a stronger hue. When he was glowing like the others, Lin moved on. He looked around but didn't see Foss.

Knowing at least one person usually stood sentry at night, Lin moved in increasing circles looking for him. Lin finally found Foss up in a tree watching the night, but he was not doing well at all. Foss was pale blue around the edges, and there was a muddy brown in his chest preventing the blue from flowing freely.

Lin considered this for a bit, before approaching Foss. Placing his hand flat on Foss's chest, Lin gathered energy from the life all around him and pushed it strongly into Foss who gasped out loud and threw his head backwards smacking it into the tree, which caused him to slump.

Suddenly Jaden was there, daggers in hand. Now it was Lin's turn to gasp, Jaden's energy was a silvery-blue, but his eyes were pure silver. One sharp

whistle later, the others were all gathered around Jaden, who gestured at Foss. Kai, Bron and Lela took off into the night, checking the darkness for danger while Lala quickly climbed the tree and balanced on the limb next to Foss. She felt for his pulse and gently patted his face.

Foss groaned a bit and reached for the back of his head. Lala handed down his bow and encouraged Foss to move to the edge of the tree limb that he was perched on. Nava and Jaston stood under the limb, waiting to help Foss down. Lin wanted to roll his eyes. He had been trying to *help*, and Foss's glow *was* much better now.

Lin moved towards Jaden, who was keeping watch over the three helping Foss. Jaden's glow was beautiful, and when Lin reached out to stroke Jaden's skin, his energy flared. Lin reached out, spinning a bit of the energy closer.

Jaden's eyes flicked towards him, and Lin was sure Jaden saw him when they both felt it. A great malevolence was out there. Lin removed his hand and the feeling left. Jaden started running back to where Lin's body lay on their blankets. Lin floated behind him, putting his hand back on Jaden's shoulder.

The feeling of danger came back, and they both looked up. A slender, red-black pulse of energy was making its way towards Lin's body. Jaden leaped and landed over Lin, covering Lin's physical body with his own.

Lin's shadow-self cried out soundlessly and PUSHED. The blue web of life pulsed and rose up, creating a barrier that shielded Jaden. The dark energy broke apart on the shield, and Lin felt weak. It was definitely time to wake up.

Sinking back into his body, Lin opened his eyes. His husband was above him, exactly as he had dreamed, eyes still glowing silver.

Jaden sat up and carefully gathered Lin to him. "Do you know what happened?" he asked.

Lin was shaken. "I thought I was dreaming."

Jaden shook his head, staring at Lin. "Whatever happened was real, Lin." He pushed Lin's hair back from his face and stopped, still as a statue.

"Your eyes are blue."

They arrived at the temple near midday, over a moon from the time they had started. While the others set up camp about a quarter-mark away, Lin and

Jaden left to find the scholar. The middle-aged priest who answered the bell took one look at their faces, and quickly ushered them into a study.

A short while later, two men walked into the study. One was grey-haired; his face was lined with age, but he was still standing tall. He was wearing simple homespun robes and sandals. The other was perhaps twenty turns younger and dressed in pants, a tunic, and soft slippers.

“Welcome travelers. I am Ruud,” the older one began. His eyes traveled their faces. “And this is Arram. Please, sit. It seems to be the season for visitors, and I would hear your stories.”

Time passed as Jaden and Lin told their stories and discussed what they knew of the lore surrounding the Bearer. From the scholar, they learned the pregnancy would last just five moons, compared to seven and a half for a normal pregnancy.

It seemed that the long, slightly-curved, silver mark that sat low on the prince's abdomen would be the babe's method of exit. As the time neared, the mark would become thin, eventually splitting in two down its length as the babe left Lin's body and resealing after.

The prince and babe both would be vulnerable at that time. The energies required of the birthing would completely drain the Bearer, and he would fall into a deep sleep lasting several marks at least. Someone must be present to care for and guard the babe and prince.

Arram had a theory concerning Lin's affinity for animals. He thought that the prince was actually communicating with them on some level, and that the longer Lin was around a certain animal the more intelligent it would become. The priest thought it was because some of the Bearer's powers were rubbing off on the animals.

Both scholar and priest agreed that the Bearer was a guardian of some sort. He was supposed to stop a great evil but what that evil was or how Lin was to stop it, neither man knew. The happenings of the previous night baffled them.

From the bits and pieces Arram had been able to discover, it seemed that the Bearer had appeared only twice before. The first time was around two thousand turns ago; the last time just over nine hundred turns ago.

Neither of the men had a clue as to why Lin's eye color had changed.

Lin and Jaden also discovered that one part of the design on their faces was a combination of ancient symbols for Ashriel, the Warrior Goddess, and Jor,

the God of Life. The other part of the markings made no sense to either priest or scholar.

Both men were mystified by the fact that Jaden and Lin were twice marked. They had never heard of such a thing before.

Marks later, Jaden's head felt stuffed full and had begun to ache. From the look on Lin's face, he felt the same, and they got ready to take their leave. Ruud walked with them to the gate before stopping Jaden with a hand to his arm. "A moment, Warrior, if you please."

Jaden looked back at the old priest. "How can I help you, Elder?"

"With everything that is happening and all this talk of the Gods, I was wondering why you had not yet reached out to Ashriel for knowledge."

At Jaden's blank look, he continued. "You are a Warrior of Ashriel. You have been accepted by her. Surely you have felt her presence in your life?"

Nodding at the priest, Jaden agreed, "I have felt her attention on occasion."

"Yes, exactly." Ruud's hand was firm on Jaden's arm as he tried to get his point across. "You have the ability, Warrior. Talk to your Goddess."

Jaden waited until the moon was shining brightly before walking out into the night. He climbed a large rock bathed in moonlight and knelt quietly. Always before in his meditations, he had emptied his mind, allowing Ashriel's energy to reach out to him. Tonight, he was calm but focused, actively seeking Her attention. After some time had passed, Jaden felt the quality of the night change, and he looked around.

The shape of a tall, fit woman was standing just past the edge of the rock. Her form flickered, there but not, her eyes bright silver.

"I wondered if you would seek me, Warrior." The voice was clear in his head, but Jaden was certain the words were not spoken out loud.

Jaden rose up and inclined his head respectfully to his Goddess, standing tall and proud before Her. Ashriel smiled her approval, and waited for him to begin.

"I seek understanding, my Goddess. Strange things are occurring, and I only understand bits and pieces of the whole," Jaden said. "I need you to explain what is happening, and what I must do. Last night, something attacked the

Bearer. A thing like I have never seen before. I believe Lin was bonded to me for his protection, but I do not know what I am protecting him from.”

Ashriel held out her hand. *“Come to me, Warrior.”*

Stepping forward, Jaden took the Goddess’s hand. Instantly, they were in a darkness lit by thousands of stars, both near and far. Jaden looked in wonder at the beauty around him.

“Are we in the sky?”

“Not exactly,” Ashriel replied. *“Simply somewhere it is easier for me to spend time. There are many things of which you will hear and see that you will not understand right now. Fullness will come when it is ready.”*

Jaden nodded his acceptance of this statement, and the Goddess continued.

“For all of us, times and places are stacked one upon another, near but never touching. There are those who do not understand the journey, and so it ends for them on a single plane. Others, like those of this planet, will travel to more of these places during their time. Moving from the plane you are on, to the next, is one example of this.”

The Goddess paused here, as if debating how much to tell him.

“Those who are like me have fullness of understanding and traverse many planes with ease. A number of us, in our travels, have come across worlds with younger, less understanding races and decided to... mentor them, guide them until they had understanding of their own.”

“You made yourselves their Gods. You made yourselves *our* Gods,” Jaden said with dawning awareness. These were frightening thoughts.

“It might be perceived that way,” Ashriel admitted. *“Most of us thought ourselves benevolent guides, but with time it has become more.”*

“What it means for you and your people is that you have had a chance at life that would not have been yours if we had not intervened. One of our people, Valru, has chosen to use his abilities to seize control of other races, slowly draining them and their worlds of life. He sends an enormous burst of power to overwhelm the planet he has chosen, so that all on it are defenseless. This weakens him, but the energy he receives back when he leeches the planet dry is richer and more intense. He is addicted to it.”

“If you are so powerful, why do you not stop this beast? Is this not the duty and honor of those in power; to watch over and care for those who cannot care for themselves? Is that not what it means to be your Warrior?”

Jaden was confused and angered by Ashriel's tale. Everything he had ever learned and stood for was outraged at the knowledge he was gaining.

"Many of those from our home were spread out across the planes of time and space when these things first occurred. Much time passed before others realized what he was doing. When we learned of the happenings, a number of us returned. We were over a dozen, but we were on the planet investigating when Valru hit us with a second blast of energy. His power caught us by surprise; we were only able to react.

This, Jaden could understand. An unexpected attack of sufficient severity, regardless of the size of the force, could easily cause chaos and panic.

"From our travels, we had learned that during certain times, the barriers between dimensions were thinned and with enough power, could be crossed. This was one of those times. We pooled our power, quickly gathered those we could reach, almost ten thousand of your people, and sought a new haven for you. Three of those with us sacrificed ALL of their power to get everyone to this place. The effort it took to maintain the life forces of those we brought with us was immense.

"We discovered a planet that we were able to adapt to our charges and made sure that they all survived. This was almost three thousand of your turns ago."

"The things you speak of make a story fit for a master bard's tale, but what does this have to do with what is happening now? What is happening to my husband? *How do I protect him?*" Jaden was determined to learn what he needed to in order to keep Lin safe.

"Valru was furious at our interference and sought retribution. When he tried to cross over the first time, we were taken by surprise. Individually, none of us were strong enough on this plane to block him. We exist in too many times now. Once you have reached a certain level of existence, coming back to lesser planes is extremely difficult. We needed a focus, someone from your plane we could provide energy to and teach how to block Valru from crossing."

"You created the first Bearer," Jaden stated.

"It was not intentional. When we chose the first focus and sent power into him, he was already married. We quickly realized that something unexpected had occurred. The energy caused changes within him. As soon as we realized what happened, we provided protections so that he could bear and birth the child without harm.

“We were able to use Rallo, who became the first Bearer, to push Valru back to his own dimension. Though changed, Rallo was content as he was and lived a mostly normal life with his family before they passed to the next plane.

“Ira, the second Bearer, did not fare as well. We followed the same path as we had with Rallo and chose a married man of moderate age. We later learned that Ira did not share strong feelings or closeness with his husband. When he needed support in his fight with Valru, no one was there to aid him.

“Valru was not able to breach the dimension, but he managed to use his energy to influence some here to do his bidding. They received a very small portion of Valru’s power and used it in an attempt to manipulate the barrier from this side. His followers were fools who believed they would continue to share Valru’s power and protection. They caused much damage before they were stopped.

“Ira was alone, and though we poured energy into him, losing two more of our own in the process, he was destroyed in the battle. It was hundreds of turns before we were able to heal all of the damage that was caused by Valru’s minions.”

Ashriel pointed to the series of stars commonly called Hunter’s Bow. *“Beyond these stars is one of the barriers I spoke of earlier. In half a turn, the planets will align in such a way that the barriers will be stretched to their weakest point. Valru will certainly try to cross over at that time, if not sooner.”*

Ashriel looked at Jaden intently. *“The cycle is beginning earlier than expected. We thought to have more time before he began his efforts, but Valru has managed to snare someone on this side; the one you call Dal Varent. We can already feel his attacks on the barrier. The danger to this planet is severe and yet... there are other differences to this cycle.”*

“What do you mean?” Jaden asked cautiously.

“I have claimed you as my own, and you have become more than before. Your abilities are increased, your reactions sharper. You are aging at a slowed pace, because I gave you a piece of my energy the day that I marked you.

“When Dagen chose Lin as the Bearer, he was changed as well, but with Lin there are differences.” Ashriel’s lips twisted in a small smile. “This one seems to be writing his own tale, and when he agreed to bond with you—my Warrior—he changed it even more.

“You two were enhanced from your previous encounters with us, but you received additional energy when we bound your souls. The change is now

significant, and affects the path you are on. You are more than the mortal being you once were, and so is he. Lin is more powerful than either of those who came before. He flares brightly with his strength, like a beacon in the night. It makes him a visible target to his enemies.

“Guard your bonded carefully, Warrior. Should Dal Varent succeed in interfering with the Bearer, it will greatly weaken our ability to aid your people. You must not allow that creature to aid Valru, or the danger will grow immeasurably. If he is able to thin the barrier enough, Valru himself will be here, and we do not have enough strength on this plane to save your world were that to occur.”

“I would guard Lin for my own selfish reasons, but he is also the guardian of my people. I will do whatever I need to, in order to protect him,” Jaden said gravely. “Though why have his eyes changed? Is he in any danger from this?”

“The energy of your world is wild and barely tamed; the power of it crashes like a heavy sea against the shore. Lin is in communion with it, and creates order where there was none. He does not yet understand this, but the change you see in his eyes is merely a reflection of the power he now wields.”

Ashriel touched Jaden’s shoulder. *“I would not have you spend too much time here. Until we meet again, Warrior.”*

With that, Jaden was back on his rock, the early morning sun peeking above the horizon.

Nava was still standing sentry when Jaden returned to the camp. Jaston and Lela were talking quietly by the fire; everyone else was asleep. Jaden went to Lin and smiled in fondness to see him curled in the blankets, cat and kits by his side.

He knelt, brushing the hair from Lin’s face, waking him. He kissed his husband’s temple in apology and helped him sit up.

“We need to talk.”

Lin sat on the ground with his back to Jaden’s chest and between his legs. His morning sickness gone and appetite restored, Lin’s belly had begun to swell. He had become very fond of tummy rubs, and Jaden seemed to enjoy the closeness this provided. He was always willing to spend time holding Lin and caressing his belly.

The others were gathering around the fire to hear Jaden's words. There was quiet for a time while they digested his story, and then they began discussing the best way to move forward.

"So our priorities are torn between keeping Lin safe and stopping Dal Varent?" Jaston asked.

Jaden nodded at him. "Ashriel said that we have somewhere between a quarter turn and a half turn before Valru will be able to reach us from the place he is at. That is the greatest danger. For now, we must stop the Dal from assisting Valru. Anything we can do to make it harder for Valru is beneficial to our plight. We must also guard Lin, as he is to be the focus for the Gods' power in the upcoming battle."

"We need to gather the company," Lela said. "But I do not believe you two should be left alone."

"We must enlist the aid of the Iraci." All eyes turned to Foss, and he continued his thought.

"We have entered a time of danger to us all. It is only right that we spread word of what is happening. At the same time, we do not want panic. The clans are a good place to start because they still follow the old ways, and doings of the Gods won't shock them. The Iraci themselves are formidable fighters and would make excellent allies. Their horsemen could move quickly to get word to the other clans, while we move at a slower pace for Lin. At the same time, they can pass word along to our scattered company that we are regrouping."

"The Goddess mentioned that the second Bearer needed strength he was not able to draw from his husband," Lala said thoughtfully. "I wonder if that means others can share energy with the Bearer."

There was a pause while everyone considered that for a moment.

"We need Bards," Kai said suddenly. "Priests might not be taken seriously right now with so few townspeople following the Gods, but everyone listens to a bard. Dal Varent is spreading stories as he wants them told, and he may have swayed many. We don't want bounty hunters coming in and trying to rescue a supposedly kidnapped Lin. Bards can craft our tale in a way that will reach people and show them the evil that the Dal is trying to accomplish."

"These are all sound ideas." Jaden turned towards Jaston. "You are from a plains clan, what is the best way to approach the Iraci?"

“Showy strength appeals to them,” Jaston replied. “They are loud and boisterous. They love bright colors and things that shine. They care for the weak and elderly, but bold strength and ability are what is respected. The Iraci feel that you should know your worth and be proud of it. You must observe the formalities. There is no discussing of business on the first day. Do not be afraid to boast, and show no fear.”

Lin sat up from leaning against Jaden and looked around the group with a slow smile. “I think we can handle that.”

Foss and Jaston had wisely taken off to scout for an Iraci encampment. Lela, Nava, and Jaden were trying hard not to look at each other. Every time one of them looked the other in the eye, they all started laughing again. They had finally gotten themselves under control when Bron went by with his horse, and they lost it again. Lela and Nava were wiping tears from their eyes.

“Enough, I can’t stand it,” Lela finally gasped.

Lin, Bron, Kai, and Lala had gone more than a little crazy on the “showy” part of their plan. Though Jaden’s company was different from most, they were still mercenaries. A good portion of their wealth went into jewelry, gems, and other small, high value items that were easily carried. Those four had spread the items around... pretty much everything.

First, they had chivied everyone into brushing the horses until they gleamed. Each horse got several braids in their manes with baubles added in. They had taken everything out of the wagon and rearranged it to look like a small, comfortable room. Lala had added intricate braids to Jaden’s hair and several simpler braids to everyone else’s. Lin’s hair was pulled back enough to show his beads but otherwise loose.

Jaston had some kohl sticks that he had intended for a pretty thing in Kenta. Kai borrowed them and used them generously on Jaden and Lin to highlight their eyes and the silver bonding marks.

Lin was wearing his silk clothing. His clothes had been too tight around his growing middle, but Kai had been able to use the second tunic to add material to his good set. He also wore his green necklace, which fit him like a collar now that he had given Jaden several pieces.

Lin and Bron had their heads together for a bit then visited the horses, spending long minutes with each one. Lin even had Aki wearing one of his bracelets around her neck.

With everyone cleaned up and wearing their best leathers, hair braids, jewels, and bits of kohl, they were quite the sight.

“Enough,” Jaden agreed and went to collect his husband.

They rode boldly into the camp. Iraci sentries had let themselves be seen about a half mark earlier, and as expected, the clan members were awaiting their arrival with curiosity.

Jaden took a moment to look the clan over. Dark, waist-long hair and tanned skin were shared by all of them. The people were of average height and very lean, probably a people who enjoyed foot racing. Jaden bet they would be very fast.

He walked his horse to the warriors, and one of the men separated from the group and came up to him. They stared at each other for a few moments before the other man grunted.

“I am Tonda. I am First Hunter of the camp and Chief of these people.”

“I am Jaden, a Weapons Master. I am Chief of *Drus Stryke*, a mercenary clan, and Chosen Warrior of Ashriel.”

Murmurs sounded throughout those gathered round. These were a people who understood what is meant to be not only a Weapons Master, but also a Warrior. The name of the mercenaries, Strength Carries, and all that it implied, was not lost on them.

Tonda moved over to Jaden, who had dismounted, and clasped arms with him.

“Come, tell us your stories,” he invited.

They lounged around the fire with the clan, eating bowls of boiled grains with bits of highly seasoned meat on top. Children sprawled and listened to their elders with undisguised interest. Lin asked for something warm to drink, and smiled at the small child who brought him a cup of fermented mare's milk.

Tales and boasts were being called back and forth, growing wilder as everyone else relaxed and shared cups of hard cider. As the day wore on into late afternoon, one fellow had become surly and stared at Lin, who was in his favored position, leaning against Jaden's chest. After several glancing looks, the man turned to Jaden and sneered, making a comment about his pet.

Before Jaden could stop him, Lin was gone. The miscreant hit the ground hard and was now on his stomach, with his neck under Lin's soft slipper. The man gasped in pain, his arm twisted high behind him. Lin kept firm hold of his wrist and hand, pulling up hard.

Jaston, Bron, and the others immediately surrounded Lin, protecting him from any who might take offense. In the stunned quiet, Jaden stood and casually called out.

“Husband, it is impolite to dismember people while a guest in their camp.”

All heads swung in Jaden's direction, and he took the time to casually dust his clothing. When he was finished, he walked towards his husband and the helpless man under his foot. Jaden stood beside Lin and placed a soft hand on his shoulder.

Lin released the man with a huff and placed one knee on the ground. Speaking very firmly, he stated, “I am Lin Aterios, Prince and sole heir to the kingdom of Vostek. I am Chosen of the Gods and bonded to Jaden, Warrior of Ashriel. *I. Am. The. Bearer.* I am no one's pet!”

Accepting Jaden's hand, Lin stood and smiled sweetly at him. Jaden raised a brow in amusement at Lin's attempted innocence.

“Perhaps we should leave, Husband. We may have overestimated the Iraci's ability to aid us in this battle,” Lin said, as if it were of no import.

Jaden pulled Lin close and stepped away from the clansman on the ground. Only then did he pay attention to the fact that they were the focus of everyone's attention. Lin's claim that he was the Bearer had most frozen where they stood.

“He is pregnant and quite moody,” Jaden said to the group and shrugged as if to say, *What can you do?*

Tonda nodded and beckoned them closer. “I would hear more of this battle.”

They were finally alone. After hearing their tale, Tonda had sent off a half-dozen riders to the surrounding clans to begin spreading word of what was happening. They had been invited to stay the night and had accepted Tonda's offer of hospitality.

Lin watched Jaden tie the tent flap closed and turn towards him. Jaden slowly undid the fastenings on his vest. Lin made a soft noise in appreciation of the show Jaden was giving him.

Jaden took his time removing his moccasins and leathers. When he was fully naked, he knelt and slowly crawled up the blankets towards Lin. As he reached Lin's feet, he stopped and removed the soft slippers, brushing up a pant leg to kiss Lin's ankle. Moving forward, he placed a kiss over Lin's hardening shaft and unfastened the band at his waist.

"So, Husband," he began, while placing tiny kisses all over Lin's growing belly. "Would you like to explain how a cherished and overprotected princeling was able to do what you did earlier?"

"Not really." Lin groaned, as Jaden scraped Lin's skin with his teeth.

"Mhmm," Jaden growled softly, and took his time teasing and nipping at the lean legs being exposed. "I am quite sure it is a story I need to hear, though."

Lin let out a small gasp as Jaden slipped off his pants and started nibbling at the tender skin behind his knee.

"I knew that you would react to the taunt, but it would not have won any respect for me, and it would not have convinced the Iraci to help us. They needed to see me as worth fighting for."

Jaden nodded. "That is why," he agreed, "but not how."

"It's embarrassing," Lin hissed, as Jaden continued his way up from the inside of his thigh to the crease of his leg.

"Is it more embarrassing than washing lizards to get off the 'paint'?"

"Well..." Lin yelped and laughed as Jaden pinched his bottom.

He reached up to unfasten his tunic, and Jaden moved over the top of him, halting his hands. He brushed his lips against Lin's neck and whispered, "Leave the top and tell me your story, Husband. Please."

Lin sighed. "I told you before that my mother passed when I was young. Father loved me, but I was a quiet child, and he was often busy. I craved his attention. I used to see him talking and laughing with the guardsmen, and I wanted him to be that easy with me. I began following the castle guards to their training sessions. Lito, the head guard, realized what I was doing and started teaching me balance moves for fighting against larger opponents. When Father found out, he was horrified that I might be injured and demanded that I stop. Lito eventually convinced him that a future king must know how to fight and defend himself, so Father let me keep studying. I was older before I realized that my father loved me no matter what." He shrugged a little and laughed.

Jaden kissed Lin softly for several moments and then pronounced, "No, the lizards were more embarrassing. You must suffer." He blew a giant raspberry against Lin's stomach, and Lin's laughter rang out from the tent. Further words were not needed for some time.

Lin awoke before the others and walked off to find a quiet patch of early morning sunlight. He felt restless, like there was something he needed to do. On his way out of the camp, he stopped by the wagon and opened his parcel of seeds. He considered them for a while and then opened one of the packets. Lin shook out three seeds and carefully closed the packet, tucking the remaining seeds safely away with the others.

Locating the path they had come from, Lin followed it back until he found the place he remembered. A low floodplain was about three hundred paces distant and would work perfectly for what he had in mind.

Using a sharp stick, Lin dug a slender trench, placing the seeds two hands away from each other. He sprinkled a little bit of the rich dirt over the top and encouraged the seeds to settle in. He stayed there until he felt the seeds awaken and begin to take root.

By spring, three hardy and fast-growing brambles would be well established. They would continue to grow quickly, and before winter, there would be nutritious, blue frostberries for the Iraci and a hearty home for many of the smaller denizens of the plains. Lin was satisfied with the new growth he had started, but this was not the only reason he had come out this morning.

Spying a small, raised area, Lin sat down and got comfortable. He closed his eyes and faced the weak morning sun, feeling the life that surrounded him. He concentrated on seeing things with his mind, like he had before when he thought he was dreaming.

There was so much energy here. It flowed wildly all around, crashing streams and uneasy pools in some areas and thin spots in others. The farmer in Lin demanded that he bring order to the chaos. This was a good place, and he desired to keep it that way.

Slowly Lin formed his favored shape. He created the anchor of a web, encouraging the streams of energy to split into long lines that radiated outwards for a thousand paces like the spokes of a giant wheel. He made these lines strong yet flexible, just like spider's silk. Once the supporting structure was in

place, Lin drained the pools to make the small, connecting lines that would tie everything together.

The web was too bright so Lin spread the energy outward, increasing the size of the web. It looked much better now, but it was still pulsing more than Lin liked, so he pulled at the excess energy and added it to his own. The animals and vegetation were all glowing with health, and nothing seemed stressed by either too much energy or too little, so Lin was content.

An idea began to form in his mind, but he needed some time to consider it.

Lin took a brief moment to check on the little group he now thought of as his. He smiled when he saw that Jaden was nearby, apparently keeping watch over him. The others appeared to be getting the wagon and horses ready to leave. Lin considered for a brief moment, and then tossed a sticky tendril of power at each of the others so that he could keep an eye on them.

Jaden's silver-blue power was glowing brightly and reaching out, as if seeking something. Lin studied the questing threads and then frayed the edges of his own power. Quickly, he spun the two together, binding his life force even more tightly to Jaden's. Their powers flared, then settled over both of them. He heard Jaden chuckle with wry amusement.

"If you have spent long enough ordering the world to your liking, it is time for us to start."

Lin opened his eyes at Jaden's soft touch. "You can feel what I am doing?" he asked.

Jaden nodded. "Yes, to an extent. I don't know how you are using it, but I can feel the power you are wielding, and I can tell it is something that satisfies you. I have been able to feel your emotions almost from the beginning."

"I don't understand. I don't feel anything from you." Lin was puzzled by this.

"Are you sure of that, Husband? I believe you receive my feelings quite well." Jaden brushed the hair away from Lin's face, letting his fingers play with the beads.

Lin thought about it. He closed his eyes again and sorted through his feelings, examining them one by one. Several of his feelings had a strange echo. That was it! They were similar enough in their emotions that Jaden's feelings felt like Lin's own.

Happy that he had solved the puzzle, Lin started to pull back when he noticed an odd sense of vagueness. Curious, he followed it back and almost fell over. It was from the babes.

“Babes?” Jaden questioned sharply. “You heard them? As in more than one?”

Lin’s eyes flew open, and he looked at his husband in shock. “There are three,” he whispered.

Jaden nodded, picked Lin up and headed for the wagon. “Call your cats,” he said grimly. “We are leaving now. You have babes to grow, and I have a Dal to kill.”

They were now stopping only long enough for Lin to get out and pee. Mark-long breaks where he could walk for a bit were things of the past. The trip back to Kenta was being made as quickly as possible, but they would not reach the town before full spring. There was a dramatic increase to the group’s sense of urgency. Multiple births were not unheard of in the clans, but they often came with complications to the mother; or birthing parent in Lin’s case. The idea that Lin carried three was seen as a concern by all.

Jaden would have to slow down once they reached the main road; it was far too bumpy to take at speed in a wagon. For now, Lin rested in a comfortable nest of blankets and clothing. He entertained himself by flicking beads here and there for the kits to play with. They were much more active now, growing large and strong but still with the skinny, long-legged look of adolescence.

Lin had developed new sleep habits with this trip. Bored with the forced rest during the day, Lin slept through large parts of it, and so when they camped at night, Lin was wide awake. At least he had enough free time to work out his earlier idea.

In the evenings, Jaden would spend a mark or so with him. He would rub Lin’s belly and talk to the babes who were growing well, based on the size his belly was attaining. While the camp slept and the cats hunted, Lin would begin his projects.

The first thing Lin would do once the camp was quiet was choose three to five seeds from those in his parcel. He would select and plant seeds with aggressive growth patterns or high yields and encourage them to take hold.

Quickly growing vegetation would consume vast amounts of energy, and Lin encouraged the seedlings towards periods of sustained, hyperactive growth. He altered the existing energy patterns of the surrounding area to create strong, supportive webs. Connecting the new webs to those from the previous pattern covered the greatest area possible. His idea was now a definite plan.

Valru was coming. The Gods were concerned that it would be so; to Lin that meant it *would* be so. By establishing an interconnected system that would operate as a whole, he was looking to thwart Valru's weapon of choice. Filled with vegetation capable of utilizing enormous amounts of energy, the webs would flex instead of being overwhelmed and tearing apart. The effects would be spread over a vast area, and the energy-hungry plants would drain the webs to a safe level.

Lin imagined if this worked, the entire land might soon look like an untamed forest. There would certainly be a population explosion among the animals. No doubt there would be energy to spare for generations to come.

Aki chittered, and Lin opened his eyes. Aki had brought him a hare almost as large as she was and sat proudly next to it. Lin picked her up and cuddled her.

"Thank you, my little friend. You are an excellent hunter and generous with your bounty. I will have a tasty meal with this one." Aki purred loudly, rubbing against Lin's belly and head-butting his hand.

Soon, Lin had to put her down and laugh. All of the kits had brought little offerings to him. Each one carried a fat dormouse or tree hare in its mouth.

Lin gathered the kits to him, smiling with pleasure. He cuddled them close and praised their hunting skills, but reminded them to take only what was going to be eaten. Soft ears were rubbed, and he made sure that each kit received several moments of attention. Lin finally set them all down and grabbed one of the many sharp knives to be found around the camp.

He skinned each little offering, wrapped it in a bit of greens and set it in the kettle over the coals. The hare he cleaned and cut into pieces, adding it into the kettle along with more water. He built the fire up and looked for some herbs to add to the pot.

Spying some reeds near a slow part of the stream, Lin wandered that way. The tubers were delicious and would mix well with the small game. He started to step into the water when large hands pulled him back. Jaden removed his cloak and wrapped it around Lin.

“You need to stay out of the water, Husband. You cannot risk getting a chill,” he admonished. Jaden dug up a number of tubers for Lin and washed them clean in the stream. “Let us return to the fire. You should not be wandering at night.”

“Lala and Bron are standing sentry tonight. You were sleeping. How did you know where I was?” Lin asked curiously.

“I always know where you are. I feel you here and here.” Jaden touched his head and then his chest. “I awoke and followed you as soon as you left the camp site.”

The tubers were quickly sliced and added to the kettle. Jaden moved it to the side of the fire and gently pulled Lin closer. “You need to sleep, Husband.”

“All I do is sleep,” Lin grumped.

“You are also growing three babes. You need to rest so that they grow well.” Jaden kissed the top of Lin’s head. “Come lie down with me, and I will rub your belly.”

Lin looked up at Jaden through his lashes. “What if that isn’t what I want you to rub?” he asked with a little smile.

Jaden snorted softly at his husband’s antics and gathered him close. “I think we should retire to the wagon and see what I can do to help you find sleep.”

Cerron made his way home from the traveler’s inn. There were many disturbing stories coming out of Vostek these days and people were beginning to flee the land. He wondered what happened to the two men who had visited him a quarter-turn ago.

He had never been a devout follower of the Gods, but seeing those two had brought to mind a number of half-remembered stories from his youth. That the men had disappeared without a trace both disappointed and concerned him, especially with the information coming from Vostek.

His thoughts turned inward, Cerron took little notice of the fact that the lamps in his room were already lit. The door clicking firmly shut behind him brought his attention sharply into focus. The young noble from before was seated at his desk, smiling. His large El’oreen warrior was standing just off to the side from Cerron’s shoulder, near the door.

The noble stood, and Cerron’s eyes bugged out. The youngling was pregnant! He sank slowly into a chair near the desk as old children’s tales swam

in his head. There was a soft laugh, and then the noble was kneeling in front of him.

“You will need to pay attention, Trader. We have work for you to do.”

“The Opposition draws near. It is time to let go.”

Several forms were gathered beyond the sky of the nearby planet. They flickered and did not hold shape.

Ashriel’s form flared for a moment. “How can we let go?” she asked gravely. “It is our responsibility to care for these life forms, Pona.”

“Our care should have ended some time ago. When we began our journeys, our guidance was never meant to be more than the barest aid. It should not have become more,” the one called Pona stated firmly.

“With Valru’s actions, things have changed, Sister, and that is our fault.” Jor spoke softly, but he was adamant.

“It has always been our way that younglings have a few centuries to explore their space. Then when it is time, they are ready to be taught,” Pona argued.

“Then ‘tradition’ is wrong and needs to be changed. Tradition does not make our responsibility or guilt any less,” Dagen stated baldly. “The fault is ours. The dimensions and times we visit are not at our level of understanding, and yet we let loose our younglings to explore them. How can that not be wrong? When things then go badly, it is OUR fault.”

Pona was frustrated, this was an old argument. “We saved them. Their lives were returned. We should be finished with this.”

“We took them to a foreign place and made them a nest,” Ashriel said sadly. “It was hardly in repair to what was suffered. If this race dies, it will be genocide. How can we conscience that? Has there not been enough loss already?”

“There are so few of us left...” Pona lamented.

Dagen’s eyes flashed in anger. “And whose fault is that? Children should not be left to wander the galaxies alone. If you don’t want their early care, don’t create them!”

“Or bring them to one who IS willing to care for them. I, for one, would have accepted responsibility,” Jor added.

“Tradition will be upheld. Finish this if you must, I am through here.” Pona left with a dull flash.

Ashriel sighed. “There is so much work left to do.”

“No, Little Sister,” Dagen said. “We will help them as we can to stop Valru and then it is time to find the others. We cannot allow the younglings to continue unsupervised. It is not safe for them or the ones they may encounter.”

Ashriel looked to Jor, who nodded agreement with Dagen. “It is time, Sister. We leave when this is done.”

Dal Varent swiped another spider off of his collar and grimaced. This was the most vermin-infested place he had ever seen, and when he was finished with his task, he would take great pleasure in burning it to the ground.

He was very close to finished now. The energy he received from terrorizing and draining the servants was powerful and made his work on the barrier go much faster.

When Dal Varent had first discovered the Scrolls of Power, he had thought them a farce. They were simply moldering in the burial tombs of a high-ranking family. None of the former occupants had even been aware of their existence. One night, out of boredom, he had read the scrolls, and how pleased he had been with the information he'd found!

It seemed that many hundreds of turns in the past, there had been a loose association of men who had learned to manipulate the life forces around them. They had gained great power and discovered an energy source so vast that they were willing to sacrifice everything around them to obtain it. There were many details in the scrolls, too many for the Dal to ignore.

He was learning and gaining power from the information in the scrolls, and it left him starving for more. The energy source that was mentioned made him weak with greedy delight. He still searched for the one mentioned as the protector of the energy source, the so called Bearer, but it was no longer a matter of importance. His power was already so great that it was unlikely any protector could stop him now.

According to the scrolls, the barrier hiding the energy source would be at its weakest point in six moons' time. However, the Dal knew he was stronger than the idiots that came before. Already he had figured out a way to weaken the barrier containing his prize. Soon, very soon, it would be his.

The stories of the Bearer and his Guardian were spreading rapidly. Between Tonda's horsemen and Cerron's information network, increasing numbers of people were hearing the tale, daily. Many offers of aid were received, and clan members arrived from across the lands. Fortunately, most of Jaden's company had reached Kenta by this time, and Jaden used them to organize the others.

The alehouse quieted when Jaden stepped inside. Two men and a woman had just arrived from Vostek and Jaden wanted very much to hear what they had to say. Nava caught his eye and motioned towards a side room. He headed in that direction.

Lin was sitting on a small couch with Foss and Lela standing behind him as sentinels. He was listening intently as the woman spoke. She paused as Jaden entered the room. Taking a seat next to Lin, Jaden encouraged her to continue.

"As I was saying, Prince Lin, there are over five hundred soldiers at the castle and in the town. The Dal is said to have brought all his men from Arkon; there is no one in control there now. Check points have been set up so that no one can enter or leave by the main roads. One of my nephews is a server at the inn where the commanders are staying. There is some sort of infestation at the castle, and those who can, stay elsewhere. My nephew learned the patrol schedule, and so we three were able to get by."

"Have any of you heard news of my father?" Lin asked anxiously.

All three shook their heads. One of the men spoke. "There are only rumors from the castle of servants disappearing and blood sacrifice. There has been no mention of King Raidon or any of the high-born that were taken."

"Did your nephew mention if the patrols were keeping to the same schedule, or rotating it?" Jaden asked the woman.

"I don't know. He could not leave because one of the commanders has been paying quite a bit of attention to him, and would have noted his absence. He got us what information he could." The woman was visibly upset, and one of the men put his arm around her.

"It has been a stressful time. We should rest now."

Jaden looked to Foss, who walked to the door. A moment later, someone was there to escort the trio to a room.

Lin pulled his legs up, rubbing his belly.

Jaden pulled Lin close, stroking a hand across his shoulders. "We will rid your land of Dal Varent and find out what has happened with your father," he promised.

After a moment, Jaden gave Lin a hard hug. "So, Husband, shall we gather to discuss Dal Varent's downfall?"

The look Jaden received said much more than words.

A small cart wended its way through the forest. A blonde female was handling the reins and chatting with a pregnant woman in a cloak. The soldier's eyes tracked them for a bit before he called out to his partner.

"Hey, come look."

The second soldier glanced up. "Entertainment," he grinned.

They stood and watched the two women, who seemed oblivious to their surroundings. The first soldier stepped forward to block the cart. "Hello pretties." He grabbed the head collar on the horse, controlling its movement.

The second man stepped closer to block the cart. Two soft *thunks* were heard, and both men fell to the ground, feathered arrow-shafts protruding from their throats.

"Stupid men," Lala remarked with contempt. She turned to Lin. "No one is harmless," she said sternly.

Lin thought of some of the court functions he had attended, and nodded his agreement. Lela and Bron emerged from the trees to quickly search the men for maps or other valuable information, then pulled them to the side and buried them under leaf fall. A clansman appeared long enough to secure the horses, before disappearing back into the forest. The cart started on its way once again.

They made a cold camp that night; only soft voices and the sounds from the horses to be heard. Over three hundred had been gathered from Kenta and were moving slowly through the forests on the north side of the palace.

Lin had Lala stop twice that day so he could plant seeds and set order to the energy of the land. He worked diligently to both strengthen the webs and tie them closely to the animals and vegetation. Power flowed through him with ease of practice.

He checked and reinforced the bonds he had with his small group and added power to the energy he shared with Jaden. Lin was determined to give his husband every possible advantage in the upcoming fight.

He was rubbing the ache in his belly when Jaden appeared next to him. Jaden's eyes had slowly become more silver than brown; an interesting look with Jaden's dark, honey-colored hair. Lin assumed his husband's bond with Ashriel was flaring, and that his eyes would regain their usual dark brown when this matter was settled.

"You should rest, Husband." Jaden sat behind Lin and wrapped him in his arms.

Lin leaned back into Jaden's chest. "I don't think I will be able to rest until this is over."

"I will not allow the Dal to harm you or the children," Jaden stated firmly. "No matter what, I promise this to you."

Caught by Jaden's tone, Lin protested. "Do not promise your life for mine, Husband. It is not an acceptable trade."

"I swore it so in the temple when we were bonded, and neither my feelings nor the oath have changed." Jaden kissed the top of Lin's head. "You and the babes come first, no matter what."

Lin pulled Jaden's arms tighter around him. "Then we must make certain that you never have to make that decision."

The following day saw them past three more patrols, and then they were in sight of the castle town's walls. They wanted the edges of their force to be just visible to the sentries. The line of clansmen and mercenaries spread in a huge semi-circle that edged around the wall. Though the approaching forces were outnumbered, a group of this size should quickly catch the attention of the troop commander.

Jaden planned to challenge Dal Varent to single combat. While he knew the Dal would not be honorable in his dealings, the time gained would allow the small groups led by Nava, Foss, and Lala to enter the palace and wreak havoc from inside. They would cause as much disruption as they could in order to hinder Dal Varent's ability to aid Valru.

Lin had been working feverishly on his webs all morning. Jaden could feel his focus and determination. Wanting to see Lin before he had to leave, Jaden went to find his husband. One of the Iraci quickly approached and held out a small sheet of folded paper.

"What is this?" he asked.

“The Bearer instructed me to give you this at midday,” the man replied.

Jaden felt a knot in the pit of his stomach. A strong foreboding ran deeply through him as he slowly opened the note. Lin's writing jumped out at him.

Husband, before anything else, know that I love you.

When I first offered to bond with you in the forest temple, my only thought was of my people. I feared the damage and chaos that Dal Varent could bring and thought to thwart his ambitions. That is no longer my primary concern. As greatly as I care for my people and my land, this pales compared to the feelings I have developed for you.

I should arrive at the palace before mid-day; I left while you were in conference with Nava. There is no doubt the Dal will be distracted.

Come and retrieve me, my love. I promise to let you yell without interruption for as long as you need to.

Yours in this plane, the next, and always,

Lin

Jaden's desperate shout caused all birds within a hundred paces to take to the air. Jumping onto his horse, Jaden took off like an arrow, the pulse of anger and fear that followed him was felt by everyone nearby.

Tonda watched Jaden take off and ran to his horse. “Come,” he yelled. “The plan seems to have changed.”

The riders raced after Jaden, who was already far ahead.

Lin drove his little cart directly towards the guards manning the gate in the back wall. He stopped when instructed to do so. As one of the men approached, Lin pushed back the hood of his cloak.

“I am Lin, Prince of Vostek. The Dal has been searching for me.”

Lin was taken to the throne room to await Dal Varent. The guards ushered him inside and quickly left, shutting the doors. Bloody-looking shapes on the walls repulsed him and cast a feeling of unease over the room.

Walking to the dais, Lin stepped up and sat upon his throne. Calming his mind, Lin closed his eyes and searched for the best place to begin healing the energies around him.

He had been working for less than a mark when he was surprised by meowing. Aki was in the room with him. Lin scratched at the arm of the throne and encouraged her to jump up. "How did you end up here?" he questioned in amazement. "You need to hide, Aki. There is danger here."

Aki had no sooner jumped down and run behind the throne than the doors were flung open, banging sharply into the walls behind them. The Dal entered the room in what he must have considered a grand manner, followed by several guards.

Lin looked down in disapproval at the man who had caused so much chaos. He could see dull, red energy seething around the older man. Rapacious tendrils reached out, searching for something to grasp onto. Several moved towards Lin, but he had surrounded himself with a cocoon of energy that the tendrils could not penetrate.

Irritation flashed briefly in his eyes, and then Dal Varent leaned, in studied indifference, against one of the little tables in front of the dais.

"Such power; just as the scrolls promised." He smirked. "Unfortunately, I no longer need your strength, but your energy will be a lovely treat." His lips slowly twisted into a frown as he was ignored by the prince, and he straightened up in irritation.

Lin was clearly at ease and allowed a small, mocking smile to grace his lips. Casually, he asked, "Have you always been so easily led, Varent, so that you jump to do another's bidding?"

Dal Varent growled deeply and hissed, "I am a DAL and I will be an *emperor*, boy."

The little smile on Lin's face was genuine as he shook his head. "You have no understanding of what it means to rule or what true power is. You are a nursery room bully, Varent. Fear will only lead you to a certain point before it overwhelms those who fear you and causes the panic that will be your doom. Even were you to be successful today, your days are already numbered."

"You ANT," the Dal roared in anger. "Already, I have found a way to reach the energy cache behind the barrier that hides it. By the end of the day, you and the life you carry with you will be nothing more than a tasty snack! Then you will see what true power is."

Lin was prevented from responding by the wave of anger and fear that ran through the room. Dal Varent's head whipped around as if scenting the source of the energy. He walked to the window and his slow, evil grin caused Lin a moment of dread.

"I will deal with you in a bit. I have a toy to play with." The Dal laughed and strode from the room, his energy crackling around him.

Lin could hear the locks click into position as the doors were shut. He leaped from the dais and felt a jolting, sharp pain run low across his abdomen. He moved carefully to the window. In the distance, he was able to see a rider racing full out towards the town gates. Behind the rider, the entire army of mercenaries and clansmen rode, feverishly trying to catch up. It could only be Jaden.

Another hard pain caused Lin to double over, and he fell to the floor. "They come," he whispered as ripping agony seized him. "They are too early. Oh Jaden, I am so sorry, my love."

Ashriel was watching the barrier pulse on a distant plane when she was startled by an intense wave of fear and anger. She turned her attention to the world below as Jor and Dagen appeared beside her.

"And so it begins," Dagen intoned sadly.

"NO. It is too soon, they are not ready yet." Ashriel looked to their focus and felt deep agony from him. She was conflicted as to where her powers were needed most.

Jor's energy reached out to her. "Concentrate on your Chosen, Little Sister. We will do what we can to strengthen the Bearer and keep Valru from this plane."

Deep gratitude shining in her eyes, Ashriel concentrated on her Warrior.

Lin cried out as another wave of pain threatened to steal his breath. He scooted back so that he was supported by the wall and pulled at the curtains around him. When one fell, he quickly made a little nest on the floor, hoping he had the energy to place the babes safely before he lost consciousness from the energy drain.

Silver lightning arced across the sky and gave Lin hope. From where he was kneeling, Lin could see Jaden's energy reach for the power of the bolts, and it surrounded him as he approached the gates.

Energy flaring, Jaden urged his horse to leap. In one giant bound, it cleared the town wall as if it were a pasture fence!

Jaden rode straight into the center of the startled troops, his sword flying in patterns as he fought. It was one of the most incredible things Lin had ever seen, and he felt a moment of pride in his husband.

Hissing at another pain, Lin turned away from the window and moved his focus inward. He started forming tiny, delicate webs of power to protect the babes and hoped it would be enough to last until someone found them.

Dal Varent crossed the bailey at a brisk pace. He was close to freeing the pulsing energy from the barrier that surrounded it, and he was not about to be stopped now. He approached the melee that was occurring just inside the town gates and paused to draw power from the death all around him.

The gates crashed open. A stream of fighters on horseback passed through the walls, engaging the troops within. Snarling, the Dal took his sword and, using the energy at his disposal, flung it with all his might at the blond warrior at the head of the fray. As the sword struck, the barrier pulsed a final time and ripped wide. A tremendous burst of power shot out to envelop everything, and Dal Varent collapsed, drained.

Lin weakly wrapped the third babe in its tiny web and laid him with his siblings. He barely had the strength left to cover the babes with a bit of curtain before he slumped back to the floor. The mark on his stomach was sealed once again, but blood was everywhere. Aki head-butted Lin and licked his face.

Trying desperately to stay awake, Lin felt Jaden take a devastating blow. He had time to cry out before the deep energy drain claimed him, and he lost consciousness.

...There was darkness and then light...

Lin fought his way to awareness. He searched for Jaden but could not feel the connection to his husband. Everything around him was silent, and he

crawled to the window. Deep, red power covered everything in sight. People and animals were lying jumbled on the ground.

Valru's power was overwhelming everyone else but must have revived him. Lin reached again for Jaden and could not find him. His heart broke, and in tears of anger, Lin PULLED.

In high orbit around the world named Chalybeous for its steel-blue seas, Science Officer Derek Jin was happily manning his station. The starship Portman was investigating unusual power fluctuations from this quadrant, and they had found a small, inter-dimensional rift.

The moderately-sized planet nearby was found to be supporting a healthy and diverse population of life forms. Classified as a primitive world, the human-like race of beings on the planet was still enjoying their version of the medieval age.

The First Officer had ordered an orbit that could not be observed from the planet. They had been here for almost two weeks now, and Jin had enough information for a very interesting paper. He was about ready to close down his station when a sudden, sharp spike in energy readings sent him lurching for the communication switch. "All power to the shields, NOW!"

The Captain turned towards the Navigation Officer as the First Officer ensured that the ship's shields were at maximum power. "Put the science station on the main viewer. I want to see what is happening," he snapped.

The small, pulsing rift they had been investigating was split wide. A heavy beam of red energy emerged from the rift, hitting the planet's center mass. It quickly covered everything on the ground and seethed up through the atmosphere. The crew watched in horror as the life-sign readings from the planet plummeted.

The science station computer chirped, and everyone looked towards the Science Officer until the navigator gasped, "Captain!"

All eyes glued to the main viewer. What appeared to be a thick, heavy web was forming around the entire planet and seemed to be absorbing the energy from the rift. At first, the energies seemed to war, then the web slowly turned brilliant blue in color. Great, sparking arcs raced around the web as the beam from the rift trailed off. The web glowed brightly for a moment and then pulsed once, hard.

The energy shot cleanly through the rift to the other side, and now a beam from the web seemed to be sealing the rift closed. Soon, there were no traces that the rift had ever existed. The blue web slowly leached back to the planet, and all the life-sign readings returned to normal.

There was a moment of stunned silence on the bridge before the Captain turned to his Navigation Officer. "Back us away, slowly. I want to be completely out of this quadrant before we engage warp engines. Communications Officer, prepare a buoy and take note. By the power vested in me according to section three of the Charter of the Allied Federation of Sentient Planets, I hereby declare Chalybeous to be an interdicted planet under penalty of imprisonment on the moon of Sauter 9. Effective immediately!"

Fingers shaking, coordinates were carefully plotted and engaged.

Lin stared in confusion at the two silvery beings, a man and a woman, who faded in and out of the darkness. "Where are we? Have I passed to the next plane? The babes—do they live? Was Valru defeated? What happened?"

The woman put out her hand. "*Peace, little brother. Your world is safe, and all are well thanks to your actions.*"

"*Valru has been sent back to his plane and is greatly weakened. We travel to bring him under our care as soon as we take our leave of you,*" the man added.

"You two are Ashriel and Jor?" Lin asked. "And you're leaving us?"

They nodded at him, and Ashriel smiled. "*You saved your people today, little brother, and in doing so, changed the shape of your future forever. You are no longer in need of our aid.*"

"I am confused. Changed the future how, and why are you calling me 'little brother'?"

Jor's gaze was gentle, and he answered for Ashriel. "*She calls you little brother because you have passed beyond your mortal bounds. You have handled enormous energies, and they have changed you and many on your world.*"

"How do you mean? Please. What is happening? I really don't remember much except sorrow, and determination that Valru would not hurt my babes." Lin looked from one God to the other.

Ashriel sent a wave of peace to Lin and explained. *“Dal Varent had weakened the barrier to the point where Valru would have been able to cross over. Valru sent a burst of energy through the barrier that was designed to overwhelm your planet. Instead, you took those energies and transformed them.”*

“The webs you created absorbed a great deal of power.” Jor continued the story. *“It was exactly as you planned, but there was an excess the webs could not absorb. When the power threatened those close to you, you created a way to save them. Much as you encouraged your seedlings to change and grow, many of your people have been changed as well. You have given those close to you the ability to change forms at will. It utilizes energy from the webs and helps to stabilize the matrix you have created. Much as you have learned, intent becomes fact. The ability is still evolving.”*

Lin was stunned. “That sounds like a terrible thing,” he breathed. “You cannot just leave us at a time like this.”

“A final gift then, little brother, before we leave. Choose a form, and I will stabilize the change for you.” Ashriel waited for Lin’s response.

Aki popped to mind, and Lin chose. “Cats will be the second form.”

Ashriel was quiet for a time, eyes closed in concentration. *“It is done, and, as we are leaving not to return, I have given you a further gift. Your people will be protected for a long time to come. There will be two forms that can be attained; both will be powerful and long-lived. They are a slight conceit to me, but do you no harm.*

“The first will be great, blond cats with silver eyes. They will have the ability to meet any threat, no matter where it originates. These warriors will be the Guardians, protectors of your people and absolutely just. There will be no corrupting them.”

Lin’s eyes filled with tears at the similarity to Jaden, and he blinked rapidly.

“The second form of cat will be slightly smaller with silver and black fur. They will have bright, blue eyes,” Ashriel briefly caressed Lin’s hair, *“reflecting their ability to manipulate energy, as you do. I have limited these changes to the three hundred and forty that rode with you to this battle.”*

Jor moved forward and placed a gentle hand on Lin’s shoulder. *“Now we leave, little brother. As a final gift from me, you will always be able to recognize the ones so blessed. Even in their mortal forms they will breed to*

type, either warrior or mage. All Guardians will be large, blond-haired and silver-eyed. The Silvers will be black of hair, with your blue eyes. There will be no halfings; the lines will always breed true.

“Watch over your people, Lin. Work together and be well.” With that, the two beings faded from view.

Lin heard a babe crying in the distance. He closed his eyes and imagined himself in the throne room next to his babes.

Lin heard crying, then a soft voice singing. Slowly, he opened his eyes and tried to blink the room into focus.

Lala popped into his vision and grinned. “Heyla, you’re awake. Good, your son was anxious to meet you.” She was holding a small, silver-eyed babe in her arms.

“You’re awake.” Bron walked up, holding another silver-eyed babe. He held her so that Lin could see. “Your daughter has been keeping us busy. You were asleep for over twelve marks.”

Nava entered the room with a tray. He smiled broadly to see Lin awake and set the tray aside. “Here, brother, let me help you sit up so you can drink. Don’t try to move yourself yet. You are probably still weak.”

Carefully, Nava shifted Lin and placed some pillows behind his back. Placing a cup at Lin’s mouth, he watched Lin take a few sips then set the cup back down and began to talk.

“When everyone first came to, there was much confusion. Suddenly, Aki was in front of us, making a LOT of noise. Lala, Kai, and I followed her to the throne room and found you and the babes. There was blood everywhere, but you were still breathing, so we brought you here and cleaned you up. I was surprised at the babe’s health since they were born too early, but Kai said he could see tiny webs of energy around each one. We assumed you found a way to protect them. Can you tell us anything more?”

Lin nodded and glanced around. “Where is the third babe?” he asked in concern.

“Right here, Husband.” Jaden walked into the room with an incredibly small, black-haired babe cradled gently in his arms. Lin’s heart felt like it stopped and then raced back to life. He stared at Jaden in wonder. “You are

here. I felt the blow you took. I thought you had died and gone to the next plane.”

Jaden smiled and sat on the bed next to Lin. “One of Ashriel’s blessings is significantly increased healing. I needed several marks to recover before I could even leave my bed, but I am fine. By evening tomorrow, I will be completely healed.”

Tears pooled and fell from Lin’s eyes, and Jaden kissed them from his lips. Lin felt like his heart was overflowing with joy. He gathered his tiniest babe from Jaden’s arms and smiled.

“We have a lot of work ahead of us, Husband.”

“So I assumed. Would you care to explain the change to the land and all the felines roaming the courtyard?”

Lin could see the increase in the forest from his position on the bed. He felt a deep gratitude that his idea concerning the excess energy had worked. Jaden helped Lin up, and they walked to the window. Lin grinned widely at the sight. There were two hundred or so large, blond cats and half as many smaller, silver and black ones roaming the courtyards.

All were being loudly lectured to by Aki from her perch, high on a fence post.

Fin

Author Bio

With a newly turned teenage son (who provides great writing music) and an adult daughter who has moved back home until she leaves for the military, Sassy suffers from more 'squirrel on crack' than usual. Just ask the patient Goodreads team.

Plot bunnies run amok in the garden, chased by the not-quite-domestic cat her daughter adopted from a local shelter, and who has now adopted Sassy as 'his human'.

Despite all attempts to convince him otherwise, Damien, the cat, now occupies her former pillow. He watches intently as she plays games on her phone until she falls asleep at night. At which time, she becomes the pillow.

C'est la vie.

Contact & Media Info

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KISS OF TRUTH

By Ash Jay

Photo Description

A clean-shaven young man, not too alert since last night's fun went on until dawn. Not much of a fan of having his picture taken, and even less so when it's done before noon. However, he is awake enough to have applied his black eyeliner perfectly and styled his dark, sexy bangs so they sit just right on his forehead. Having a slight hangover is never an excuse not to look your best.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The picture I have chosen represents a music singer who is struggling to find himself in a fast-paced society. He is secretly in love with a fellow band member, but hides it oh so well. When his band member is kidnapped, he begins to realize his feelings and does everything he can to find the band member. The band member he loves, also loves him but has witnessed too many failed couples and can be afraid to commit. The original band member can suffer from depression. I would like kink to be included, just don't overdo the d & s. I'd prefer no shifters and I hope your imagination runs wild. Enjoy.

P.S. It has to have a HEA

Sincerely,

Angie

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: kidnapping, musicians/rock stars, nightclub, kink, bondage, friends to lovers, secret love

Word Count: 9,209

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KISS OF TRUTH

By Ash Jay

Chapter 1

Blackie peered into my face, leaning in far too close. I fought back the urge to kiss him.

“Where ya been?” I asked.

“How come you’re looking so good?” He stroked his long fingers through my black hair fondly. “Like you didn’t get as smashed as the rest of us last night.”

He was the one who looked good in his tight, white T-shirt that made his lightly tanned, muscular arms pop.

Usually I hated white but it suited him. But then, everything suited Blackie.

“I didn’t,” I said, trying not to flinch away from his touch. “I got to the bar about four hours after you did, remember?”

“Don’t be angry, Jaiden. They stopped the train between stations for, like, ever,” Blackie said, his mouth up against my ear.

“I’m not angry.” Clapping him on the back, I tried my best not to get distracted by his sparkling green eyes. “We just need to get going.”

Picking up his guitar, Blackie gave me the big grin he knew I couldn’t resist. “So let’s get going.”

Exhaling, I took my place at the microphone. Blackie didn’t know what kind of an effect he had on me when he was overly friendly. He was like that with everybody, not just me, but I was the one with a crush on him.

He didn’t know about it; I was careful about that. And I could manage it no problem, just as long as he didn’t touch me or get too close.

Fin counted us in to our first song and we tore it up. I kept a critical ear open for how everyone was playing while I sang, wanting to make sure we were the tightest unit possible. In just a few weeks, we were heading out on a midsize club tour all around the country. We’d scored a prime opening slot for another band who was getting very popular, and the tour could be a big break for us too. Everything needed to be perfect.

All I’ve ever wanted to do was play music. I was lucky that my best friend felt the same way. Blackie and I had played in bands together since high school,

but Lead Wire was the first one where it all finally came together. All of us clicked so well I knew we had a real shot at making it big. So far, it seemed I was right.

We'd just got the opening slot, pretty last minute, and there wasn't much time to get ready. We were rehearsing six nights a week as it was. I'd have been happy if we could play eight hours a day, every day, but we all still needed our day jobs to fund our trip.

And our rhythm section would have mutinied if I drove them any harder, I think. Fin and Roman had also done time in several bands together, and it showed in how well they played off each other. I couldn't risk losing them, and if one went, the other would follow.

We ran through our entire set several times before Fin stopped us.

"That's it. I'm out," he said, holding up a broken drumstick. "That was my last one."

"You could go get more," I pointed out.

"That's enough," Roman protested before Fin could retort. "We've been here for hours. We're good for tonight."

I was about to object when Blackie caught my eye. He was usually the one to rein me in when I got a little obsessive. I had learned a long time ago that when all three of them were together on something, I'd do well to back down.

But I didn't have to like it.

"All in for the Met?" Roman asked, his bass already packed up. Only a few blocks from our warehouse space, but across the invisible line into an even worse area was The Met, a bar that gave dive bars a bad name. It was our usual hangout.

"Can't," Blackie said. "I gotta go."

"What are you up to?" I wanted to know.

"Got a thing," he said, already at the door. "See you tomorrow night, guys."

It wasn't like Blackie to blow off our usual post-rehearsal beers. He was out of there so quickly he left his hoodie behind. I shrugged it on, leaving my own behind. His was warmer, nicer, and it smelled like him. *Bonus*.

As usual Roman and Fin drank like there was an imminent beer shortage. Usually I would have been right there with them, but I was too preoccupied with our upcoming tour, as well as wishing Blackie was there to talk about it.

It struck me then that I might be just a bit too dependent on him. I'd become pretty good at holding my feelings for him in check since we graduated high school, but these days I'd been backsliding, thinking about him all the time, talking to him every day, hanging out with him maybe too often.

I'd have to check myself. He was probably on my mind more lately because we'd been spending so much time together rehearsing, but that wasn't good. In a few weeks, we were going out on tour and I'd be with him twenty-four seven. Recipe for disaster, lusting after him while we're holed up together in the close quarters of a van for most of our days and nights.

The best cure might be finding a nice boy to take my mind off my best friend for a few hours.

The pub was closing down, and after they kicked us out, we walked a couple of blocks together before it was time for us to go our separate ways. Fin and Roman were roommates, and they lived further south than me. When I went to give Fin a parting slap on the back, something fell to the ground as I pulled my hands out of the hoodie's pockets.

The others took off and I picked up a piece of paper, about to shove it back in its place when an image caught my eye. A topless man in very tight pants was pictured in grainy black and white, blindfolded and tied to what looked like a cross. Intrigued, I gave it a closer look. The text was minimal.

Veer. Fetish Fridays. Grand opening February 28.

That was last week. I recognized the address. Last time I was there, it had been a punk club. Looks like they were keeping the alt vibe going. And alt clubs were always decent places to find a hot boy who was up for some fun.

There was only about an hour until closing. Perfect. I couldn't give a rat's ass about what kind of fetishes they had going on there because closing time in any bar meant having my choice of drunk, horny guys with little effort invested on my part. I picked up my pace. In five minutes, I was standing just inside the front door.

"Twenty bucks," the guy told me.

"You can't charge me full price when you're closing soon," I said. I had to talk him down as I only had twenty on me.

"It goes down to ten in half an hour."

No way was I going to stand around in the cold for half an hour. "How about fifteen?"

He stared at me, unflinching. Not wanting to waste my time, I called up my best cute-boy grin, sliding my eyes slowly over his body as if I wanted to do him right then and there. In truth, you couldn't have paid me enough.

“Okay.”

I handed over most of my cash and went straight for the bar, ordering the cheapest beer they had. Walking around, I drank it without interest while I cruised the thinning crowd. There weren't a lot of hotties left. Maybe I was too late.

Not ready to give up yet, I decided I had to check out all my options. Heading toward the back of the room, I found the dimly lit staircase leading down to where the real action was no doubt taking place.

The short hallway at the bottom was so dark I narrowly avoided walking into a black-painted wall that jutted out as if it was designed to trip a person up. Skirting around it, I found myself in a different world.

Blinking against the unexpected brightness, I tried to get my bearings. Quieter than upstairs, with only the faint echo of the thumping music making itself known every few beats, the room was small and intimate. A tiny bar at one end was the only reminder of where I was.

This is where the crowd had been hiding, and everyone was focused on what was going on in the center. Working my way around, I found a place to stand where there was a decent view of what was happening.

Three people were all lying face down on wooden cross-like contraptions, bodies as close to naked as they could legally be. Whips of varying sizes cracked as they met the willing flesh in front of them.

The guy closest to me had two men working him over. Given the visible red welts on his exposed ass, he had been there for some time already. The two circled his prone form, switching positions, stopping to raise their hands when they found a piece of flesh they wanted to explore.

“Quiet,” one of them growled when their victim groaned.

He seemed to be enjoying himself, but his tormentors were moving so slowly, pausing for so long, my eyes wandered away. Surely there should more action than that. A struggle would be fun to see.

Across the room there was a woman, waiting expectantly for her two female tormentors just as this guy was. Nothing exciting going on with her either.

About ready to give up, I moved a few feet over to see if the third person was putting on more of a show.

Unlike the other two, he only had one person concentrating on him. A big bear of a guy, shirtless and wearing a mask to shield his features, he wielded a smaller whip than the others. It looked fairly tame to me, but from the writhing of the guy on the bench, it seemed to be causing some distress.

I was shifting around, trying for a better vantage point, when I spotted something unexpected. Something familiar. The prone guy looked familiar too. Tall, long chestnut hair, wearing only tight black briefs made of some filmy kind of material that was see-through enough that I wished he was lying on his back.

But there was something else. The tiniest tattoo sat on his right side, just barely visible above the top band of his underwear. I stared at it, trying to make sure I was seeing what I thought I was.

Yes. It was. A treble clef, inked subtly in a thin white line so it looked like a scar instead of a tattoo. Easy to overlook when you didn't know it was there.

My eyes about popped out of my head. The man on the cross was Blackie. Swallowing hard, I moved as close as I could. It was him all right. I knew his body anywhere, even though this was the last place I would have expected to see it, bound up, nearly naked, and being whipped by someone I figured was a total stranger.

Blackie squirmed every time the whip met his flesh. Unlike the other ones, his torturer didn't stop him from letting out soft moans.

My breath caught in my throat. The sight and sounds were so erotic I was instantly hot and hard, my pants now uncomfortable and confining, my shirt barely long enough to conceal my erection. It probably wasn't the place anyone would have minded, but still.

Entranced, I started giving silent commands to the guy with the whip. Harder. Slower. Don't stop.

Time slowed way down while I stood rooted to the spot. Unaware of anyone else in the room, I didn't know if a minute or an hour had passed when the guy finally set his whip aside.

Watching him begin to free Blackie snapped me back to reality. I had to get out of there before he saw me. Hastily, I forced my way through the crowd that

had grown considerably around me. Apparently I wasn't the only one captivated by my friend's prone, glistening body.

Reaching the staircase, I turned back, unable to resist one more look. I only had a few seconds. It was enough. The image of him was burned into my memory. Blackie made a move to get up and I nearly tripped on the stairs in my rush to flee.

Back at home, I headed right for my bed. Far too wired to fall asleep, I replayed the events I witnessed at the club. It was such an unexpected scene to have stumbled on, I wanted to keep it as real and fresh in my mind as I could. But of course I changed up the memory into a fantasy of my own.

Instead of being in a nightclub full of people, Blackie and I were alone in my bedroom. He was tied down just the same, and I was the one wielding the whip. But we were past that stage. Blackie was wildly turned-on after my expert beating, as was I, and it was time to get serious.

After I freed him, he sat down on my bed, looking up at me, his eyes pleading for release.

"Please." It was the only word he managed to say, and after a moment I gave him a very slight nod.

Slowly he worked my boxers down, letting them fall to the floor. Grasping my raging erection, he stroked it reverently.

That wasn't what I wanted, but before I could move, his tongue was running up and down the entire length of my shaft.

"I've been dreaming about this for so long," he said, almost making me lose it right then.

Before I could even think of what to say, his mouth met my cock again, enveloping its throbbing length.

This time I was the one who groaned.

"Please."

My hand came to rest on the back of his head. He sucked me, swallowing as much of my stiff cock as he could manage, hands on my thighs to keep himself steady.

I couldn't help but thrust a little. When his hand reached my balls, rolling them, they tightened up instantly.

Knowing I was so close, he sucked me faster, more intently, making my cock pulse against his tongue.

My orgasm exploded almost violently from my body as I shot hard, over and over, filling Blackie's mouth. It was so intense my legs nearly gave way, and I collapsed down onto the bed beside him.

"Fuck," I breathed, incapable of anything more profound.

When I could move again, I wasted no time pulling Blackie down with me. Jerking his straining underwear out of my way, I engulfed his erection in my mouth. Blackie squirmed and groaned, thrusting his hips hard.

In seconds, his cock lengthened, thickened, and he exploded.

Imagining Blackie in my bed like that was more than enough for me in reality too.

Furiously stroking my throbbing shaft, I spilled quite a load all over myself, still picturing Blackie right there beside me.

Chapter 2

The next morning I delayed getting out of bed, thinking again about what I'd seen.

According to the flyer, fetish nights were once a week, Friday nights only. Might Blackie go there again? I didn't want to ask him about it. Maybe it was a one-time thing he just wanted to try out.

My thoughts kept going back to him all day and when I got to our practice space, it was harder than usual to act normal when he arrived. I sang like I had to reach the back rows of a stadium, trying to distract myself from Blackie, who had decided to stand far too close to me.

"Everything okay?" he finally asked me when we took a break.

"Sure, why?"

"You haven't said two words to me all night."

Heat crept into my cheeks.

"Oh, you know. Long day. Work sucked." *I can't stop picturing you nearly naked and getting your ass whipped in front of strangers*, I added silently.

He tossed me a beer. "You gotta chillax, Jai."

"Right." *That'll happen.*

Blackie and I hung out nearly every night that week. I was used to my crush on him, I'd pushed it well into the back of my head so we could be proper friends.

But this was a new level of torture. Up until now I'd kept my pervy thoughts about Blackie just for masturbation. I never thought about him that way when we were together in normal life. It had taken me a long time to be able to pull that off, and now it was blown all to hell.

When next Friday night came around, and I was just getting home from work, Blackie sent me a text. Writing back, I couldn't help but ask him what he was doing that night.

Hot date

Anyone I know?

No. See you Sat.

Blackie never had hot dates, only hookups now and then. My heart beating a little faster, I weighed my options. Head out to The Met and hang out with the usual crowd, or take the chance of finding Blackie strapped down once again at Veer.

It was a no-brainer.

But the price of stalking can be high. There was a different guy working the door, one who wouldn't fall for my half-assed attempts at flirting. I handed over the outrageous cover and stood still while the bouncer looked me over, making sure I met the "strict fetish dress code."

He jerked his head to the side, indicating that I passed his standards, but just barely. There was another guy, really tall, dressed all in black, standing behind the bouncer. He actually wore sunglasses. *Inside the nightclub*. He looked like he worked there, and for a moment I was worried he would stop me from coming in.

Solo guys aren't exactly the clubgoers they want. But in spite of the look he gave me, like I was the worst person on earth, he didn't block my way.

Stopping at the bar on the main floor, I ordered the cheapest highball there was so as to blend in and not look like I was just there as a perv.

I watched the dance floor, enjoying the view but wishing I had earplugs. It was some of the worst music I'd ever heard. I hated EDM more than anything else in the world. At least the people were better-looking as it was earlier on in the evening.

My drink finished and my paranoia about being kicked out abated, I headed for the staircase in back.

Easing my way through the crowd, I headed for the darkest corner. From my vantage point, I could see the center clearly.

Just like last week, there were three people strapped down. And there he was. Blackie and his tiny tattoo, right in between the other two. I hadn't known he had such a collection of sexy underwear. That was probably a good thing.

The scene played out much like last week. It seemed to be the same guy with Blackie too, although I hadn't exactly paid him any attention before.

My eyes were glued to them like they were the only two people in the room. I didn't look away once, not until it became clear their session was ending. Once again, I fled before he could spot me.

I was halfway home before an unwanted thought occurred to me, and when it did I actually felt a pain in my chest. Blackie had texted that he had a hot date. Could he be involved with that guy in the club?

I swung between jealousy and despair. I had never once let my feelings for Blackie slip. Nothing had ever happened between us. But still, in my head at least, he was all mine.

Back when we were still in school, I decided I would go for it with him. We were at his place, downstairs in his bedroom.

His parents were out and we were enjoying some weed along with our cheap beer. It was good stuff and I was buzzing, way more than was usual for me.

Blackie looked so sexy, lying back on the floor, his hair strewn about. I had to tell him how I felt. But he spoke first.

“My parents are getting divorced.”

“What?” I thought I hadn't heard him right, couldn't have heard him right.

“They told me last night.”

I didn't even know what to say. My head was fogged up, and I couldn't seem to switch gears from declaring my undying love to the bomb he had just dropped.

“Um... are you okay?” I finally managed, thinking about how stupid I must sound. But what else do you say to something like that?

“Yeah,” he said, taking the joint from me and drawing in a long pull. But something was off. He was a laid-back guy, sure, but he was acting like what he was saying wasn't even news at all.

“You don't seem like you're surprised. Did you see it coming?”

He shrugged, passing the smoke back to me, but I shook my head and he kept hold of it.

“I'm not surprised. Everyone I know has divorced parents. Every couple always breaks up.”

“That’s not true!” I said, shocked even through my stoned haze at the way he was acting. I’d never once heard a cynical word leave his mouth. He was kind of freaking me out.

“Oh yeah? Name anyone you know who’s stuck together. Anyone.”

I didn’t even have to think about it. “Mindy and Geo.” We had all known each other since first grade. They had been going out for years.

Blackie shook his head. “They broke it off last week. They just haven’t told anyone yet.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

It was more shocking somehow than the news of Blackie’s parents. It seemed more real, although that would change when Blackie’s father eventually moved out.

“It doesn’t mean it can’t happen,” I said, still thinking I wanted to jump him right then and there.

“It always happens. No point to coupling up when it’ll just end. Best to have fun and don’t ever get involved.”

I couldn’t even argue with him. He had a point, and even though it didn’t feel right, I kept my feelings for him to myself.

Every Friday after that, I went to the club and found Blackie there. When he eventually asked the band if we could take Friday nights off instead of Sundays, no-one objected. Least of all me.

I had become a regular, spending week after week downstairs at Veer, and so had quite a number of other people. I kept going back even though every time was exactly the same.

Except for tonight. It was especially crowded and even though I had actually arrived early for once, there was no room to stand in my usual spot. The dumbasses started late, too. I toyed with the idea of leaving, but I didn’t want to lose twenty bucks for nothing.

Finally, all the players came out. I turned away as usual so Blackie wouldn’t spot me, leaving enough time for them to get strapped down.

Three crosses, all full. So many people had worked their way in front of me, I could barely see what was going on.

Thoroughly pissed off, I was knocking back the rest of my drink when something hit me square in the back.

What the fuck? I turned around, only to get shoved out of the way by someone. Cayle, the club's owner.

Figured it was him. He was the guy I had seen my second time there, wearing sunglasses and standing behind the bouncer like he was trying to intimidate people. Like an ass, he still wore those bloody shades.

I couldn't stand him and now here he was, bashing me with a door I didn't know existed, just to make my night perfect. He shoved it closed, and it all but disappeared in the blackness. Even squinting, I could only make it out because I knew it was there.

Chapter 3

“Where have you been?” I walked into our warehouse to be greeted by an annoyed Fin.

“They wouldn’t let me leave work on time. What’s the big deal? You could have started without me.”

“The big deal is that bloody Blackie didn’t show. Doesn’t do much good without the singer or the guitarist, huh? Do you know where he is?”

“No.” Blackie had a habit of being late to most things, but never this late. Twenty minutes later, he still hadn’t put in an appearance.

“This is crap,” Roman said. “What’s he thinking? Did he call you?”

“No, but something must have happened. He’d never blow us off like this without a word.”

“Well, either let’s play anyway or I’m leaving.”

“Fine. We can still run through the set anyway.”

I was still hoping Blackie would show. When I hadn’t heard from him by the time we were on our way to the Met, I was starting to worry. This wasn’t like him at all.

Three nights later, Fin and Roman came by my place. Blackie had missed our last few rehearsals and no one had heard a word from him. Even Fin and Roman were getting concerned.

“He’s going to fuck up our tour. We leave in less than two weeks and there’s still tons of stuff to work out before then,” Roman said, looking at me like I might have been hiding Blackie away from him on purpose.

“Has he done this before?” Fin wanted to know. “You know, pulled a runner when the pressure got too high?”

“No. Never. He’s not like that. I’m telling you, something’s wrong. No one’s seen him for days,” I told them.

“What about his roommates?” Fin wanted to know.

“They’ve been gone on tour for a couple weeks now, he’s been living alone.” I sat down beside Fin on the floor. “I went to the cops today to report him as missing.”

“What? For real? You don’t think he’s just buggered off for a while somewhere?”

I shook my head. “No way. He’d have called me long before now.”

“So what’d they say?”

“They had me make a report with a detective. He said he’d look into it.”

At least the man had taken me seriously. Detective Branson seemed decent enough, but I wasn’t convinced about what he was actually going to do.

“You really think he’s gone missing?”

“All I know is, something’s wrong.”

It occurred to me long after Fin and Roman had left that maybe I should have mentioned Blackie’s Friday night habits to the detective. But then, that didn’t matter, did it? Who would stalk him there?

Other than me, of course. But if I was doing it, could someone else be? But why?

My thoughts circled again and again until eventually I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 4

It was Friday night and Blackie had been missing for days. As a last-ditch effort, I went out to the Met to ask once again if anyone had seen him lately. No luck.

I left after I'd spoken to everyone. Spending time there without Blackie around seemed wrong, and I was in no mood to just hang out anyway. All I could do lately was worry about him.

There was only one other place I could go on a Friday night. In a burst of optimism, I convinced myself he might just be there, enjoying himself as usual. I could confront him and he would tell me it was all a mistake.

Buoyed by my fantasy that everything would be fine, I nearly ran the distance to Veer.

The bouncer's usual scrutiny of how I was dressed was treading on my last nerve. I was about to tell him to fuck off when I saw Cayle come up right behind him. I kept my mouth shut. No matter what, I needed to get inside.

The bloody bouncer was taking his sweet time tonight so I ground my teeth and looked at Cayle, silently directing my hate vibes toward him. He was as good an outlet as any. He took off his suit jacket—*so* appropriate for a fetish night, I was dying to say to him.

And then I saw it. Blinking hard, I was convinced I was imagining it. But there it was.

Dumbass Cayle always wore a T-shirt in the club. I'd seen his overdeveloped arms more times than I cared to count. They were bare, always.

Until now.

He had gotten a tattoo on his upper arm. It was his only one, so it stood out. What riveted my gaze was the design of it.

A treble clef. Not uncommon, but it was exactly the same as Blackie's scar tattoo. The one you would only see if he was practically naked.

I mean, it was identical. I had it memorized, just because I'd seen it so often. Blackie had drawn it himself, working on it for weeks and weeks when we were in school, showing me the new version every time he changed so much as even the thickness of the line. He had woven our common initial

through it in such a stylized way that only he and I knew it was there. It wasn't the kind of thing anyone else would have by accident. Ever.

And there it was, clear as anything. Tattooed in black on fucking Cayle.

Cayle went off even before the damn bouncer was done with me. As soon as he gave me the nod, I tore into the club, determined to find Cayle. Because I very much doubted Blackie would have given someone like him a close enough look at his tattoo to let him replicate it that exactly.

Which could mean he had a look at it against Blackie's will.

But I couldn't find him anywhere. I went downstairs to wait like I'd planned and to think about what to do about Cayle.

The crowd buzzed around me and I got more disheartened the longer I waited. Finally, everyone came out and took their places according to their roles. I didn't have to look, but I did anyway to prove it to myself. No Blackie.

I was about to leave when that damn invisible door about bumped me again. It wasn't Cayle who came out, it was some other guy. As he walked off, an idea started to form in my head.

If Cayle had something to do with Blackie disappearing, which I was now certain he did, I needed something to take to the cops. As I was here, I'd best do some looking around.

I waited impatiently until midnight, not moving an inch from where I stood. The door swung open and Cayle came out. I could have set a clock by him. This time I was ready. I caught the door at the last second and flew inside, squeezing myself as small as I could so the change in the light wouldn't be noticed.

Letting it fall closed naturally behind me, I had to stop and let my eyes adjust again. It was fucking dark in there, but there were LEDs set into the floor like in a movie theater or an airplane. Fucking bizarre.

Just like in the fetish room, all the walls were painted black.

I'd gotten in, but now I didn't know what to do. It was eerily quiet. I couldn't hear the music at all. Bloody great soundproofing for a hallway.

At one end was a door that I was fairly certain led outside. Down to my right, the rest of the hallway was blocked off with stacks of chairs. I don't know what I had expected to find, but so far it was a big letdown.

I got to the exit door, about to give up and get the hell out of there when I spotted another, smaller hallway. Fucking place was so dark I hadn't even noticed it.

I could make out two doors down there. The first one was wide open to a tiny room, oddly lit up. Not quite able to tell if anyone was inside, I went over as quietly as I could.

The light was coming from a bank of screens. Each one had a different feed from a camera monitoring the club. Standard security setup, but no one was actually watching them.

There were three in the fetish room, one focused narrowly on each cross. Huh. That wasn't security, it was perverting.

A shiver ran up my spine as I turned away, the creepiness of it all suddenly sinking in. Fear jolted my heart into high gear. What was I doing? If Cayle was in fact a bad guy, I shouldn't be sneaking around in the private areas of his club.

Then something stopped me in my tracks. My blood ran cold when I realized just what had caught my eye.

On first glance, it looked like a photo. But I was wrong.

It was another monitor. It was on the side, removed from the others, mounted into the wall and almost hidden from view by the open door. Someone could easily watch it and keep an eye on the door at the same time.

And very visible on this monitor was a person.

The figure had a hood covering their head and they were tied to a chair in an otherwise empty room. I had almost convinced myself it wasn't real when the figure moved.

I sucked in my breath. What the fuck was I actually looking at? It could be a movie. That's it. A movie.

Staring hard, I tried to will something to happen. But nothing did. It was the same image. It was real.

My hands shaking from fear, I bolted out the exit door without even thinking of whether it was rigged or not. Fortunately, I heard nothing. Even if I'd tripped a silent alarm that was ringing elsewhere, at least I was free. I popped out into the middle of an alley and ran for the street, not even knowing which way I was going.

I didn't stop shaking the entire subway ride home. What the fuck did I see?
What should I do?

Chapter 5

All day Saturday, I stressed about what I had seen and what I could do about it. The only thing I was sure of was that I had to go back and see if I could find something, anything that would be enough to tell the cops about. All I had to go on so far was a grainy image that might well turn out to be a film clip and a feeling that something was off there. Determined to resolve things one way or the other, I set out just after dark.

It was a regular club night so the crowd was a lot different. I stuck out in my rocker clothes. Fortunately, they let me in anyway. The fetish room was transformed into just another dance floor.

I hung around the door and just like before, Cayle came out at midnight. I slipped in again, trying not to think about what could happen to me if I got caught.

Terrified, I went down the hallway and around the corner. The door was open. I crept in, hoping I'd find something different, something that had a good explanation behind it.

There it was. The same fucking scene as before.

My heart about to pound through my chest, I watched.

And tonight there was a difference.

The figure was still there, still covered and bound, same as last night. There was someone else in the room. Cayle. Even in the dim light he was still wearing his stupid fucking sunglasses.

It looked like he was talking to the bound-up person, who wasn't responding in any way that I could detect. And then he moved out of the camera's range.

I froze. Someone was coming down the hallway.

Son of a fucker. There was nowhere to hide in this tiny fucking room except behind the door. I went behind it, pulling it as close to my body as I could.

Someone came in the room. I stopped breathing.

What the fuck? It was Cayle.

He started playing around with the main monitors. I had no way out. If he caught me there...

Then a phone beeped. Fuck. Was it mine? I about passed out in panic.

But it was his.

“What?” he snapped, not stopping what he was doing while he listened.

“Fine.” He walked out, pulling the door closed behind him. I stayed flattened against the wall, straining to hear whatever I could.

A muffled thud sounded and I could only hope it was the door to the main club closing behind him.

I didn't move until I realized this might be my only chance to get out safely.

Before I fled, I checked the monitor one last time. The figure was still there, still tied, unmoving.

Shaking so hard I nearly tripped, I shot out of the exit door.

I didn't even know where I was headed until I found myself at home. Still panicking, I paced back and forth. Cayle was keeping a person tied up. Somewhere in the club.

Who was it? Was it Blackie?

What the fucking hell do I do now?

If nothing else, I knew I needed some help. It took me three tries before I successfully dialed Detective Branson's number.

Straight to fucking voicemail. After I left a message asking him to call me as soon as he could, I went back to pacing. It was Saturday night. I had no idea if he worked over the weekend. He might not even get back to me before Monday.

So I was no better off. No longer caring if they thought I was crazy or not, I called up Roman.

“Did you call the police?” he asked when I was done telling him my half-coherent story.

“Yeah. They told me to talk to the fucking detective.” I said, my frustration spilling over. “We have to do something.”

“I know.”

Half an hour later, I met him and Fin in front of our warehouse.

Quickly, I outlined the plan I had come up with on my way over. “Veer closes at four. That only gives us a couple hours, so let's get going.”

“The only way in is through that locked door, right? Is there any time you’ve seen that guy come out of there other than midnight?” Roman asked while we walked through the empty streets.

“No. But I’ve never stayed past one.”

“Be careful,” Fin said to me before we split up.

The plan was risky, but there was no choice. There was no one to help us and nothing else we could do.

I flashed my hand stamp at the bouncer, half hoping Cayle would be standing at the entrance as usual so at least I would know where he was. But there was no sign of him.

I went downstairs, stationing myself right by the door. All that happened was that more people left, making me more conspicuous.

If someone didn’t come out soon, I didn’t know what we were going to do.

My phone vibrated and I pulled it out of my pocket. Fuck. It was already 3:25.

Fin had texted me.

What’s going on?

I started to reply when the door swung open wide, nearly bashing into me. I didn’t recognize the man who came out. Cayle wasn’t with him.

I let it close halfway, whipping my head around first before I slipped in.

Knowing Cayle could appear at any moment, I listened carefully. I didn’t dare go to the monitor room.

Heading for the exit door, I opened it as slowly as possible, clenching my jaw in the hope that it wouldn’t squeak.

Fin and Roman were waiting in the dark alley. I let them in, raising my finger to my lips so they would know we might not be alone.

The door to the monitor room was closed. I had only ever seen it open, so that probably meant it was occupied. I motioned for Fin and Roman to follow me past it.

We stopped at the second door. It was the only possible place that the captive person could be. Cayle had appeared too quickly for them to be in any other part of the club.

I hadn't realized there were two deadbolts as well as the lock on the door handle. I turned to Roman, breaking out into a sweat for about the hundredth time that night and practically shoving my mouth into his ear. "Can you do it?"

He shrugged. Shit.

Fin pulled me away and gestured for me to focus. We turned on our phones and held them as close as we could to the first lock, shining their light for Roman.

He slipped his key in and tapped it. I flinched at the noise, but there was no other way to pick the lock.

He twisted the handle to see if he had gotten it unlocked. It opened easily.

The second one worked just as well. I started to believe we were going to pull it off and actually get in.

The third lock stuck. He tapped again and again, adjusting the key by a millimeter each time to see what would work. It took every ounce of self-control I had not to urge him to go faster.

On the fifth try, it clicked. Glancing behind us, he turned the handle and opened the door.

Halfway open, it squeaked. It couldn't have been very loud but the sound was magnified in the dead silence. All three of us froze, not even daring to breathe. After what seemed like an eternity, Roman pushed on the door again, opening it the bare minimum necessary for us to get through.

We were all in. Christ. It was another fucking hallway. I wanted to punch the wall in frustration. We were running out of time. What was it with this place?

Three more doors. All locked, but no deadbolts so it should be a lot faster.

Roman got the first one unlocked quickly. I opened the door and froze.

It was the room I had seen on the monitor. And there was the figure, sitting in the center, bound, head covered.

We weren't two steps inside when someone spoke.

"What are you doing?"

I knew the voice before I even turned around. It was surprisingly calm and even, without so much as a trace of anger.

“You,” Cayle said when he saw me. “You know, trespassing is never a good idea.”

He had a gun in his hand. An actual fucking gun.

“Get away from him. Over there.”

He motioned us to move to the corner.

“I don’t have anywhere to keep you. So it looks like I’m going to have to get rid of you.”

Cayle was between us and the door. There was no way out. He advanced toward us, raising the gun.

“Drop your weapon.” A different voice broke the silence.

Someone else had come into the room. I couldn’t see who, but from the sounds of it, he didn’t work for Cayle.

And yet Cayle didn’t move, didn’t even turn to see who it was. He was so focused on us, he didn’t even blink. His eyes didn’t so much as flicker. Had I only imagined that there was someone else there?

But then I looked into his eyes and I knew what was going on.

He was deciding whether or not to take a shot at us anyway.

I actually think he was about to, but the man came up behind him and grabbed his arms, cuffing him roughly.

“You boys okay?” It was Detective Branson. I was too stunned to speak, as were Fin and Roman.

“We’ve been watching Cayle and this club for some time now. When I got your message, Jaiden, we had enough to obtain a warrant.”

I hardly heard what he was saying. There were cops in the room now, over at the still-silent figure on the chair. One was working on the chains that bound him, while the other untied the hood. I held my breath while he pulled it off.

It was Blackie. Eyes closed, apparently unconscious.

Chapter 6

The rest of the night passed by in a blur. I was dying to ride with Blackie to the hospital, but we all had to go back to the police station to make statements.

Even while he was being arrested, Cayle was threatening to charge us with breaking and entering.

Branson said that probably wouldn't hold up what with the things he had done. Apparently they'd been watching Cayle long before he kidnapped Blackie, but Branson was pretty tight-lipped about why.

The sun was coming up when we were finally allowed to leave. Detective Branson was nice enough to have us driven to the hospital by another cop.

Blackie was sleeping when we got there. After sitting in his room for a while, Fin and Roman decided to go down to the cafeteria.

"You want anything?" Fin asked me.

I shook my head. I should have been starving, but the thought of food had no appeal.

Once they left the room, I went over to Blackie's bed, touching his hand lightly.

When he moved, I jerked back. Shit. I hadn't meant to disturb him.

He opened his eyes. "Jaiden," he murmured.

I tried to force myself to smile in what I hoped was a reassuring way.

"How are you feeling? Did he hurt you?"

He shook his head weakly.

"Just suffering a lack of food and water. They're only going to keep me overnight."

"You scared me, Blackie. Don't ever do it again." I wasn't even sure what I was saying, I was just so relieved he was safe.

"Okay," he said, closing his eyes once more.

Blackie's roommates wouldn't be back for another week, so I was staying with him to make sure he was okay.

He was crashed out on the sofa when I arrived, looking a lot better. I cuddled right up next to him, way too close, and he didn't even pull away.

He had the TV on but I couldn't pay attention to it. In spite of looking a lot better, he still seemed really freaked out and nervous.

"Do you want to talk about what happened?" I finally asked after I noticed he wasn't even watching the screen but staring off into space.

He didn't answer for so long I thought he had fallen asleep. I had just clicked the TV off when he spoke up.

"It was my fault."

Sitting up, I looked over at him but he wouldn't face me.

"Of course it's not your fault. Why would you even say that?"

"I've been going to that club for a while now, since it reopened again. That guy Cayle was always real friendly to me, right from the start. He was okay, he bought me drinks now and then, it seemed harmless enough. When he really started hitting on me, I made it clear I wasn't interested. Obviously I should have shut him down a lot sooner."

We were sitting so close to each other I could feel Blackie's body tense up.

"He acted cool about it even after I turned him down, and he got me a drink like usual. It must have been drugged, because next thing I knew I woke up in that room, tied up. He told me then we were going to be together no matter what, that nobody ever said no to him."

Blackie took a drink of water and regarded me.

"The detective said it was you who found me. How did you manage that?"

I'd been dreading this moment. "I saw you at Veer one time. And I've kind of been going there too ever since. And since that was the last place I saw you, I started to wonder if there was something going on there."

"You've been... watching me?" Blackie's expression made my stomach twist nastily.

"I'm sorry. I saw you there once and then... well, I kind of got caught up in it."

He seemed to be considering my words. "Well, if you hadn't, I probably wouldn't be here right now."

I could tell it bothered him. I couldn't have felt more like a jerk than I did in that moment. Before I could think of what to say, Blackie continued.

"Cayle didn't hassle me much when I was down there, he just kept talking about us as if we were a couple. It was weird, you know, he was so calm about it. And then he told me we were going away together on Sunday."

A chill ran up my spine. "You know we found you on Saturday night."

"Yeah, that's what the cops told me. Just in time. He was talking about taking me 'far away', whatever that means. If you hadn't been looking for me... I wouldn't have had a chance once he took me out of the club."

He moved and grimaced. I had caught a glimpse of his back when he was getting dressed at the hospital. There were marks on his body that told me he wasn't being totally honest about what Cayle had really done to him.

"Hey, take it easy," I said.

Ignoring me, he kept shifting around while he spoke. "I was alone down there nearly all the time. It was making me crazy. There was no way out. Time lost all meaning and I couldn't tell if it was day or night. Or how long it had been. But I kept thinking that somehow you would find me. When I wasn't freaking out, thinking about how to escape, or if I even would, I thought about you."

"Me?" I swallowed hard.

"You were the one I wanted to see again. The idea of never seeing you again was scarier than Cayle, actually."

"Well, I'm here. And you're safe. You're never going to get rid of me, you know that. Friends for life, remember? That is, if you still want a stalker like me as your friend."

He shook his head, wincing in pain again.

"Stop moving so much," I told him, a little worried. He hadn't seemed like he was in any pain before, but then he was probably on painkillers in the hospital.

"I don't want to be friends," he said.

That knocked the wind right out of me. "I'm sorry I went to the club and watched you there, Blackie. Really I am. I'll do anything to make it up to you. I know it was wrong, I don't know what got into me."

“That’s not it. I just don’t want to be friends anymore.”

“But why can’t we be friends?”

“Because I want more than that. I’m in love with you.”

I didn’t think I heard him right.

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked him carefully. “Do you remember if Cayle ever hit you on the head?”

“Shut up. I’m serious.”

“Maybe we should talk about this when you’re feeling better. You’ve been through a lot—”

“Jaiden, please. I’m not telling you this because my head’s fucked up. It’s how I feel. I’ve felt that way for a while now. I just never wanted to be in a relationship before. I didn’t see the point. But the idea of never even giving it a shot with you while I had the chance... being trapped down there, thinking I might never see you again... that’s what scared me more than anything else.”

“But aren’t you involved with that guy from the club?”

He gave me a blank look. “Huh? What guy?”

“The guy who whips you every Friday night...” My voice trailed off when I saw his expression. At least I can still surprise myself with the depths of my own stupidity.

“Just how often did you watch me at Veer?” he asked me.

My cheeks burned. “Um... after the first time I saw you there... every Friday night. A few weeks now.”

He laughed, and even though it was at my expense, I was happy. I hadn’t heard him laugh in so long.

“I never knew I had a stalker.”

“Yeah. I’m a loser, I know it as well as you do. But everyone else in that place had different people working on them. You were always with the same guy.”

“He’s just a guy I met there. He knows what he’s doing so I trust him. But we’re not involved in any way other than that.”

He looked into my eyes so deeply it seemed like he could see right through me.

“The truth is, I love you, Jaiden. I always have. The only question is, do you feel the same way?”

He pulled me down and gave me the sweetest kiss I've ever had.

Kissing Blackie was better than I ever imagined it would be.

“Of course,” I said when we broke apart for air. “Of course.”

The End

Author Bio

Ash Jay is the author of two sexy MM novellas: Pierced and A Twist of Love.

Contact & Media Info

[Website](#)

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KNICKERS IN A TWIST

By Ofelia Gränd

Photo Description

A man is standing with his back to the camera. He is shielding his face with his arm, displaying muscles and strength, but hiding. He is wearing a black garter belt in lace with matching stockings, gloves and a harness in black leather, and nothing else. He is a beautiful contrast of strength and delicacy.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

So I'm a man and I like to wear lace. Sometimes I like to wear leather and lace. Is that such a crime? I don't want to be dominated, I don't want to submit, I just want a partner who will look at me and think I'm hotter than the sun. I just want a man who won't see me as weak because of what I wear under my clothes. But it's hard enough to find a partner as a gay man; how am I ever going to find one who will enjoy my kink as much as I do? God, I'm so tired of hiding who I am.

Please, no BDSM. The rest is up to you.

Sincerely,

Kiracee

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: 1 salesman, teacher, underwear fetish, sports, sex in public, Sweden, disability

Word Count: 14,663

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KNICKERS IN A TWIST

By Ofelia Gränd

Oh, that felt nice. He fingered the cool, silky fabric. The colour would look so good on him, creamy champagne against his golden skin. The stretchy lace waistband seemed comfortable and would've hugged his hips perfectly. They would've been perfect, if they had been made for a man, that is. He stretched the lace, tested it. Yes, it would have felt nice to put them on.

“May I help you?”

Peter jumped, startled. The shop assistant had materialised out of nowhere. She was wearing heels, which should have alerted him to her presence, but he hadn't heard her coming. He stared at her and tried desperately to come up with a casual response. “Eh...” He didn't blush, he did not, but his face felt a little too warm for him to really believe it.

The assistant fixed her gaze on the white-knuckled hand that clenched the crumpled silk. “No, thank you. Just looking around,” Peter managed, a little breathlessly. He would be looking for the exit as soon as he could convince his hand to release the amazing fabric.

“Looking for something for your girlfriend? We have the most beautiful longline corset that came in yesterday. I would die to have one. If that's a bit too much, then we have some new balcony bras in wonderful colours, some lace demi-cups and a few new contour bras, all with matching panties and some with matching suspender belts.”

Suspender belts. Oh, that would be nice. He would love to have a suspender belt. No, snap out of it! Focus on bras. Peter stared at her. He knew nothing about bras, and he had no intention of learning. “Err, no, thank you. I was just looking around. I'll go now.”

“Come back any time,” she said with an amused smile.

Did she know? She looked like she knew, but how could she? No, it didn't show on the outside. He looked down at his thighs. No line was visible. Peter was always cautious. A revealing line could give him away if he wasn't careful. His finger found the barely-there lace-top of his thigh-highs, but it wasn't visible. The trousers stretched uninterrupted with each step he took; they

weren't catching on anything. He looked proper in his suit, he was sure of it. No one would know just by looking at him.

Yet somehow, his mother had always known, hadn't she? She could give him one look, and then she'd start to spew her hatred. How could she always tell? Even if he just wore something plain, like satin briefs, she'd know. Maybe it did show.

Peter rushed out of the shop. He was not going back, he wasn't. He had to stop gawking at women's underwear. He didn't even like women all that much. But even though the internet gave him access to shops that sold beautiful panties for men, online shopping wasn't ideal. He needed to feel the fabric, make sure that it lived up to his expectations, and he couldn't do that in an online shop.

Twelve days later Peter relapsed, and found himself just inside the door of *Underneath*. Again. The shop beckoned to him. It wasn't very big, but the interior design reminded him of a warehouse. Everything apart from the lingerie was in black and grey which made the colours pop out even more. He liked it. A concrete bunker decorated in colourful lace.

He'd promised himself that he wouldn't come back, but then he saw a pair of hipster panties online made from some kind of mesh he hadn't seen before. Peter had mesh panties, of course, but the mesh in the photo seemed very wide, and he just wasn't certain.

The bell jingled as always, but he didn't see anyone. He could hear the shop assistant's voice from somewhere in the back, and prayed that whoever she was talking to was important enough to keep her occupied until he left. He didn't want to remind her of his existence. This was a typical Swedish small town, and you couldn't help but be recognised if you stayed for more than a couple of weeks, and by now she'd probably know him if she saw him at the grocery store. He really needed to stay away for a while.

He found a rack of thongs in different fabrics. One pair had the same kind of mesh as the hipsters he'd found online. Mesh felt nice, it always did. He wouldn't be able to wear the hipsters he'd been looking at on Tuesdays or Thursdays, since the teachers' floorball games had started up again, but other than that they would work as everyday underwear, even the widely meshed ones.

“You want those?” Peter was startled by the gruff voice and looked up to see a dark haired man with a five o'clock shadow that didn't seem to be a fashion choice. What was it about this shop that made Peter incapable of hearing people moving around?

“No, thank you.” He was sure he'd never seen a man in here before, and he was proud that his voice didn't betray his surprise. At least he didn't think it did. The man was staring pretty hard, and Peter felt a bit intimidated. The guy was not huge. In fact, he was quite average, like Peter, but bulkier. Still, there was something about him that made Peter stand up a little straighter.

“Buying for the wife or the mistress?” The tone was challenging.

“Not buying at all,” he answered through gritted teeth.

The shop assistant sounded amused when she shouted from the back, “Alex, don't scare the customers.” Peter wanted to run even more than before. Had they both seen him caress the thongs?

“I'm not! I just...” Peter was out the door before he could hear the rest of their conversation. He was not going back, he wasn't.

Alex turned back to the customer only to realise he was no longer there. What the fuck? He looked at the door just in time to see the man walk out stiffly without a backward glance. Great. He hadn't really meant to scare the guy. It was just that when Alex came out from the back, the man had been worshipping a pair of panties, and something about that made him a little angry. One shouldn't stare at women's lingerie in such a way.

His back was hurting like hell, and he was freaking starving. Maybe he'd been a little harsh, but that was no reason to run. Alex grimaced. It could've been a smile, but since he hardly ever smiled these days, it was probably a sign that it was time for another pain pill. His back was stiff, but every time he tried to stretch it he got a most uncomfortable twinge.

He shut his eyes only to see the man's shocked expression in his mind. Maybe it was a smile that made his lips stretch after all. The guy had been pretty plain looking, body on the slim side, but nice as far as he'd seen. It was the eyes, though, that were etched into Alex's memory. They were big and blue, and that deer-caught-in-the-headlights look made Alex want to kiss him.

It wasn't the panties that bothered him, not really, it was the way the man had been looking at them. However, Alex would've been perfectly happy to be

the object of a look like that. Who was he kidding though? The man looked smart, all preppy, and proper just like all the men Alex wanted but could never get.

He was probably straight as an arrow. This town tended to scare away any decent gay guy brave enough to set foot in it, so it wasn't like Alex expected to meet someone.

"Did you scare him away?"

"No."

"So where is he?"

Alex gave his sister a hard stare. "He just had to leave," he said with a shrug. God, he was so not the right person for this.

She smiled. "Yeah, he's a bit skittish, that one."

"Does he come here often?"

"Every now and then. Always acts like it's a crime to look at panties."

"What does he buy?"

"Nothing."

Alex raised one eyebrow, suddenly more curious about the man. "He doesn't buy anything?"

"Just looks at panties," she said with a laugh. "He's harmless, really. I think he just wants to have someone to buy lingerie for. If I wasn't taken, I would offer myself in a heartbeat. He's one gorgeous man." Gorgeous. Was he gorgeous? Alex usually agreed with his sister when it came to looks, but at the moment he couldn't think of anything beyond those stunning blue eyes. "Oh, that skin," she said with a dreamy look. "How can he be that fair and still be honey-coloured? I don't get it. But don't feel bad, I usually scare him away too. The trick is not to talk to him. As soon as he realises you've seen him, he's out the door."

Alex pursed his lips looking at a dent in the grey concrete floor. He wasn't cut out for this. He wasn't smart, and he really wasn't blessed with the social skills to make people feel welcome. How would he be able to run a women's lingerie shop for four months?

"Have you really thought this through, Linda?"

"It's a bit late to back out now, isn't it? I'll be leaving in a couple of hours, and don't you try to stop me. You'll be fine. Just read what needs to be read at

your own pace. You're fine with numbers, so don't fret, and if anything goes wrong or you need help, give Anna a ring. She'll know what to do."

Anna had helped Linda out in the shop on a few occasions, and probably knew more about how to run it than Alex ever would. He would not, however, ring Anna. He couldn't think of any reason good enough to make him pick up a phone and confess that he was too stupid to go through the post, or whatever he was meant to do. Alex still couldn't believe that he'd agreed to take care of his little sister's shop while she went backpacking in India. How would he manage to be polite and give advice about bras for several months without scaring away every potential customer, not to mention any skittish men who might venture in here?

Peter was going out today, and he was not going to wear lace. He had to stop this lace thing. He was not going out in his soul-draining Tuesday underwear, but he was going to prove to himself that life could be good without beautiful lingerie. Everyday people were happy without the touch of lace, satin or silk against their most intimate parts. Lace was not the solution to any world crisis, and it was possible to have great sex without the tantalizing stretch of the coarse fabric against your prick.

He was getting a little hard just thinking about that sensation, but he was not going to give in. He was not going to wear lace. Not that it really mattered. He could hardly remember the last time he'd gotten lucky in this town. Gay men were not exactly scarce, but the supply was far from plentiful. Half of them were in the closet and did not want to come out. The other half were either too young, too old, too femme, or acted as if he was supposed to fall to his knees and lick their boots. So far he hadn't met anyone who shared his tastes.

He didn't have unreasonably high standards. Peter just wanted a man. A normal guy who loved him for who he was. Someone who could look at him in frilly lace panties and still think that he was one hot man. Not someone who thought he was effeminate, a sub, or even a total bottom. He wanted a man, who saw him as a man, and who wouldn't assume that pink satin meant he had some pent-up need to submit.

Tonight he was going for a more butch approach. He wanted something not associated with women, but he was determined not to wear his Tuesday boxers on a Saturday. That would only kill his weekend spirit. He had a nice jockstrap in leather. Leather was hot, and butch, and smelt nice, and it felt good too.

He picked up the phone and rang Tom, his very best and very straight friend. Ever since his last boyfriend, if you could call him that, Peter felt a bit insecure about going out alone. He hated to feel insecure. He had fought hard as a teenager to break free of his mother's hold, and he knew he'd taken some backward steps these last months. It didn't feel good at all. He'd always been one to stand proud, but things with Nick had left him broken.

The phone rang a few times before Tom screamed, "Peter," over what sounded as a lot of wind.

"Yeah?"

"Oh, it is you. I couldn't see the display very well. My eyes are tearing up," he continued to shout.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm fishing. Can you believe it?"

"In this weather?" The Swedish autumn wasn't very forgiving, and especially not at sea.

"Yeah, Adam bought this sweet little motorboat that we're testing out."

Peter shivered. He didn't like sailing, especially not if it was windy. "Okay, have fun!" He was about to hang up when Tom shouted again.

"Hey, was there something you wanted?"

"Nah, I just wanted to go out and grab a beer or four."

"Sorry man, but don't let me stop you. Go down to the pub anyway. It's been ages since you went out, and you deserve to relax a little."

"Sure..." It was just that Peter was afraid Nick would be there, and he didn't know if he could hold his head up high without the emotional support of a friend.

"Have fun!" Tom disconnected, and Peter headed for the shower. He could go out on his own, it was no big deal, right? He could do it.

Alex motioned for the bartender to give him another whisky. He'd been sitting at this bar since returning from dropping Linda and Marcus off at the train station four hours ago. What was he to do with his life? Thirty-six and alone with nothing to fall back on. He was living in his sister's flat and doing

her job, for now, but what did you do when you were getting close to forty and couldn't do your job anymore?

Someone sat down next to him, but Alex didn't invite conversation. His ambition was to drink the night away, forget about the pain in his back, his lonely life, and the fact that he was now a fucking lingerie salesman. The whisky was, in fact, taking care of the pain for the moment. Self-medication was something to consider.

God, he wasn't normally this morose. It was this town. He had gotten out once, but now he was back. It was a small town, all about the white picket fences, and straight couples with two point four children and a Golden Retriever. It was a miracle that Linda's shop was doing as well as it was. But of course, if all the straight men bought sexy underwear for their special someones, both the wife and the little secret on the side, then bra sales were sure to remain steady.

Just as he was about to take a sip of his whisky, someone bumped into him from behind, and the golden elixir sloshed over the rim. "What the fuck," Alex growled and turned around to find himself face to face with deer-caught-in-the-headlights guy. The panty worshipper was wearing that very same expression again, and Alex melted a little. He swallowed the snarl that had been halfway out of his mouth. Fuck, he wished he could have a man like that.

Darn. What was it with this guy? Not that Peter expected him to be overwhelmed with joy about spilled whisky but still, it wasn't as if Peter had set out to spill it. Some kid had walked right into him and, like a domino effect, he'd been tumbled into the man. He didn't have to be all growly about it.

"Sorry," Peter mumbled, not wanting to infuriate the guy more than he already had.

"Hey, it's my almost-customer."

Was that a sneer? Peter tried to be nonchalant, but it was hard when he was reminded of being caught red-handed, fondling a pair of mesh thongs. He straightened his back, he was not going to cower for a stranger.

Slurring slightly, the guy asked, "You want my job?" Was that a reference to earlier? Peter wondered just how much whisky the man had chugged down, and if it was safe for him to hang around. He was pretty sure he wouldn't stand

a chance if the man decided to whip some sense into him. He'd met them before, the people who thought he was sick and ought to be punished for it.

"Sit down and talk to me." He didn't seem angry now so Peter sat down, but mainly because it was the only unoccupied stool in the place. On a Saturday night in a small town like this, you either went to the night club with all the kids, the fancy restaurant with the older men in expensive suits or here, to the pub, where you could drink and still be able talk to the person next to you without having to shout at the top of your lungs.

"So," the man continued, "what kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a teacher."

"Ah, so you're smart," he hissed acidly.

How do you respond to that? "Erhm..."

"What do you teach?"

"Maths and..."

"So you were a brainy kid. I bet the teachers loved you. Never did well in maths myself. Better than other subjects but still not well."

"No?"

"No. I don't really get it. I mean, I understand numbers but I never understood what to do with them, you know? All that text describing a problem, x's and y's and some poor bloke with apples."

"Sure," Peter tried to sound as if the guy was making perfect sense while he flagged the bartender down for a beer.

"So you want to swap?"

"Swap?" He gazed in confusion at the man's almost empty glass of whisky and his untouched bottle of beer.

"Yeah, I teach the kids something important, and you sell lingerie."

"You're selling lingerie?" Wouldn't that be a dream?

"For four months. Starting today. You were my only customer, so that went well. The shop's closed on Monday, but come Tuesday and I'm on my own in the dungeon of see-through undergarments and pantyhose."

"Well, it can't be that bad, can it?"

"Really? You want to do it?"

Did he? No, he wanted to wear lingerie, not sell them, at least he didn't think so. "Maybe?"

"Good, I'll give you a ring when I can't stand it any more." Then he mumbled something Peter couldn't quite make out, but it sounded like something about missing fires.

Peter smiled. "You do that." He was just about to move along when the guy caught his arm.

"I'm Alex."

"Peter."

"You want to get out of here, Peter?"

Alex needed some fresh air, but he didn't want to let Peter go just yet. He was hot. Had he really thought of Peter as plain before? Even though he was pretty sure Peter was just humouring him, he thought that maybe he could get him to step outside into the chilly night.

"Out?"

"Yeah, get some fresh air."

Alex needed to sober up in the worst way, but he wasn't pissed enough to miss how Peter was scanning the pub, as if making sure no one was looking. "What, afraid someone'll think less of you if they see you leave with me?" That came out a little harsher than he'd intended.

Peter burst out laughing, but it wasn't a happy laugh. "No, I don't think that's possible."

Alex looked over his shoulder to the place where Peter's gaze lingered and saw a tall, muscular man staring at them. The man leered at Peter before saying something to the people around him who all laughed and turned to look at them. Whatever that was about, Alex didn't like it. He didn't give a flying fuck what people thought of him, and they usually didn't give him any shit, but Peter looked nervous. He felt oddly protective of the other man and wanted to keep him away from the smirking group.

"Who's he?" God, he sounded more sloshed than he felt.

Peter shrugged a little. "No one. Just a guy I used to know."

“A boyfriend?” Oh, way to blurt that out, Alex, and none too politely either. He wasn't even sure if Peter was gay. He thought that maybe he was since his eyes tended to linger a little on some of the men but still, he'd been looking at women's underwear.

Peter looked surprised but not angry. “Not really.”

Did that mean that he was gay, and the man wasn't a boyfriend or that he wasn't gay at all? Alex was boozed-up, and when he was he tended to think that all men were gay, so he'd probably imagined the heated looks Peter had given some of the men. Fuck it, Alex needed some fresh air.

“Come on, baby, let's go outside for a while.”

Again, Peter looked a little shocked but smiled and trailed after Alex. The wind came right at them when they stepped outside, and Alex shivered. It wasn't really weather for a stroll along the riverside, but he tugged Peter in that direction anyway.

The river went straight through town, so it only took a few minutes to get there. Alex leaned drunkenly against the rail. “So, Peter, tell me something about yourself.”

“Not much to tell, really.”

“I find that hard to believe. Handsome guy like you doesn't have a wife?”

Peter shot Alex a cheeky look, making him forget how to breathe. “No, no wife, no girlfriend, no boyfriend, not even a cat.”

“Good.”

“Good that I don't have a cat?”

Alex slipped a finger through one of a belt loops in Peter's jeans and stepped in close. “Good, that you don't have a wife, or a girlfriend... or a boyfriend. I don't really have an opinion about the cat.”

Peter felt a little dizzy. He was pretty sure he was about to be kissed, and he really wanted to be kissed.

“God, you're hot,” Alex mumbled near his lips. His breath felt warm against Peter's chilled skin, and he wet his lips in anticipation. “Say, Peter, would you be awfully angry if I kissed you?” Alex's thumb caressed Peter's bottom lip, and Peter thought he might pass out if they didn't kiss soon.

“I might be if you don’t.” That earned him a little smile just before Alex’s lips descended. Peter groaned. It had been a long time since he’d felt a hard body against his. Alex fit perfectly, and he felt so good. Peter didn’t even mind the taste of whisky on his tongue. He was kissing Alex deeply and grinding against him as if it were possible to get even closer.

Peter broke the kiss to suck in some oxygen and tipped his head a little, baring his throat to give Alex room to do whatever he wanted. Alex nipped and kissed on Peter’s exposed skin until he found a magic spot just below the ear that made Peter shudder. God, that felt good.

Alex never stopped his ministrations as he walked them backwards toward the trees that stood a few feet away. Peter’s back hit a trunk, and he looked around. They were pretty secluded, no one nearby as far as he could see.

Swiftly, Alex’s fingers found their way to Peter’s trousers. He was fumbling with the fly before Peter could find his voice and utter a warning.

“Eh...”

“Leather?” Alex asked with a smile as he opened the zip and fell to his knees. Peter searched his face to see if he was going to say something else. He felt his hard-on falter a little. Normally leather was okay. Guys usually didn’t laugh at him as they did when they uncovered lace, but some still found it funny.

Alex took hold of the waist of Peter’s jeans and pulled them down to mid-thigh. The chilling wind kissed Peter’s skin, and he shivered from the cold, but the warm breath that ghosted over his hipbone made him forget all about it. Feather-light fingers followed the straps of his jock before gripping his bare buttocks.

“Fuck, Peter. I could eat you up.”

Peter was flabbergasted, his cock growing harder by the second. He’d been prepared for Alex to say something, criticise him, make fun of him, or tell him that he was repellent. He was not prepared for appreciation, and Alex appeared to truly appreciate the choice of underwear. Of course, he had to remind himself, it was leather. Not like he’d discovered what Peter really preferred. He probably wouldn’t be ecstatic about that.

Peter’s cock was aching, straining against the unyielding pouch, but he couldn’t make his brain shut up and enjoy the moment. What was wrong with him? He should savour what Alex was doing, not wait for condemnation.

Alex gripped the waistband of the leather jock and pulled down, baring Peter's leaking member to the cold night air. He nuzzled the light brown curls and groaned before he followed the vein on Peter's shaft with his tongue from root to tip. Peter stood transfixed. Alex was damn beautiful, a little rough looking, just the way Peter liked it.

Wicked dark brown eyes sought out his before Alex's lips locked around the head. The tongue was teasing, dipping into his slit, swirling around the tip, and then Alex took him deeper, looking like there wasn't anything in the world he'd rather be doing. Peter grunted, then remembered that they were outside and took a quick look around. Still no one. His fingertips sunk into some grooves in the tree trunk, and he let out a shuddering breath.

He was—not shy, exactly, but being outside made him a little nervous. He really, really hoped no one would venture down to the river. Not many did when the weather was this cold and windy, but still.

The slurping sounds Alex made drowned out the noise from the nearby pub and yanked Peter out of his worries. God, he couldn't believe this was happening. Alex took him down deep and swallowed around him, nearly making Peter come in an instant. He tried to slow down, but Alex didn't let him. He tried to form some kind of warning and managed to utter some stuttering sounds that only made Alex look into his eyes and wink around a mouthful of cock.

Peter felt the initial sparkles of his orgasm and let go of the trunk to pull Alex away, but Alex wouldn't have it. Alex fondled Peter's balls with one hand, and urged him to shove that cock as far down his throat as it would go with the other. When Peter did just that, Alex moaned appreciatively, sending vibrations all the way through Peter. What little control Peter had slipped away. He gripped Alex's shoulders in a bruising hold and thrust deep into the warm, wet heat. One time, two and then it was over.

Panting, Peter sought out Alex's gaze. He felt a bit embarrassed. Not only had he climaxed down a stranger's throat in a public place, but it had ended much too soon. Had he been too rough? He took a few deep breaths and looked down at his softening dick, fighting the urge to hide.

Alex rose to his feet, helped him pull up his trousers, and gave him a sloppy kiss before he started giggling. An honest-to-God giggle. "Well, that was fun," he said, still giggling.

Peter looked at him with raised eyebrows. "You're plastered."

“I know. But still, you gotta agree that was fun.” Peter shrugged. “Aw, come on, man. Don’t hurt my feelings.”

“I can kiss it better.” Peter grabbed hold of Alex’s shoulder and traded places with him. He wasn’t sure that he could give a good blowjob in a setting like this, but one should reciprocate. That was common courtesy.

“Nah, it’s okay. I’m too old and too drunk.”

“Too old?”

“Yup, you’d better tuck me in,” Alex said with a smile. Peter smiled too but didn’t really know what to do next. What was the custom here? Should he offer something else as a thank you for getting him off?

God, Peter was hot. Alex could probably suck him for hours. He tasted so good, and the sounds he made were so sweet. Alex wasn’t kidding, though. He was suddenly very tired. He did not, however, want to part ways with Peter just yet.

“So you want to go for a cup of coffee?” Peter sounded insecure, and Alex didn’t like hearing that. He loved it when Peter straightened his back and gave him a challenging look like he’d done in the pub after the initial frightened one. To see that there was steel underneath Peter’s vulnerability made Alex hot as hell.

“Yeah, sure. Your place?”

“Eh... I was thinking some place in town, but okay, why not?”

They walked quietly along the river for quite a while. The silence became strained, and Peter kept sneaking glances, probably thinking Alex was too sloshed to notice. The further they went the more uncertain Alex became. He wanted to spend more time with Peter, but maybe this wasn’t the way. It wasn’t as if Peter had invited him to come along, he’d invited himself. Maybe Peter just saw him as a one night stand and didn’t want to get to know him now that he’d had his fun.

“You know what? I think maybe I should head home instead, or to Linda’s flat, that is.”

“Linda?”

“My sister.”

“You sure?” Peter sounded both relieved and disappointed at the same time.

“Yeah, I think so. Say, why don't you stop by the shop on Tuesday and I'll let you try on every piece of flimsy lingerie we have,” Alex said with a laugh. Peter froze mid-step and gave him a guarded look.

“Sure. Goodnight.” Before Alex could say anything else Peter had turned the street corner and walked away with the same stiff stride he'd used to stalk out of shop earlier. Baffled, Alex watched him go. That was not how he'd planned it. He thought Peter would say something funny in return, and they could set a time and place for a cup of coffee, or exchange phone numbers, or something.

Peter was the first person he'd met in this godforsaken town who he wanted to hang out with. Not that he knew him all that well, but, somehow, it felt good to be with him. It felt right. Alex sighed and shivered. Too tired to chase after Peter, he turned around and headed for Linda's flat.

A week had passed and it was Saturday again. Peter was in town just like everybody else. It was a Swedish tradition to spend Saturday morning visiting market stalls and doing some shopping. When you were done, you went to one of the cafés, indulged in something sweet, and gossiped with everyone you met.

Underneath was just a block away, and Peter desperately wanted to go. He couldn't get Alex out of his head, but he wasn't sure if he would survive being rejected yet again. It didn't matter how many times he swore that he'd never put on another pair of panties. He knew that he would. Maybe he could play normal for a while, but it wouldn't last.

With Nick he had thought that he would let the man get to know him first, then maybe it wouldn't be such a big deal. That had obviously been the wrong approach as he'd learned in a painfully humbling way. He really hoped that Alex had been too drunk to notice that they'd been laughed at by Nick and his friends in the pub last week.

It wasn't easy finding a partner, and Peter knew he would probably never find one who could love all of him. Still, he hoped for someone who could at least love him enough to ignore his underwear. He wasn't wearing them for anyone else. It was just one little thing he did for himself. He couldn't understand why people would care, but they did.

He wiggled a little, reminding himself that he was wearing a pair of his favourites—yellow low-rise boxer briefs completely in lace that showed a bit of

cheek. They were beautiful. They made Peter feel beautiful. Maybe he should run home and change if he planned to go see Alex, though. What if the man wanted to rip his clothes off? Yeah, like that was going to happen after his little drama queen adieu.

In that moment, he'd thought Alex was making fun of him, but once he got home, he realised that he had probably overreacted. He still hadn't manned up enough to go see Alex. The joke about letting him try on lingerie made Peter think his tastes wouldn't be appreciated, and he was afraid things would turn ugly if, or when, he was found out.

God, he was ridiculous. How could he ever meet a man who would love him for who he was if he couldn't even stand up for himself? Since when had he become such a coward? He'd been confident once, hadn't he? At least after he'd moved away from his mother. Leather, lace, satin or silk, it didn't matter. He'd always been a man who stood up for who he was and what he wanted.

With a deep breath he walked toward the shop, and he didn't hesitate once, not until he had his hand on the door knob. For a moment, he considered letting go and walking away, but then a woman leaving the shop pulled the door open and held it for him. Not much choice left. The bell above the door chimed, and Alex looked up from behind the counter ready to greet a customer. He looked surprised to see Peter.

"Hi there, handsome. I'd almost given up on you," Alex said with careful smile.

"Oh, yeah, me too."

That made the smile more real. "Come to take me out for that coffee?"

"If you like."

"I'd love to, but I'm the only one working, and since I know diddly-squat about lingerie it's gonna be a while. Don't know what my dear, deluded sister was thinking."

"Rough week?"

"Like being shot with a taser every day."

"That bad?"

"No, not really. It's just that I used to be a firefighter, so I'm mostly used to yelling at people for false alarms and occasionally helping someone who's in actual need. Here, I have to be all soft-spoken so I don't frighten the women. I

learned earlier this week that, even though she's buying lingerie, it isn't appropriate to hint that it might spice up her sex life if she bought a certain piece." Peter laughed a little. He could see it, Alex trying to help and it coming out all wrong. "So I had this epiphany. It's not really earth shattering, but okay, here goes; I'm really not that into women's underwear."

Peter laughed. "What about men's underwear?" He fought the blush that wanted to make an appearance.

"Wearing leather today, baby?"

"No."

Alex smiled fondly. "Shame. I liked those."

Peter swallowed. Was this the time to tell him? No, Alex probably never wanted to see his stuff again, and Peter wasn't sure he'd ever have the guts to tell Alex. Maybe show him, he'd done that before. Sometimes he even put on lace before he went to the pub. Not in this town, but in neighbouring ones. He'd always dreamt about going out in suspender belts. Those, with a matching pair of panties, were about the hottest thing Peter could imagine, but he didn't dare. He didn't even own a suspender belt.

"Okay then, what's your take on teddies" Alex asked mischievously.

"Scandalous," Peter said with a straight face. Alex let out a surprised laugh, and Peter smiled. It was a nice laugh.

Alex was having a hard time playing it cool. He was thrilled that Peter had shown up, but fuck if he wanted it to show. He'd been waiting all week, and every day he'd scolded himself for pining after someone who didn't want him. He knew he wasn't smart enough to land a guy like Peter, but he wanted to try. Now he felt the need to establish something, to make sure he'd at least see Peter again.

"Would you like to go out for dinner?"

"What, today?"

"No, not today. I've been working late every fucking day this week, and there's still a lot to do, so it'll be another long day. Even if I have to stay here until dawn to get everything done, I will, because there's no way in hell I'm coming back here this weekend." Alex thought about the post that was piled up in the office. It would take him hours to go through it all.

“No trip to the pub tonight, then?”

“God no, I’m never drinking again! I spent all of Sunday nursing my hangover, and I still felt half dead on Monday.” Peter laughed. God, Alex loved that sound. He would do just about anything to keep this man laughing. “Unless you want me to go, that is.”

“Nah, I guess you’re right. No use in spending what few days you have off being hungover.”

“So can I take you out? Dinner, tomorrow night?”

“On a Sunday?”

“I work Saturdays and have Sundays and Mondays off.”

“I work Monday, but sure, as long as you’re not planning to get me drunk.”

“No, just a glass of wine or two. You like wine?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“Great, six o’clock, okay?”

“Sure.”

Alex made sure they exchanged phone numbers before he let Peter get on with his day. He even smiled for the rest of the day. The smile, however, disappeared when he sat down with the paperwork. God, he hated paperwork. He figured it took him about three times as long as a normal person.

He felt a bit guilty about not telling Peter that he’d agreed to a date with a dim-witted idiot, but he really wanted to keep Peter for a bit longer, so he was faking it. He’d even pretended to read the paper while Peter had been in the shop. Pathetic.

Linda really hadn’t thought things through when she suggested that Alex should take care of the business while she was away. He knew next to nothing about bookkeeping and even less about lingerie, but she’d insisted.

He was pretty sure it was because of the accident. She probably thought it would help him move on. Alex had been feeling low ever since his forced retirement from the fire brigade. All he’d had was his work, and the guys there. Now, he had nothing.

Maybe he should give the guys a ring. He’d been shutting them out since his injury, but he missed them now. He was stranded in this hellhole of a town for four months, and he didn’t have anyone apart from Peter. And even though he

really liked Peter, he couldn't be sure that it wouldn't end badly, or end before it could even start.

Peter was nervous and excited at the same time. He was fussing in front of the mirror. There weren't many places to go to in this town, so he was pretty sure a suit wasn't required. But he looked so darn good in them that he'd put one on anyway. The midnight blue wool picked up the colour of his eyes in an almost unnatural way. He wanted his thigh-highs underneath but put on ordinary black socks instead. He was not, however, going on a date in his goddamned Tuesday boxers.

It made him nervous to think about how Alex would react if they got naked. Peter knew that he was different, but he'd never feared to take his clothes off before things with Nick went bad. Nick had ridiculed him for being the total freak Peter now knew that he was. It was a perversion to want to wear panties when you were a guy, he'd said. No self-respecting man would ever be caught wearing something like that. Peter hadn't shown his panties to anyone after things with Nick had ended, but what could he do?

He was fretting while he waited for Alex. He kept pacing by the living room window to force himself away from the bedroom and his safe, boring, soul-killing Tuesday boxers. By the time the doorbell rang, he had managed to distress himself to the point where he actually considered cancelling the date altogether.

Alex looked a bit shocked when Peter opened the door but his expression soon turned to wonder. "You look beautiful." Peter was pleased to hear Alex's breath hitch a little and smiled.

"Thank you. You look pretty hot yourself."

Alex smiled nervously and looked down at himself in an almost self-conscious way. He wasn't wearing a suit—just jeans and a button-down—but to Peter he looked cracking. The way the jeans stretched over well-formed thighs had Peter salivating. He loved nice thighs, and Alex had very nice thighs.

"So, ready to go?" Alex asked. He wasn't responding to the compliment, but seemed excited about the date.

The restaurant was almost empty. Peter wasn't surprised. Sunday wasn't a big date night, and the few restaurants they had in town closed early. Once they

were seated and had ordered their meals, Peter couldn't help smiling. Alex seemed so happy to be there with him, and he couldn't figure out why.

Peter thought of himself as a boring, average looking guy who liked to teach maths, play floorball with his colleagues, and solve Sudoku puzzles while having his morning coffee. Whereas Alex was gorgeous, and amusing, and a firefighter for God's sake—how much more of a fantasy could anyone be?

“Why did you stop being a firefighter?” Peter asked. Immediately he saw some of Alex's good mood evaporate.

“I was in an accident, and now I can't do the job.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Peter felt bad and a little unsure of how to proceed.

“Yeah, well, it happens, you know. I fell through a floor and hurt my back. Not much to do about it.”

“Was it a long time ago?”

“Eight months now. I don't know what to do, really. I think Linda's whole backpacking thing is a scheme to get me to work again,” Alex grumbled like a child. Peter couldn't help but smile.

“Really?”

“Absolutely! No, not really. I think this is the last thing she and Marcus will do before they succumb to the white-picket-fence-thing this town's got going.”

“Ah, one last journey before the doom?”

“Yeah, she's probably already knocked up and planning for me to run the shop for an unforeseeable future.”

“Would you?”

“I hate this town but yeah, I probably would. She's my little sister, not much I wouldn't do for her. And she's working too hard. It's more work than one person should do.”

“But could you be content living here?”

Alex shrugged. Peter tried to stop his brain from making plans for the future, especially if Alex couldn't see himself living here. Not that Peter was overly fond of the judgemental little town but his life was here, his job, his friends. If he couldn't share that with Alex, he didn't really see any point in dating him. Peter wasn't getting any younger, and he wanted a partner in his life, not a casual fling. But he probably shouldn't be thinking like that. He

should enjoy this while it lasted. He knew how abruptly a good thing could come to an end.

Alex was hot and funny. Apart from that lingerie comment last Saturday, he hadn't made Peter feel bad about himself once. Besides, Alex couldn't really be blamed for how Peter had interpreted the comment. He probably still thought Peter was a nut job for storming away from him like that.

The date was going well. Alex was having a great time. He didn't want the night to end, but he knew that Peter had to work in the morning. Still, on their way home he was hoping for Peter to invite him in.

Peter's terrace house wasn't new, but it wasn't worn down either. It looked nice from the outside. Nothing fancy, but a perfectly good place to live either alone or with a family. Alex could sort of see himself living like that, with a partner and maybe a dog.

Oh God! He was succumbing to the white-picket-fence-thing.

"So, eh... you want to come in?" Oh, Alex wanted to alright, but he was trying to read Peter. Last time, when he'd invited himself over, the evening hadn't ended well.

"You okay with that? I mean, you don't feel like you need to go to bed right away?"

"Maybe you could tuck me in," Peter said with a soft smile.

Yes! "Maybe I could."

Peter had barely unlocked the door before Alex grabbed him from behind and pushed him up against the wall in the hallway. "God, I've wanted to do this all night," he growled into the crook of Peter's neck as he let his hands wander over the suit that had been driving him mad since he first laid eyes on Peter earlier. "You look so damn good, I've been wanting to rumple this suit for hours."

He found the spot beneath Peter's ear that made him shiver and groan like crazy. God, he wanted to fuck him right here, right now, up against the wall. Grinding his cock against Peter's arse made his back twinge, but he ignored it.

"Can I fuck you?"

Peter shuddered and nodded.

“Here? Can I fuck you here in the hallway?” Peter nodded again.

Alex feasted on Peter's neck while he searched his pockets for a condom and lube. Peter broke free, shrugged off his suit jacket, and started to unbutton his shirt, but Alex knocked away his hands. “I want to do it,” he mumbled between the kisses he planted on the naked skin of Peter's throat. Alex's lips found the collarbone, and he sucked hard, leaving a mark.

Peter moaned and wiggled while Alex undressed him. Alex felt him tense when he started unbuttoning the trousers, but Peter didn't try to stop him. He searched Peter's face to see if he'd changed his mind, but he avoided his eyes. He slipped his finger in under the fabric and felt... lace? His eyes found Peter's, and he raised a brow in question.

Peter tried to look away, but Alex trapped him with his gaze. Peter looked nervous, ashamed, and a little defeated, not a good look on him, and Alex wanted it gone. Gone as soon as fucking possible.

“I, eh...” Alex couldn't let him finish that. He didn't want to hear what was about to come out of Peter's mouth, so he took the easy way out and covered it with his own. He kissed Peter hard, and deep, and dirty, and maybe a tad more possessively than he had the right to. He was grinding, and groaning, and devouring Peter in every way he could.

When he felt that Peter was distracted, he pushed at the trousers until they fell to the floor and glanced down. Holy shit! Peter was wearing pink bikini briefs completely in lace.

His preppy little teacher appeared to have an underwear kink. Alex groaned. That was so hot. The realisation that Peter had been sitting in the restaurant in his immaculate suit looking all hot and proper while wearing these underneath made Alex whimper.

He turned Peter around so that he was facing the wall again. Oh God, that was hot. Peter's body, cut and lithe, in something that should've been feminine but most definitely was not. Alex wanted to caress every part of Peter but his hands were shaking. He had to focus on getting himself under control.

Peter had gone very still, not saying or doing anything. The muscles in his back were taut. Alex wanted to soothe him, but at the same time he wanted to follow every line of muscle with his tongue, keeping them flexed.

“For me, baby?” Alex asked raspily even though he was pretty sure they were for Peter and not for him at all. He didn't really care, they were for him now.

Peter still didn't say anything, but he loosened up a bit. Alex stroked the fabric. It caught a little on the rough skin of his fingers. He grabbed Peter's arse and kneaded it. It was an awkward angle, but he wanted to watch as his movements made the fabric tighten over Peter's cock. The lace had to be coarse against that sensitive skin, but Peter was panting and whimpering as if it was the most pleasurable caress imaginable.

He lifted the lacy elastic waistband and peeked inside while parting Peter's cheeks a little. Jesus, he wanted to fuck him with the panties on, wanted to pull the fabric aside but still be able to feel it while he pounded into Peter.

Alex's fingers found their way under the lace and in between Peter's arse cheeks. He was too dry. Fumbling, he retrieved the sample-sized lube packet, tore it open with his teeth, and wet his fingers. He groaned as he forced Peter's legs a little further apart for better access. The panties stretched over his knuckles as his fingers slid in between the cheeks and teased the hole.

"Fuck, Peter."

Up until then, Peter had seemed a little shocked by Alex's reaction, and had remained quite passive as if he were waiting for something. Now, though, he was starting to make those amazing sounds that Alex had fantasized about the entire week. He caressed the furrowed skin, letting the tip of his finger slide in just a little. Peter moaned louder when he was breached and goose bumps broke out across his back. Alex didn't have patience for nice and slow; that would have to wait for another time. He prayed to God there would be another time.

He stretched Peter fast, adding another finger each time he thought Peter could handle it. "Fuck you're hot. I just want to bury myself balls deep in that sweet arse of yours."

"Yes!" Peter hissed and nodded.

Alex fumbled a little with the condom before he squeezed out more lube from the package and slicked himself. What was left he put in the palm of his hand, about to reach around and take hold of Peter's cock when he realised his dilemma. Peter's cock was still trapped in lace. He froze a little in indecision.

Alex hadn't even gotten inside of Peter, and already he was having a hard time keeping himself together. He stepped up close, keeping the fabric out of the way and let his cock slide between Peter's cheeks. He felt the panties pull at his balls and had to stretch the lace so it didn't hinder his access. Growling he nipped at Peter's shoulder, placed himself right, and pushed forward a little. He

felt the muscles give way, the head slid into the tight, welcoming heat. He fisted the lace in his hand to prevent himself from ripping it off altogether.

Peter was standing with his legs apart and his hands placed on the wall as if a police officer had told him to assume position.

“Baby, you make me so hard, driving me insane. I want to fuck you until I can’t stand up any more.”

Alex had to force himself to take it slow. Peter made an unintelligible sound and bucked against him. The lace scratched against the skin on Alex’s hip, and he shivered. Shit, how was Peter doing this? He was not going to last, and he didn’t even have a thing for lace, not really. He got off more on Peter getting off on it, not the lace itself.

Suddenly, he felt frustrated by the way the panties limited his ability to touch Peter. He wanted to rip the flimsy fabric away and touch the man as he pleased. So he did. He took hold of the fabric by the hip with both hands and ripped it, leaving smears of lube on Peter’s skin. One hard pull at the seam and the panties fell to the floor, still around one of Peter’s legs.

“Hey! I liked those.”

“I’ll buy you new ones.” Alex rolled his hips, feeling Peter surrounding him. He would give him a freaking lingerie shop if it pleased him.

“You will?”

“Anything you want, baby. Anything that makes you happy.”

Peter cursed softly against the wall, not loud enough to hear unless you were leaning in close. Alex rolled his hips again and fisted Peter’s hot, velvety cock. Peter moaned and writhed while Alex thrust into him, trying to find the right angle and consciously ignoring the pain in his back while he did. He soaked it all in, Peter’s groans and shudders, the way their bodies fit together.

This was like the ultimate fantasy. Well, maybe not the ultimate. He’d never fantasized about panties, but he had hundreds of fantasies like this one, fucking in unusual places—like a hallway. He wanted to try them all, with Peter. Every single one of them. He was so damn responsive and somehow classy and dirty at the same time. Alex thought he’d die.

“Not gonna last,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Uh-huh.” Peter nodded and let out a growly moan, his inner muscles gripping Alex hard, suddenly bringing Alex to a bright white heaven. In the

same moment, Alex felt Peter's hot cum run down his fingers. The smell of sweat and spunk was filling his senses. Glorious. Peter was fucking glorious.

He rested his sweaty forehead against Peter's shoulder, half hanging onto him, half holding him up. Peter was breathing hard but otherwise didn't move a muscle. Alex started to giggle. It wasn't the manliest thing to do, but who the fuck cared? He grasped the base of the condom before pulling out and slid down onto the cold hallway floor, tugging at Peter to make him follow. Both of them still had their shoes on, trousers crumpled around their ankles. Alex's giggle transformed into full-out laughter.

"What are you laughing about?" Peter sounded angry and hurt at the same time.

"Nothing, it's just... I sort of fantasized about doing that ever since I saw you opening the door earlier. But this wasn't part of it. Cold floor, feet tangled up in trousers, a used condom in my hand." He turned to Peter and kissed his elbow since that was the part nearest to him.

"That's what you're laughing about? Cold floors?"

"Yeah, I guess, though I think I find the condom funnier."

"You don't... you don't mind?"

"Mind what?"

Peter was holding the pink lace a little sheepishly.

"Mind? Why the hell would I mind?" Alex hadn't meant to raise his voice but he had, a little, and Peter flinched.

"It's just that... some of the guys I've hooked up with... didn't like it."

"Baby, you're hotter than the sun, and if they didn't see that, it's their loss and my gain."

The following weeks Peter was on cloud nine. He and Alex would go out or stay in a few times each week. They stayed together from the time Alex closed the shop on Saturday afternoon until Monday morning when Peter went to work. Altogether, life seemed pretty awesome.

Peter even gave Alex his extra key after finding him with chattering teeth on the doorstep one cold evening after work. It was no big deal, they weren't living together or anything, but that way Alex could come and go as he pleased.

Today, Peter was finishing early because one of his classes was away on a study tour, and he thought he'd surprise Alex at work. He bought coffee and Danish pastries on the way, hoping that Alex would have time to take a break while the coffee was still hot.

The bell tinkled as always, but before Peter even crossed the threshold he heard a whiny female voice echoing through the shop from the fitting rooms at the back. The voice was answered by a defeated grumble from Alex.

A few moments later Alex walked into view with his arms full of bras in different shapes and colours. He was pale but brightened when he saw Peter. Peter wasn't fooled though. There was a strained expression beneath the smile, and he wondered what was wrong.

"Everything okay?" He felt a bit foolish standing there with his bag of pastries and cups of coffee while Alex was wrestling with bras.

"I'm not smart enough for this."

"You're smart."

"No, I'm not," he snapped. During the weeks they'd spent together, Alex had never snapped at him. He could be a little growly and raise his voice sometimes but not really at Peter.

"What's wrong?"

"There's this... bitch," he hissed. "She's been here for forty-five fucking minutes and wants my advice about every fucking bra in the shop. I don't know shit about bras! I've just figured out what a T-shirt bra is."

"You could just read to her from some catalogue."

"It would take me forty-five minutes just to figure out what the text meant." Their eyes met, and a desperate, pained expression crossed Alex's face. "I can't read! The only way I ever finished school was with Linda writing my essays and reports."

Little things fell into place, the way Alex seemed hung up on intelligence, and how he often said that Peter was smart. "So, you have dyslexia?"

"Fuck if I know! It wasn't like they'd give you an excuse for being stupid when I went to school. I swore I would never come back to this hellhole. Being the dumb kid is not much fun, you know." Alex looked as if he was about to burst into tears. "I guess you don't want me now. A brainless idiot with a busted back, not much of catch."

“Shh.” Peter threw his arms around the mountain of bras and Alex. “Now, that was stupid. Of course I want you. How could I not want you?” Alex was rigid in his embrace. “Why don’t you sit down by the counter and have some coffee while I talk to the little lady in the fitting room.”

“There’s nothing little about her, and I can’t sit down...” Peter raised his brows in question. “I hurt my back trying to lift a box,” Alex rumbled. Ah, that explained the paleness and the tension.

“Do you have your painkillers here?” Alex nodded. “Well, take a pill, drink some coffee, and I’ll see what I can do about the customer.”

“She’s a walrus and doesn’t want any lines to show through her clothes. It’s an impossible feat.”

“We’ll see,” Peter laughed softly and went to the woman in question. He focused on keeping his face blank, and his mind off Alex’s walrus metaphor—or at least he tried.

“How can I help you?” he asked when he met the not-so-pleased plus-sized woman.

His customer explained that she was going to a wedding and was wearing a satin dress and that there couldn’t possibly be any bra or panty lines. He let his eyes wander, trying to think about what he knew about lingerie.

The woman was quite plump but she had beautiful curves, and Peter thought she would be stunning in the right dress. A bra would create bulges, and Peter knew that wouldn’t be flattering in satin but there were other choices. She needed some kind of bust support; otherwise, the dress wouldn’t fit as it should.

“Have you tried a corset?”

“Are you kidding me? My husband would die!”

“And go to heaven, darling!” No one would mind Peter flaming and going a little limp-wristed in this situation, right? He was having so much fun that he had a hard time containing himself. “Trust me, if you have a one-piece there will be no bulges, and you can pick one with suspender straps. That way you have the stockings sorted too, without bulges in the waist. For that I would recommend a G-string to minimize the lines altogether.”

The woman looked a little pale and started to object. “I can’t wear a G-string.”

“If I can, you can.”

She actually blushed at that but she didn't seem to be put off. He heard a soft laugh behind him and almost jumped out of his skin. Alex gave him a fond smile before going back to the counter. Peter felt a little flutter in his stomach but quickly returned to the customer.

"I'm sure we have some full body shapers if that's what you really want, but believe me, corsets are so much sexier, and your husband will be blown away."

The woman left a short time later with a smile on her lips and a huge bag of lingerie.

"How did you do that?" Alex asked with something close to adoration in his voice.

"I know all about unwanted lines," Peter answered with a wink. He strutted away to sort out the mountain of bras Alex had left piled on the counter, feeling darned good about himself.

Alex was waiting for Peter to come home. They didn't usually meet on Tuesdays because of Peter's floorball practice after work, but he'd been going mad in Linda's flat. He felt like a caged tiger in that cluttered space. Peter's house was much better, open spaces free from knick-knacks and bits and bobs. Here he could relax and feel right at home.

He thought he ought to surprise Peter with a hot meal, but his lack of cooking skills was one of the reasons he'd become a fireman in the first place, so he steered clear of the kitchen. You do not impress your boyfriend by burning down his house. He had, however, stopped by the sushi bar on his way over and hoped that Peter would be pleased.

Sitting on the living room sofa with his laptop before him, he started to search for something nice for Peter to wear. He hadn't replaced the panties he'd ripped that first time in the hallway but he intended to, if only he could figure out how to spell what he wanted to buy.

It was harder than he thought to actually find a good e-shop. He'd figured there would be a wide selection but there really wasn't. Sure, he found some shops, but the choices were pretty limited. Maybe he should leaf through Linda's product catalogues and see if any of them traded in panties for men. Alex smiled just thinking about it. That would be a shock for her, coming home to find that she was now selling men's lingerie.

He'd never thought that men in lace or satin would be hot but, God, they were. Peter standing tall in the bedroom wearing nothing but pink thigh highs and a raging hard-on was about as hot as it could get. He loved it when Peter took something as feminine as pink stockings, put them on, and gave Alex a defiant look. Those times always ended with Alex manhandling him into whatever position he saw fit and fucking Peter within an inch of his life.

He wanted Peter in a suspender belt and stockings, preferably in black lace, and he wanted Peter to fuck him dressed in it. So far, he had always topped but not because he wanted it to be that way. He liked to top just fine, but he wanted to bottom as well. He thought Peter would be okay with that. They hadn't talked about it, and Alex didn't think that Peter would take control if Alex didn't give him the verbal go ahead.

He found the lace he was looking for and added it to his shopping cart. He also found a suspender belt in black leather. It wasn't really designed for stockings but it made Alex's mouth go dry, so he bought that too, even though it cost a pretty penny. Just as he clicked to confirm his purchase, he heard Peter's car in the garage driveway. He put away the laptop and went to meet him in the hallway, prepared to explain why he was there on a Tuesday.

"Hi," Peter said. He gave Alex a smile and a quick kiss, walking past as if Alex's presence had been expected. Oh! Freshly showered man. Fuck, that's hot! Alex returned the smile and trailed after him.

In the bedroom, he leaned against the door frame and watched as Peter busied himself with unpacking his gym bag and then repacking it with clean clothes. He always did that, packed the bag right away, and put it in the hallway so he could take it to the car the next morning. Alex hadn't actually seen him do this before since he usually wasn't there on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but Peter had told him once that he did it so he'd always have a set of fresh gym clothes in the car.

Alex wasn't smart, but he remembered shit like that. If Peter told him something, no matter how trivial, he remembered. And he loved to watch Peter, memorizing everything he saw. He liked all the little things he did—how he placed his coffee cup next to his Sudoku puzzle in the morning, how he organised his work papers in different stacks with colour coded Post-it notes on them, how he always straightened the towels in the lavatory after his shower.

Peter was dead sexy and didn't even know it. Alex couldn't understand what had made him think of the man as average-looking that first time they'd

met. Peter was gorgeous, all warm colours and big blue eyes. His body was well defined, slender but not skinny.

Alex was getting hard just from watching Peter as he pattered around. The other day he'd laid Peter down on the bed and used only his mouth to get him off through a pair of baby blue satin panties. That had been so fucking hot, the moisture from Peter's cock seeping through the fabric, the hard shaft straining against the unyielding satin.

The next time Peter passed him, Alex pounced, taking Peter down on the bed. He ground his hard cock against Peter's thigh to let him know what was on his mind.

"I've been waiting for you," he mumbled against Peter's throat.

"Have you, now?" Peter sounded pleased but a little subdued.

"Oh yes, I have."

Alex found the button in Peter's trousers. "I was thinking about the other day." He undid the button and started to open the zip, wondering what beautiful treasure would be waiting for him today. He looked down and saw... plain boxers. Ordinary boxer shorts in a dull dark blue.

"What's this?" Alex asked, before he could school his disappointment.

"Tuesday boxers," Peter mumbled and looked so sad that Alex wanted to scream. No one should ever have to wear Tuesday boxers.

"Why?"

"Floorball."

"So?"

"So... The guy who teaches Religion is on the team, he's sixty-two and very conservative. The gym teacher is a total phobe, and the English teacher always tries to set me up on blind dates with women, no matter how many times I tell her I'm gay. They already think I'm weak because of my sexuality. I must be more woman than man because I like dick, right? What do you think would happen if I showed up in lace or silk?"

"Yeah, okay, but why not a jockstrap? That ought to be okay. I mean, that's acceptable amongst athletes, right?" Alex was getting a little excited. Not excited in the way he would be if Peter had been wearing something nice, but maybe he could help Peter find something to wear that wouldn't make him sad.

“Don’t you have jocks?” Alex was up off the bed in a heartbeat shuffling through Peter’s drawers. God, he probably had more panties than they had in stock at *Underneath*. He was going to find something. He would make his man happy again.

“I had a jock on the first time we met.”

Alex shivered at the memory. “So you did. Why don’t you wear that on Thursday?” Peter burst out laughing, and Alex was pleased to hear it.

“Leather would probably be a little better than lace, but I still don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“God, baby, do you have anything that’s both leather and lace?”

“Not in jocks but I do have a pair of hipsters that are leather with frilly lace down the thighs.”

Alex groaned. “So, what do we have on the jockstrap front?”

“Not much. I have some that are sheer.”

Okay, maybe not solving the problem but what the hell. “What are you waiting for? Put them on.”

Peter gave him a smile that made Alex’s insides melt as he started to rummage through the mountain of underwear.

Peter was having a horrid day. He and Alex had overslept, and he’d had to rush to work, just to make it in time for his first class. He’d then had to improvise, since there hadn’t been time to pick out the books he needed, and there’d been no opportunity to go to print materials. The day hadn’t gotten any better from there. Now, he’d just realised that this was Thursday!

Thursday meant floorball. Floorball meant Tuesday underwear. And was Peter wearing Tuesday underwear? No, of course not! He had no idea how he would solve this problem. He could skip practice and go home early, but that felt wrong. Why should he stay away from the locker room just because he didn’t wear the same kind of underpants as other men did? He would just change quickly. They probably wouldn’t even notice.

It could be worse, it really could. He could’ve been wearing thongs or sheer panties, the satin boxer briefs weren’t that bad. The problem, however, was that they were red with a little border of black lace in the front.

Before he headed to the locker room he went to the loo, and took off his stockings. Better to be barefoot than to take off his trousers and reveal the thigh highs he wore underneath. He didn't usually wear stockings at work, but Alex had caught him caressing them as he got dressed this morning, and had given him a smouldering look. On they went, and off he went. He had a pair of socks in his gym bag, so he wouldn't have to be barefoot during the game, just on the way home. It was no big deal.

He was late, again. Theme of the day! When he stumbled into the locker room it was already filled with men. There was no way around it, Peter realised. He tried to turn his back as much as he could and dropped his trousers. Faster than ever before, he stepped into his shorts and pulled them up.

“What the hell, Peter! What was that?” Great. Thomas, the gym teacher. “Are you wearing panties?” Peter tried to ignore the guy, but his voice held the same tone his mother's always had. “You sick fuck! Not enough to take a dick up your arse, you have to dress like a girl too?”

Peter felt like he was seventeen again. At that time he hadn't dared to wear anything other than the briefs his mother bought him, but he had silk, leather and lace hidden in his room. His mother had found them, of course. It was now more than fifteen years since they'd last spoken, but her voice still rang loud and clear in his head every time someone judged him. He'd loved her, tried to please her in every possible way, but the woman, who'd strictly forbidden every curse word since the day he was born, had spewed so much filth that he'd feared he'd never recover from it.

Peter fidgeted with his T-shirt. He didn't know how to handle this. Nick, his mother, every hook-up that ever laughed at him—too many old ghosts were surfacing.

“I guess that answers any question about who's the girl in your relationships.” Some of the others were snickering, and Peter felt the walls closing in.

“Sickening,” Thomas whispered to him in contempt.

Peter threw his clothes in the bag and ran from the locker room, fighting down tears on his way out.

Alex had just hung up the phone. That had been one of the hardest conversations he'd had in years. Not only had he been avoiding everyone he

used to hang out with, he hadn't told any of them that he'd moved away, packed up his things and gone back to his home town.

David had given him a lashing he wasn't likely to forget any time soon, but everything was sorted now, and he couldn't wait to tell Peter. He'd told the guys that he had a new boyfriend, and they were all excited to meet him. Alex hoped that Peter wouldn't mind that he'd invited them over next Saturday. It was a bit of a long drive, but not too bad. He'd ask Peter to make his divine lasagne, and everything would be great.

Alex put his phone in the charger on the kitchen counter. At first, he hadn't planned on coming over this evening since Peter had floorball, but he'd realised he hardly had anything left in Linda's flat. His charger was here, and his battery was down to one bar. His laptop, most of his clothes, all of his shoes, even his gym bag was here.

He was pouring himself a glass of water when he heard the front door slam closed. "Peter?" No answer. He stepped into the hallway, and was almost knocked over as a badly dishevelled Peter charged past. Some water spilled out of the glass and onto Alex's shirt, but Peter didn't seem to notice. "Hey, are you all right?"

"Yes," Peter hissed without looking at him as he headed for the bedroom dressed in shorts, a T-shirt, and nothing else. Strange.

"Baby, could you make a lasagne for next Saturday? I invited..."

"I'm not your fucking wife!"

Alex was shocked by the hostility in Peter's tone. "No, of course..."

"I'm not a girl. I'm not weak. You can't just screw me..."

"Hey! What are you talking about?" What the fuck?

"I'm not a girl!"

"I wouldn't be here if you were."

"You just asked me to cook for you. I don't cook for you, or clean for you, got it? Just because I suck your cock, it doesn't make me your slave. You know what? Get out."

"What?" Alex stared at Peter in disbelief. What the hell just happened?

"Didn't you hear me? Get out!" Peter was screaming, and his eyes were brimming with tears that threatened to spill over.

“Baby...” Alex said softly.

“Get out!”

Alex did. He turned around and left. He didn't want to, but he did. He'd give Peter some time to cool down. Tomorrow he'd come back and get to the bottom of this, whatever it was.

The moment he heard the front door click shut, Peter began regretting that he'd yelled at Alex. Alex had never done anything that made Peter think less of himself. It was quite the opposite, really. Alex always made him feel good about himself, and what he liked. He had even tried to help Peter find a way out of his Tuesday boxer blues. It hadn't helped, but still.

How could he have screamed at the first man who'd ever really accepted him for who he was—the first who seemed to like Peter's panties almost as much as Peter did? Alex was the first who'd ever told him that he looked hot in lace. He'd had partners before who'd laughed it off and been okay with it, but they hadn't truly appreciated Peter's kink. Alex did.

Peter wondered how he could ever set foot outside his house again. This was worse than when Nick had left him with his trousers down, and then told everyone he knew about it. This time it was his colleagues, the people he worked with every day. He couldn't even imagine what kind of rumours would be flying around the teachers' lounge come morning. He knew he couldn't face it. He contemplated ringing in sick, maybe even resigning. There had to be some other job he could do.

He was so tired. Tired of always hiding who he was and what he liked. That was probably why he loved being with Alex so much; he never had to pretend. He could wear what he wanted, and Alex would still tackle him every chance he got.

But that was also part of the problem. Thomas's comment, about which one was the girl, had stung because it echoed Peter's own fears. He was afraid that Alex saw him, not as a girl, but as the weaker half of the relationship. Alex never did anything that made Peter think of himself as less of a man. He knew it was all in his head, and he hated that he thought something like that. He knew that being a bottom had nothing at all to do with being weak, but he wanted a relationship where he felt that he too could do the tackling—where he could be dominant even if he was wearing panties. But he wasn't like Alex. Alex would shove him up against the wall, and growl that he wanted to fuck him. When he

did, Peter got so hot that it never even occurred to him to suggest they'd trade places.

He went to bed early, but sleep didn't come. He got up and phoned in sick. At midnight he finally caved and gave Alex a ring. Alex's phone rang, and rang, until it went through to voice mail. After the beep, Peter mumbled a "Sorry," and hoped that Alex would ring him the next day.

Alex was in a hurry. He'd overslept for the second day in a row. Today, it had happened because his phone still was on the charger in Peter's kitchen. He didn't have any clean clothes in the flat. Not that it was important, but some people frowned on wearing the same clothes as the day before. Still, he couldn't be bothered. He couldn't really find it in him to care if he was late, or what people would think of him when he showed up all wrinkled and unsorted.

Lunch came quickly, and he had to get his phone because he was expecting a notification about the package from the e-shop. He didn't have a minute to spare. He was going to give this gift to Peter, even if the man didn't want anything more to do with him. Alex couldn't understand what he'd done wrong, but he wouldn't force his presence on Peter if he didn't want him. He might be stupid, but he was not that stupid.

He practically ran through town to get to Peter's place. He put the key in the front door, but it was already unlocked. Alex opened it carefully. He had every intention of speaking to Peter about what had happened, but he didn't have time for a confrontation right now.

The house was completely silent. Surely, if Peter was home there would've been some sounds, a radio, the telly, or something. He wiped his shoes on the doormat, and proceeded into the kitchen. His phone was where he'd left it on the counter. He took it, left the charger since he planned on coming back, and was just heading for the door when he heard the shower start. He had about two minutes before he had to run back to *Underneath*.

He glanced into the bathroom. "Peter?" Peter's head flew up, his eyes locking with Alex's through the misty glass of the shower enclosure.

"Alex! Wait." Peter stuck his head under the spray, rinsing out the shampoo. "I'll be out in three minutes."

"I don't have three minutes."

"What? You won't even give me three minutes?" Peter looked hurt.

“I’ll be back after work, okay?” God, he wished he could stand there and watch the suds run down Peter’s body all day. The light from the fixture above the mirror reflected on wet skin, making it glisten.

“You’ll be back?” Peter asked, sounding uncertain.

Alex raised one brow. “Of course. I practically live here, you know.”

“You do?”

Alex smiled and shook his head, he would’ve thought that Peter had noticed all his things lying around. “See you later, honey.”

Peter nodded, looking a little dazed as he returned to his shower.

Peter was waiting for Alex to come home. He actually thought of it as that: home. Not just for him, but for Alex too. He wasn’t quite sure when that had happened, and he certainly hadn’t noticed Alex moving in, but as he went through the house he realised that Alex’s things were everywhere. His clothes were in the cupboard, his laptop in the living room, his charger in the kitchen, everywhere he looked something reminded him that Alex was mostly living here too.

He was nervous. Alex should’ve been home by now. Maybe he wasn’t coming, after all. Maybe he’d thought things through and decided that Peter wasn’t worth the trouble. He was pacing the living room, and had been for a while, when he heard the front door open. In a heartbeat he was in the hallway.

Alex smiled at him. “You okay, sweetie?” Peter flinched, why did he have to call him sweetie, or baby, or anything, it wasn’t very... manly, was it?

“Sure.”

“Sure?”

“I’m sorry,” Peter blurted.

Alex nodded. “Talk to me.”

Peter couldn’t really look at Alex. “I forgot that it was Thursday.” He watched as realisation dawned, and then Alex burst out laughing.

“No way! What were you wearing?”

Peter smiled weakly. He wasn’t even close to finding this funny yet, but Alex’s reaction was amusing. “Red satin.”

“Oh. Those are pretty.” Yes, they were.

He didn't know how to continue. Alex deserved an explanation, and an apology. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"You're forgiven," Alex said, and handed him a pink package with a black bow. Again, not very manly.

"You know... I'm not a girl. You don't have to buy presents for me." Alex gave him a strange look.

"I didn't."

He hadn't?

"Did you make it?" Peter eyed the package sceptically.

"No, but I didn't buy it for you. I bought it for me." Alex had a predatory gleam in his eyes. "But if I want to buy you presents, I'm going to buy you presents, end of story."

"You bought it for you? You want me to believe that you bought a pink package, for yourself?" Peter started to give it back, but Alex pushed it back at him.

"I did. Is there a problem with me liking pink packages?"

Peter blushed, as if he could ever criticise someone for liking something that was considered feminine. "No, it's just that sometimes... well... you call me 'sweetie' and you buy me pink presents. I am a man, you know?"

Alex maintained a calm and gentle tone. "For crying out loud, Peter, what has that got to do with anything? I like pretty things just as much as anyone else, and I want to call my man 'baby' or 'honey' or 'sweetie', and I bought that pink package for me. I bought what's in it, for me. For you to wear, while you fuck me."

"While I... fuck you?" Peter almost stuttered. He never used that word unless he was really angry. For a guy with a kink, he really was a prude. "You want me to?"

"Oh yes, I want you to. I want you to fuck me, and me to fuck you, until we're too old to do it any more. I want to love you for the rest of my life. But for today, I want you to fuck me wearing that," he said, pointing at the package. "I want you to put that on, and bend me over the washing machine."

Peter started to smile. "Well, get moving then."

The End

Author Bio

Ofelia Gränd is Swedish through and through. She is constantly thinking of stories she would love to write. Anything and everything is a source of inspiration that has her lost in thought, staring off into space, in no time at all. Sometimes she turns a street corner, and sees a different world. She is often walking around mumbling to herself and her intended characters. Every so often she is painting mental pictures of their appearances, or wishing that she was better at Photoshop, because she knows exactly what the cover of the story in her mind should look like. Real life, however, interferes all too often, and the stories mostly remains unwritten.

In real life, Ofelia is living with her husband and their three children in a small town on the southwestern Swedish coast. When she isn't a stay-at-home mom, she is teaching Swedish and Swedish as a second language to teenagers and adults. She has been thinking about teaching English, but since she isn't fluent in the language, she is sticking to the one she knows well. Therefore, she, more than anyone, is a bit perplexed about why she thought it would be a good idea to try to write in English. But, she'll probably come to her senses—sometime.

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KNIGHT IN SHINING COWBOY BOOTS

By Thianna D

Photo Description

Both wearing jeans and bare-chested. Man on the left is kissing the man on the right's cheek. Man on the right is glaring into the camera while he keeps a tight hold on hands that are at his hips.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

How the hell did this happen, again?

It was just supposed to be a summer job as a ranch hand, something to get him by before he started his last year of college; and yet here he was half-naked, his cheek being caressed by a velvet tongue, and staring questioningly at the man who had forced him into this mess to begin with.

The ranch foreman licked his lips as he watched them through the viewfinder of the camera. He took note of the restraining hand that was keeping the other man from caressing the one watching him with hooded eyes. He remembered the day that the bright eyed freshman with a brand new tattoo had come to the ranch looking for an "internship". Damn city-folk and their hair-brained ideas, but the kid hadn't given up. So the foreman had given in this year, on one condition...

I'm not picky. PWP, fluff, angst. Whatever you wanna do with it. (Please ignore the text on the the picture, I couldn't find a version with no text >.<)

Sincerely,

Ava

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: cowboy, drag queen, in the closet, flamboyant characters, adult film, turning a straight guy gay

Content warnings: dub-con

Word Count: 5,407

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Author's Note

When I received this wonderful little prompt, I had a slight idea of how the story would go. But as always happens when I start a story, the characters have their own ideas. What started out as a small story quickly built into a novel. At over 100k, it is not finished. Realizing I would not get it done and edited within the span of time needed (as when I write a novel it gets put away for 3 months before I can look at it and start rewriting), I elected to take one of the scenes from the novel and write it in a different POV. So, once the novel comes out, you can find out Corrigan's take on this scene.

KNIGHT IN SHINING COWBOY BOOTS

By Thianna D

Stumbling into the small closet that passed for his bedroom in the run-down building reserved for ranch hands, Tyler Campden tossed the bag aside and crashed onto his bed, staring at the wall in front of him in dismay. This could not be happening. Not again. Biting the inside of his cheek hard to stop the tears that threatened to escape, he forced himself to take a few deep breaths to calm down.

This isn't the end of the world, he tried to convince himself. It was nothing. A once-off. And yet... Tyler had the feeling Carlos had no intention of it happening only the one time. But that wasn't even the worst part. No, the nastiest part was it was all captured on camera for the second time in his life. Kyle kissing and touching him, his boner when the sensations became too much, and the pinnacle was Corrigan coming to his aid.

“What the hell was that?” he hissed, shoving his face into his pillow. Tyler wasn't a prude. At the age of twenty-one, he'd had a fair number of sexual partners. But all female. Never had he let a man touch him like he'd been touched today. Never had he thrust and let a guy...

Shuddering, he pulled the pillow out from under him and pulled it over his head, as if doing so would muffle the recollection of the last hour. One hour that would haunt him for years to come, he was sure. Unable to stop the images coming to mind, he sunk into the memory.

“Tyler,” Carlos called.

Looking up from tossing the new hay bales into the back of the truck, Tyler raised an eyebrow at his boss, Carlos Fuega. In his mid-fifties, Carlos had the look of a man who had spent his entire life outside. Deeply tanned, weathered face, brittle brown hair, and an expression Tyler knew well. It said he wanted to get the hell out of here.

“Yeah, boss?” Working at Summerland Ranch had not been Tyler's first choice, but they had offered enough money for sixty days work that it had been

worth his while to step out of the city and into the tall grasses that reminded him a little too much of home.

“Need your help in the old barn.”

A tremble went through Tyler as he knew something odd was happening over in the old barn. Other ranch hands had made teasing and somewhat lewd references to it and as his gut clenched, he knew he should refuse. But if he did, would he lose the job? He truly needed the money this summer position would bring him. It would support him enough that he wouldn't have to work for his entire senior year in college. Instead, he could study for the LSAT and apply and interview at the law schools he wished to attend.

Looking to his left, he grimaced at the strange grin on Tommy Larson's face. “What's with you?” he asked, and Tommy just snickered and turned back to the hay. Straightening up, Tyler pulled off his gloves and walked across the field. The walk to the old, rarely used barn would take a good thirty minutes, and he needed it to convince himself that whatever they needed him for, he could do. There was something strange going on here. He had noticed from his first day. The men working this ranch weren't your typical ranch hands. They were pretty boys, flirts, and most of them—if he was any judge—were gay.

Firmly in the bi-closet ever since he realized he was as attracted to men as he was to women, Tyler never let anyone know of his same-sex attraction. His father and the cowboys he had worked with growing up had taught him one thing. Being gay was an abomination, and they would beat the shit out of anyone they found with that particular disgrace. As he was also attracted to women, he was mostly able to put his own needs aside. But the testosterone and sex that practically oozed through the air out here in the middle of fucking nowhere was too much to ignore.

With nowhere to point his frustration, he tended to use his time in the shower wisely.

Coming up on the barn that, as far as he knew, wasn't used for anything useful, he felt his heart speed up. The expressions on the guys' faces when they left the barn were usually a mixture of euphoria and horror. At least the first time. Just what happened in this building? As he walked up to the door and stopped, he knew he was about to find out. The question was, did he want to? His gut told him that if he walked across the threshold of the barn, his life would change. Tyler just wished he knew if it was a change for the better or the worse.

Sliding the door open, he stepped out of the noonday sun and into the cooler air of the barn, inhaling hay and the old scent of horses. Looking around, he spotted none, so he assumed that it was just one of those scents that once it got into the wood, it was there for good. Standing in the middle of the barn in front of two neatly stacked bales of straw was Kyle Petherly in all his shaved-head glory. Tyler was barely able to control his grimace. He really didn't like Kyle. The man was a suck-up, a tease, and had made a pass at almost every man on the ranch as far as he could tell. If he was any judge, though, Kyle had a thing for Carlos which made Tyler wonder if he and Carlos were in this together.

The door shut behind him, making him jump as he swung round to come face-to-face with the foreman.

"Made good time," Carlos grunted, walking past him and Kyle. Tyler's mouth dropped open as he watched the older man pull a tarp off a video camera and tripod. Turning back, Carlos smiled, a piece of straw between his teeth. "So, Tyler, about time you were initiated into Summerland Ranch."

"Meaning what?" Tyler asked, walking forward incredibly slowly but still keeping his distance from Kyle.

Ignoring the question, Carlos grabbed a small bag and unzipped it, walking over to him. As he spread open the top, Tyler's eyes fell on the bundle of money inside of it, a small moan escaping his lips. With that kind of money, maybe he could live rather than just exist this year.

"It's simple," Carlos said, re-zipping the bag and walking back behind the camera. "You want this? You perform on camera."

"Perform?"

Kyle grinned. "A little kissin'. Some touchin'. Nothin' big."

Tensing as he realized what they were saying, Tyler shook his head, even as his eyes stared at the bag of money.

He couldn't.

"It's nothing," Carlos said in a soothing tone. "You can even keep your pants on if that makes you feel safer. Kyle can touch you, fondle you, kiss you above your clothes or on bare skin."

"Why the camera?" Tyler searched his mind for why this was a bad idea, but the money was clouding out all judgment. Maybe he could even pay for plane tickets to visit law schools instead of driving long distances.

“Artistic merit,” the older man said with a shrug. “We have plans to use this place in the future, and this allows us to learn more about lighting and camera work. Nothing big or bad about this. I promise.”

A little voice in the back of his head was screaming “No!” After all, he had hidden his sexuality for five years. This was heading into a gray area, an area he had dabbled in only once before as a freshman. Surely this couldn't be a good idea?

And yet, that money would be wonderful.

“How long?” he asked, fighting a throat that wanted to close up in protest.

“Forty minutes,” Kyle said in his flirtatious tone, making Tyler grimace again. He really didn't like Kyle. Maybe that would be a good thing. His distaste for the man should preclude any sexual reaction.

“And I don't have to do anything, right?” he hedged.

“Just accept my touch.”

Glancing at the camera, Tyler took a slow breath even as his eyes drifted to the bag. “So, I have to let you touch me for forty minutes and you'll give me that money? No questions asked?”

“No questions asked,” Carlos agreed. “Though you will have to sign a piece of paper saying you accept the money for modeling.”

Modeling. That didn't sound bad. Law schools wouldn't have issues with a guy modeling. They would never have to know what he did, or what was done to him to procure the money. “All right,” he whispered.

“Step into the circle,” Kyle encouraged, pointing out a chalk circle that ran around him and the bales of straw. “As long as you stay in here, the camera can see you.”

“Lose the shirt,” Carlos added as Tyler stepped over the outline. A telltale red light came on, and Tyler tried to ignore it as he tossed aside his hat and unbuttoned and removed his shirt, pulling his undershirt over his head quickly and tossing them both on the straw. Quickly, he pushed back the hair that always fell into his face when he wasn't wearing something to hold it back. Tyler supposed he should get it cut, but he rather liked his hair a little disorderly.

“Ooh, baby,” Kyle said, licking his lower lip. “You are hot!”

Pleased that he felt grossed out by the words pouring from Kyle's lips, Tyler stood in front of him, his eyes turned toward the camera. At least this way he didn't have to watch. Two warm hands landed on his hips and instinctively he grasped them, holding them still as soft warm lips pressed against his cheek. He felt like a wooden statue standing there as Kyle kissed him, warm feathered lips ghosting down his cheek and across his mouth. When a very wet tongue slid along the crease, Tyler clenched his lips together. A low chuckle resounded in Kyle's chest.

"Give it up, baby," he said, nuzzling Tyler's chin. "All men want it. And you will, too. Just let go. Feel. Touch me." Pulling his hands out of Tyler's grip, they slid up Tyler's back, leaving long tendrils of ice in their wake. One hand slid back down and grabbed the back of his jeans, yanking him close. He could feel Kyle's aroused state.

Bile slowly rose up Tyler's throat, and he fought it back. Just forty minutes. Forty minutes and he could leave with that money. Surely he could put up with forty minutes of this?

Holding Tyler's body, Kyle pressed his knee in between Tyler's legs and as he thrust his cock up against Tyler's thigh, his thigh came in contact with Tyler's dick.

"No!" Tyler shouted, jumping back, fighting back the severe nausea threatening to expunge what little he'd had for breakfast this morning.

Raising an eyebrow, Kyle just grinned. "Come on, baby. Stop thinkin'. Just feel." Reaching out, he grasped Tyler's hand too hard to pull away from and steadily, yet firmly, pulled him back within the chalk outline. Kyle placed Tyler's hands on his hips. "Touch me. It'll help," he murmured, his lips already drifting across Tyler's chest.

But Tyler didn't want to touch him. He didn't even want Kyle to be touching him! Glancing at the money one last time, he knew what he had to do. "I can't," he said, starting to back up and glaring when Kyle wrapped his arms around him and held him close.

"Yes, you can," Kyle murmured into Tyler's ear. "Think of all that money. Surely that's worth a grope or two? Just relax, baby. After your first orgasm, it's easier. Never been with a man before?"

"No," Tyler replied woodenly.

"Best fuck of your life. I promise. If you'd let me suck your dick, you'd get over this shyness right now."

Startled, Tyler stared at him wide-eyed. Of course he wanted a blow job. What man wouldn't? But not from this sad excuse for a man. Besides, he was keeping his pants on. Turning to look toward the money, all the air left him quickly as Kyle grasped his dick through his jeans, rubbing lightly.

"Fuck off!" he yelled, pushing Kyle hard enough that he fell backward into the straw. "The money ain't worth it," he managed to say, gulping back the bile in his mouth.

"Sure it is," Carlos said in an encouraging tone. "I know you need it. Tell you what. Let's make it easier on you. Sit on the straw and let Kyle blow you. This is just nerves. It doesn't have to be a big thing. And this way you get a really good blow job out of it. Because, believe me, Kyle knows what he's doing. And then you and the money can walk out of the barn." He lifted the bag and hung it out where Tyler could see it.

Damn, he wanted that money, but he didn't want to be touched by Kyle. Even the thought brought up more bile. If only it was somebody else. Anyone else except for one man, really. He was the only man on the ranch besides Kyle that Tyler found repulsive.

"How are we doing?" As if he had magicked the horror into the barn, Tyler turned and stared at Corrigan Summers who was standing just outside of the chalk circle with a bright smile on his face. Being found in this situation was bad enough. That it was by the biggest queen in the place made it a million times worse. Dressed in tight, red shorts that left nothing to the imagination except where the fuck he tucked his rod and a tight black T-shirt, Corrigan looked like he belonged on stage somewhere. Not on a working ranch in Washington State. The addition of heavy black eyeliner and bright red rouge on his cheeks just made it worse. But with all of that dressing, the part that Tyler couldn't quite get was the man's boots. How the hell did he keep them so shiny with all the dust?

"What do you want, Corrigan?" Carlos grunted.

"Well, since you're getting Tyler into the action, I thought I'd come and lend a hand... if you know what I mean," Corrigan added suggestively.

Something was wrong here. Corrigan was a queen, just the kind of guy Tyler was never attracted to, and yet compared to Kyle, he suddenly felt like a better option. And Tyler wasn't quite sure what to think of that. He hated queens.

Grunting, Carlos shrugged. "You don't get anything from it."

Raising an eyebrow, Corrigan ran his gaze down and back up Tyler's body. "Honey, I'll be getting a lot from it."

Standing up, Kyle glared at the newcomer but walked out of the circle to stand next to Carlos. Tyler could see him whispering in the older man's ear but couldn't hear a word. A hand landing on his shoulder made him jump, and he turned, coming face to face with the queen. "Hey," he grunted, his stomach tensing in a strange way.

Corrigan looked over at the camera and gave it a slow, lazy grin, before wrapping his arms around Tyler's shoulders and pulling him close. His lips grazed Tyler's ear making him tremble. In a voice so low the two at the camera probably didn't even realize he was talking, Corrigan whispered, "We can get through this, Tyler. I promise I won't let anything bad happen to you."

Tyler had a brief moment of "What the fuck?" The voice in his ear was deeper, firmer, more commanding than he had heard from Corrigan up to this point. His hold was friendly, warm, and comforting. "What's going on?" he hissed as quietly as he could.

"Just go with it. We can give them what they want without you having to let slack-jaw over there suck you."

Snorting at the term, Tyler fought a desire to smile. Corrigan Summers had a sense of humor. A real one. Who knew?

"And I promise," Corrigan's voice deepened even further, "that the video they're shooting won't leave this ranch."

Tyler relaxed, resting against the slightly older man's chest. Corrigan might only be twenty-five, but right now he seemed older, and in this moment, Tyler felt he could be trusted. And Tyler really needed someone he could trust. "Okay."

"Just follow my lead."

A warm, slightly-calloused hand lightly touched his cheek as warm, velvety lips trailed along his chin. "Just think of me as a woman," Corrigan encouraged with a definite hint of humor in his tone. "I am dressed like one."

Spluttering a laugh, Tyler looked into Corrigan's warm eyes. They were a pale green, like a golden delicious apple, and for the first time since they met, Tyler wondered if there was more to Corrigan than his queen persona.

His thoughts derailed when the man in front of him leaned in, drifting his lips softly along Tyler's upper lip and continuing their path along his lower.

Soft tufts of breath drifted across his skin, and Tyler inhaled cinnamon and mint mixed with a little chocolate. Corrigan's lips followed a path up over his nose and to his forehead, drifting along every inch of his skin, leaving heat in his wake.

Without consciously thinking about it, Tyler wrapped his arms around the man in front of him, one hand gripping the shirt at his upper back, the other lying lightly right above the swell of Corrigan's buttocks, his fingers drifting along a sliver of skin. As arms tightened around him, Corrigan's lips once again drifted over his; and as Corrigan softly sucked his upper lip between his own, Tyler moaned. A shiver travelled up his spine, spreading out through the rest of his body. Instinctively, his lips parted, and Corrigan took what he offered, covering his mouth and sliding his tongue inside.

Tyler had frenched girls before, but had never had someone do it to him. This man knew what he was doing. Their tongues danced lightly against one another for a few minutes as hands reached down and grasped his buttocks, pulling him forward gently. This time, as a thigh came in contact with his dick, it made his heart race and his hands grasp.

"Shh," Corrigan whispered, pulling back enough to speak, keeping his lips right in front of Tyler's. "There's no reason to hurry, Cowboy. And don't forget, you're on camera." The warning had Tyler's eyes flashing open. He'd forgotten that small detail for a moment. And as Corrigan's thigh pressed gently against his budding stiffy, he forgot again. Damn, this felt good. As his breathing sped up, Corrigan covered his mouth again, licking along each curve and sucking Tyler's tongue into his own mouth.

Each movement he made was seductive, and yet Tyler didn't think it was put on. The man truly knew what he was doing. Who knew how many men he'd been with? Tyler kicked that thought out. He didn't want to think of Corrigan with other men. One hand left his buttocks and slid around to his front, palming his cock over his jeans.

"Oh my god," he moaned as Corrigan grasped the back of his head and held him still, pushing Tyler's tongue back into his mouth and sliding his own tongue in and out between Tyler's lips.

The pressure of the hand at his crotch combined with the amazing tongue-fucking he was getting made Tyler lose all sense of reality. He bucked against Corrigan's hand again and again, the pressure building quickly. He wanted... he wanted... His brain couldn't seem to make a connection with what he indeed

wanted. At the moment, Tyler wasn't even sure. All he was sure of was that he wanted it with the man holding him tight.

The long, sure strokes over his jeans-covered dick slowed down until, with almost a lazy flick, the hand left, moving back to rest against Tyler's lower back. Pulling his tongue out, Corrigan leaned his forehead against Tyler's as the two breathed roughly against one another. "Don't stop," Tyler whimpered softly.

Kissing him with the softest of caresses, Corrigan moved his mouth to Tyler's ear and whispered. "Not in front of the camera. You deserve more than to come for these two assholes to see. If you want... I'll come to your room later where we can do this in private. Or not. Your choice." Pulling back, Corrigan kissed him one last time before releasing him, his hands grasping Tyler's arms as if to steady him. Once Tyler stood up straight, Corrigan let him go.

Almost instantly, the queen persona came back. Turning to the camera, Corrigan waved his arm around and bowed. "And that's how it's done. Give him his money," he said with a laugh. There was something in the laugh that caught Tyler's attention—a steely note that spoke more of his feelings for the two men watching them than about the money. In that moment, Tyler realized Corrigan didn't like Carlos or Kyle. For all he knew, Corrigan hated whatever they were doing with the camera. Or there might be more.

The red light on the camera went off, and Carlos shook his head. "One of these days, Corrigan, you're gonna fail."

"Not possible," Corrigan replied, putting his hands up in front of his face while looking at his nails objectively. "Honey, I hope you don't need me for the rest of the day. I need to go into town. These nails need a new buff and shine. All this cowboy work is horrible for them."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist," Kyle said with a sneer.

Grabbing a piece of paper, Carlos beckoned to Tyler who took a cautious step forward. "Sign and the money's yours."

Taking the contract and the pen, Tyler glanced back at Corrigan, the first man he'd ever actually made out with, trying to come to terms with his feelings about the whole thing and hoping the man behind him would give him some indication if signing was a good thing. Corrigan's eyes narrowed, but he didn't

make any comment. Quickly signing his name to the bottom of the form, Tyler handed it back, relieved when Kyle tossed him the bag.

Without waiting for anything else, he turned and ran out of the barn, high-tailing it to his room.

Groaning, Tyler lifted the pillow off his head and flipped around, lying on his back. Only once before had another man turned him on as much as Corrigan Summers, and at that time he hadn't gotten close enough to touch, let alone anything else. But now he was confused. Did Corrigan like him? It seemed like he was in on the filming thing, and yet he didn't like Carlos or Kyle at all.

Even at the thought of the man, his cock came back to life. "Shit," he hissed, unbuttoning and removing his jeans quickly. He didn't have the time to go to the shower, and this was his own room. As his hand wrapped around his cock, the first image that came to mind was of Corrigan in those hideous shorts and T-shirt. His interest sagged until he thought of the wonderful green eyes and soft, velvety lips. After a low moan left his throat, he spit into his palm and quickly moved his hand up and down his shaft. He needed completion. Damn. Corrigan stopping so close to when he was about to come had been torture. True, Tyler was glad he had. Coming on camera would have been hideous once the realization hit him.

But... ungh! Remembering how good it had felt for another man's hand to rub along his dick, using just the right amount of pressure, understanding where his most sensitive areas were. Not to mention being tongue-fucked for the first time in his life.

His breathing sped up, as did his hand. Harsh breaths filled his room as he raced toward what he needed. He never heard his door open. Tyler's first indication that he wasn't alone was a low moan from across the small space. Turning his head, Tyler froze as he stared at Corrigan, who was staring at Tyler's cock. "Fuck!" he hissed, grabbing the blanket and tossing it over his lap.

Blinking as if coming out of a trance, Corrigan grimaced. "Sorry. I didn't realize you were busy." His tone was deep again. In fact, even though he was still wearing the offensive outfit, it no longer looked right. Corrigan stood with his weight firmly planted on both feet, his back straight, head up. There was no queen anywhere in his attitude. "Look," he said gently, "I just wanted to

apologize about the barn. I hate what they're doing and just wanted to get you out of there without pissing Carlos off. Not an easy feat. But I didn't actually mean to go so far." Pausing, he ran his hand through his hair, the first indication he was nervous. "I know you're straight. I'd never try to turn a straight guy gay."

"Bi," Tyler blurted out for the first time in his life. "I'm bi, not straight." For some reason, it seemed important to explain that to the man standing across the small amount of floor space.

Startled, Corrigan stared at him for a moment before his lips quirked into a semi-real smile. "So you weren't thinking of a hot girl with big tits while I kissed you?"

Amused, Tyler shook his head. "Nope."

Taking the one step forward that was needed, Corrigan slowly sat down next to Tyler. "Look," he said in a quiet voice. "The guys think you're straight, and that's why Carlos wants you for his films. He has this strange fixation about turning a straight guy gay." Shrugging, he stretched his back, causing his shirt to ride up a little. Tyler's eyes fastened on the thin line of hair going from his outie belly button straight down, a trail to whatever was hiding in those shorts. Clearing his voice, Corrigan added. "I've got a vehicle. I suggest if you don't want that cash disappearing, that I take you into town where you can deposit it somewhere. After all," he said, his voice raising a little in tone as he stood up and the queen made another appearance. "I have to get my nails done. They're a fright."

Staring at the man in front of him, Tyler shook his head. "Who are you?"

With a raised eyebrow, Corrigan shook his head. "An anomaly."

"I suppose so. I'll meet you by your truck."

"Don't take long," Corrigan said in a sing-song voice as he opened the door. "If you need to come, I'd be mighty glad to help in the truck. You'd be amazed what this tongue can do." With a wink, he sauntered out of the room leaving Tyler staring at him wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

His cock throbbed in complaint as he stood up and quickly pulled his jeans and boots back on. For all he knew, maybe he could get Corrigan to give him another hand job. If he didn't look at the clothes, Tyler could almost forget the man was a queen. Grabbing the bag of money, he quickly made his way out of

the building, catching up to Corrigan who was just climbing into the cab of his truck. As he hopped in next to him, Tyler's eyes fell to the man's boots and he found himself blurting out, "How do you keep those things so shiny?"

Bursting out laughing, Corrigan backed up the truck and headed into town. "It's skill, Honey. Just skill. I like things clean." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a container of Handi-Wipes. "They come in handy for all sorts of things."

Shaking his head as Tyler seriously didn't get how Corrigan could be a firm, comforting man one moment and an annoying queen the next, he lifted his boots up and put them on the dash. "Do you think that's the end of Carlos trying to get me in front of the camera?"

"Hell, no," Corrigan said, shaking his head. "The man wants you bent over and either swallowing cock or being fucked by one. Or even better for him, both at the same time. But don't worry," he said in a teasing tone as he glanced over and winked before turning back to the road. "I'll come save ya."

"Great. Just what I needed. A knight in shining cowboy boots."

The burst of deep, heartfelt laughter next to him made Tyler grin. Just maybe he'd made a friend. And if he wanted to, Tyler had the feeling there was even more than friendship possible. Would he? Could he? Only time would tell, but Tyler had to admit to himself that he looked forward to getting to know more about the man next to him. He had never considered a summer fling as even a possibility, but maybe... just maybe Tyler Campden was ready to be flung. It might be the deep end he was diving into, but he had the feeling, as long as nobody else found out about it, that this affair would be something he would be able to look back on with fondness for the rest of his life.

The End

Author Bio

Thianna D is a writer of both M/M and M/F erotica and erotic romance. She loves reading and writing stories with strong men who each have a past and through each other are able to heal. In the majority of her work, some form of D/s is usually apparent.

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KNIGHT OWL

By C. Dallas Floyd

Photo Description

A blond man holds the hand of a young boy and holds another child in his arms. They are standing atop a rocky ledge overlooking a river with grassy hills in the distance and an overcast sky above them.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This was my first glimpse of him, the man that completes my life, and his two beautiful children. I knew, somehow, that meeting him, meeting them, would change my life forever... and I was not disappointed. It wasn't long before their demons came calling, and even I was surprised by my protective instincts, despite my violent past and desire for family. Little did I know just what a blessing being part of his family would become, and what it would mean for my future.

No non-con, BDSM, or super-kinky shenanigans. Looking for something that's sweet but with some heat, and would prefer at least one of the characters (likely the "observer") to be a shifter of some kind.

Sincerely,

Brett

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, paranormal

Tags: family, sweet, alpha, humorous, hurt/comfort, shifters-wolf/non-wolf, suspense

Content Warnings: Very Strong Happy For Now

Word Count: 16,189

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This story is dedicated to...

My husband, Dustin. For your love and commitment. My Knight, I love you.

My sister, Courtney, at Hartness Photography—for creating this awesome cover.

NOLAStars, my favorite group of writers. You are all amazing.

Chris Cox, Winnie Duplessis Griggs, and Liz Talley—For awakening in me the spark to once again write. I haven't found greater friends.

KNIGHT OWL

By C. Dallas Floyd

Chapter One

Try not to judge me too harshly. All I really wanted was to see him. To feel him beside me. All I ever wanted was his arms around me. At night, in my bed, all alone—all I ever wanted was to feel the solace of his body. But, all I could do was watch.

So I watched him from the tree outside his window. I wasn't close enough to feel his skin or hear his breath. I wasn't close enough to see the brilliant shades of green in his eyes. I wasn't close enough to smell the day upon his skin. Yet, from the oak outside his window, and even in the darkness of night that fell over its branches, I recognized the same expression on his face that told me he, too, longed for the solace of a body. And I only wished it was mine.

Again, I ask you to not judge me. I'm not a creep. Not much of a beast. I am many things. I *have been* many things. Now, all I am is lonely. You're probably saying to yourself, "But you're a Shifter! You can be anything, anyone you want. You can fly to the highest mountain and swim to the deepest of oceans. You can morph your image to that of the most desirable man alive, or woman if you chose." And I'd tell you, sure. I could. All that is easy. Appearances. However, the heart that slowly beats in my chest never changes. It pumps the same cold blood. It pumps the same rage, fear, and sadness. The only time I don't feel alone is when I'm watching him, sometimes following him, wanting to learn all there is to him. I just want him to give me a chance. Like I'm asking you to.

His name is Trent and he's just turned his bedside lamp off. He's twenty-six and by now he's drifting away to a world of paradises. His body is hard with muscles, yet he rests so softly beneath the white sheets that drape him. He's more of a man than any I could shift into. Only a real man could raise two young boys alone and still be a worthy father.

Now you're probably saying to yourself, "He has kids? Where's his wife?" Well, simply put, there isn't one. He didn't choose the life he's living now. Then again, that's not keeping him from giving them the life they deserve. It's not keeping him from giving back to them what was so quickly torn away.

Yeah, he's a good man. The best kind. And though I've never spoken a hello to him; I find myself never wanting to say good-bye.

I let my owl wings stretch out and took to the night's gales. Soaring like there was no destination. Freedom only temporary. Soon, I had to return to the four walls I called home.

Home?

Those four walls felt like an empty cage. At times it was exactly that. A cage for my wrath and violent nature.

It's been months since my last break. I've been able to control the anger lurking beneath my calm veneer. Though, it's harder in my human form; when I'm Bennett. Bennett's weak like a child. But then I remember he—I never really got to be a child.

Chapter Two

Trent

Trent's sister's final words resonated within him as he watched her sons—now his sons, fast asleep in their bunks. He closed his eyes, the memory more vivid that way. He could still feel her cold grip on his wrist. Her soft, spaced words like lyrics.

“Take my boys, Trent. Make sure they're safe. Tell them I'm sorry.”

Her eyes flickered shut, and one last breath abandoned her lungs.

“Earth to Uncle Trent!” A tug at Trent's khakis brought him back to reality. His vacant expression freshened when he saw the gleam in his young nephew's eyes staring up at him.

Trent squatted to eye level and gave Brody a good morning noogie.

“Hey Sprout, go wake your brother. Got some oatmeal in the kitchen.”

Brody's face twisted up like he'd bitten into a lemon. “Oatmeal? Guh-ross!”

“Hey, it'll make you strong.” Trent stood up proudly flexing his biceps. “And one day you'll be as big as me.”

Brody sneered and ran off, disregarding Trent's request. *Damn kid's too smart for his own good.* He got that from his mother. She was clever, always breaking the rules. There he went again—letting his mind wander back to his sister.

Stop. She's gone.

Trent convinced his legs to move toward the bundle of superhero blankets where his five-year-old nephew, Jules, slept. He peeled back the layers until a familiar tickled face appeared.

“Did you hear him, Uncle Trent?” Jules asked.

“Who, buddy?”

Jules rounded his lips, “Hooo Hooo.”

“Ahh, you mean that owl. Yeah, I heard him.” The damn thing was partly to blame for Trent's lack of sleep last night, too. “Come on, buddy. Today's a big day for you and your brother.”

"I don't wanna go."

"It won't be so bad. You'll make plenty of friends. Promise."

"I miss Mommy." Jules returned to his cocoon of supermen.

"I know. I do too. But hey, you have me now!"

"You won't leave me there, will you?"

His tiny words gave pause to Trent's heart. So long, that Jules rose up, waiting for an answer.

"I will never leave you or your brother. It's us now."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart."

Anderson Elementary reminded Trent of his days in grade school. He hoped things were different, maybe even better for today's generation. Jules took his big brother's hand. Trent watched on as they seemingly marched off to war. That's what school had felt like to Trent, a constant fight for acceptance. The Battle of Morals vs. Heart.

When Trent moved himself and his nephews to Oklahoma, he was lucky to find a job creditable to his skills. Senior Wildlife Biologist sounded good enough to him, though Oklahoma Reserve was quite different than the terrain of Missouri that he was used to.

Trent wasn't one for offices or boxes, either. They reminded him of the cages he too often had to trap animals in. And like those animals, only the lucky were released. Trent was one of the lucky few. Today, so was the coyote in the back of his work truck.

Miles deep in a prairie blossoming with wildflowers, Trent killed the rumbling engine and looked to his rearview mirror. The coyote, still captive though rehabilitated, peered through the cage door and their stares met. A golden beam of sunlight passed across his wild eyes as Trent pressed the release button to the cargo door. The coyote raised his head and boasted one more howl in honor of his freedom. He looked back at Trent and appeared to nod in thanks before disappearing in the thickets. The corners of Trent's chapped lips rose to a smile. The feeling of giving back something that had

been taken away always made him feel like he meant something. Even in the smallest of ways, to the wildest of creatures, at least he meant something.

Chapter Three

Bennett

Mirrors. People love them. Perfect for the vain. How wonderful it must be to look into one and see yourself staring back. How great it must feel to be comfortable with and accept the image within one. I don't get this satisfaction. When I look into the fractured pane of this mirror, all I see is who and what I've been. I have no true identity. I am whoever I want to be, whatever my moods or emotions want me to be.

Wait, there he is, in a tiny sliver of mirror, I see him. I see the man the outside world knows me to be. Bennett Grey. Probably average by most standards. My Native American heritage gave me dark features. Skin, eyes, and hair all darkened, like my life.

Who needs mirrors?

I plunged my fist into the deceiving shards of glass sending them flying. My hand shook, blood dripped from my knuckles but not for long. One benefit of the curse I'd inherited from my father was healing. I watched the wounds mend and the blood dry up and vanish. One thing remained, that one sliver of mirror, clinging to the wall. I didn't see myself this time. I saw him. Was he the part of me I could never see? Was he the absent piece that would complete me? It may have been the first time in years that a smile adorned my face. But it did and it was because of him. I needed to have him.

Something inside me twisted. Not a good feeling. Like all those shards of glass were whirling and cutting at my insides. I knew this feeling all too well. Another shifter was near and I could smell him right outside my door.

I thought I'd run far enough away he'd never find me. Should have known I couldn't hide for long. He was the only one that could sniff me out. I didn't want to believe it, but bursting through the door, proving his putrid existence, was my brother. Stronger, bigger than I remembered him. I found myself racing towards him ready for a fight. My blood turned hot, my fists curled.

“What are you doing here? How did you find me?”

“Oh, come on, brother. You didn't think you could hide from me did you?” He looked around the dismal room, at fist holes punctured in the walls, at the lone shredded mattress in the corner. “You've lowered your standards, I see.”

“Anything is better than what you’re calling home. I’d take this any day. Stop playing games. Why are you here, Guy?”

“You need to come back. Forget this place—this hellhole.”

“Not a fucking chance! Get. Out.”

“Calm yourself, little one. I have made no threats.” Guy slithered in closer and whispered, “I know your dirty little secret.”

My own strength surprised me when I threw him back. I felt big, strong... until he laughed.

“Now that tickled.” Guy cracked his neck. “Stop denying it, Bennett. We all know. Hey, it’s cool. We just want you back.”

“I don’t care what you or any of the others know. This is my home now. I’m not going back to that life. Guy, this is the last time I’ll tell you. Leave my house. Now.” My eyes felt as if they were soon going to burst into flames. A telltale sign I was on the verge of turning. Into what, I didn’t know. But I could feel the old me, the violent me creeping in.

“Bennett, oh, what’s that I smell?” He inhaled a deep breath from the air around me.

“Don’t.” I fumbled backward. Knowing he was trying to read me. Another pitfall of this forlorn curse. Blood knows blood. If he wanted, he could read my feelings and my memories. I lacked the strength, and Guy was older and more powerful than me on a bad day.

Too late, he already knew. “Ohhh, he’s a pretty one, too.” His laugh was dry and caustic. “And those kids, so vulnerable.”

In an instant, I had him by the neck. “I’ll kill you, goddamn it. I swear it, if you even go near them. I’ll know it and I’ll rip your heart out.”

“Oh brother. Your threats don’t worry me. I never said I’d hurt them. It’s not them I want. It’s you.” Guy escaped my grip and came face-to-face with me. “I’ll give you some time to think. I will be back, brother. And I won’t take no for an answer next time. You can get back to your little *fairy* tale now.”

Guy departed just as quickly as he’d appeared.

Damn him!

Who the fuck did he think he was coming here and threatening me? I couldn’t shake the worry of him hurting Trent or his boys. He said my words were threats but I don’t make threats. I finish them.

I had been in my preferred form as a Great Horned Owl, scouring for prey in the forest when I first saw them. And there they were, lakeside and happy. I watched them enjoying the nature, laughing and playing. Children being children. A man being a father. No lies. No secrets. Just love. Pure, true love. It was that day that I won't ever forget. Because that was the day I knew something inside me had changed. I wasn't violent Bennett anymore. I was new.

Find him. Make sure he's okay. It was Guy's nature to take things from me, including people. I flew until I found them. I was relieved to find Trent unscathed. The boys were safe too, piling into his car from a long day at school. If I could just be a part of their family I could always be there to protect them.

I followed them home and when I saw the dilapidated shed in Trent's back yard an idea sparked. I was taking a risk. And because I was never good with the formal "Hello my name is Bennett. Let's be friends" thing; this was my only shot. And a chance I was willing to take. *Come on, self. Don't let me down.*

Chest out, breath fresh, hair combed, ready. I eased up to the small Victorian. Potted flowers lined his front steps. A weathered porch swing rocked in the breeze. I exhaled, but I couldn't stop the color draining out of my face. The doorbell chimed with a press of my finger. The wind returned to tussle at my hair. And as I attempted to lay it down, the door swung opened.

He was even more handsome up close. His eyes were green like springtime. His smile was soft and subtle and brighter than the stubble around it. He was nothing short of perfect. He opened his mouth, his voice just as welcoming as his skin.

"Hello. Can I help you?" He stepped out onto the porch just inches from me. For a moment, I forgot exactly why I was there. His cologne was Aspen pine, reminiscent of my foresty haven.

"Hi. I—I noticed your shed in the back. Looks like it could use some work. And..." I stalled, like an idiot. I wasn't making any sense.

"Oh yeah. We just moved here and I haven't really given it much thought."

"I could, ya know, help out. I do carpentry part-time but I was looking for some work on the side. I wouldn't charge much." Hell, I'd do it *pro bono* for him. But I had to seem legit.

Trent's eyes tapered. "I don't know. I was actually thinking about tearing it down and opening up the yard some anyway. Thanks though."

Damn. I screwed it up. I knew my timidity would be my downfall.

“Oh, okay. Well, have a good one then. Nice meeting you.” I gave him a gracious nod and was halfway down the porch steps when he stopped me.

“Hey. On second thought, I could use the space to store some things. Might not be the only thing around here that needs some fixin’ up.”

“Well, I’m pretty damn handy and can fix just about anything.” Except my own life. That one seemed broken beyond repair.

“Why don’t you come back tomorrow ’round noon? I can show you around the place and we’ll put together a list of things. I’m Trent Moss, you are?”

“Oh, um, Bennett. Bennett Grey.” I offered my hand anxiously. He accepted it and shook it firmly. His palms were rough, a sign of a hard-working man. My kind of man.

“It’s nice to meet you, Bennett.”

“Yeah, you too. So, tomorrow, at noon, then?”

“Sounds good. See you then.”

I was sure I’d never had pep in my step. But walking down the sidewalk, I couldn’t help but feel accomplished. Trent was willing to let me into his life. Sure, it was just as a helping hand but *finally* something good. The delight was overwhelming. My heart rocketed. Everything around me seemed brighter. I wasn’t sure, but I detected an inkling of passion budding inside me.

Chapter Four

Trent

Trent watched as the mysterious Bennett Grey neared his front door. When they had met, Trent saw something in him that made him want to know more. He was handsome, young, and strong. He was also willing to help around the place. No denying that it could use it. But mostly, Trent wanted to see Bennett sweat. Two years of being single did things to a person. So what if all Trent wanted to do now was gawk? No hurt in that. Right?

Trent opened the door to let Bennett in, along with a sticky gust of May air. Bennett wore a tight-fitting denim shirt and frayed cut-off denim shorts. His construction-worker boots and rusted tool box completed Trent's fantasy.

"Morning, Trent. Thanks again for the work."

"No problem. So, you ready to get started?" Trent motioned him to follow through the kitchen and out the patio door. "Well, here it is. Pretty sad isn't it?"

Bennett examined the shed carefully while Trent checked other things out. Like Bennett's legs for example, which were strong and defined by a thin layer of dark hair. His ass was firm and cozied nicely into the tight shorts. Trent imagined running his hands down and under the center seam of Bennett's shorts.

"Not so bad really." Bennett set his tool box down revealing just enough skin above his beltline. "Nothing a few screws can't fix."

Trent was sure he wasn't insinuating anything by the statement but that didn't keep him from thinking about it for a second or two. Trent had to be careful not to get aroused. His Wranglers wouldn't be one bit forgiving. Trent swallowed the thought. "So what can I do to help?"

"Nah man, you ain't gotta. You're doin' me a favor by letting me work for you anyway."

"But I really don't mind. Four hands are better than two. Plus, it'll get done quicker and we can move on to another project I had in mind." Trent had several jobs in mind for Bennett. But most of them were clothing optional.

"Well, I was going to start inside. I noticed some support beams need tightening. Got a ladder?"

Trent retrieved a ladder and returned to Bennett who was already inside the shed tossing out the remnants of junk the previous owners had left. Bennett took the ladder from him and set it up beneath a support beam running the length of the shed.

“Mind spottin’ me?”

Like he could say no. Trent wanted to spot every inch of him.

Trent couldn’t keep focused on the job at hand. Not when Bennett’s hard stomach kept peeping out every time he’d raise his muscled arms. Sweat rippled down his smooth, dark abdomen and soaked into the denim above his zipper.

“That should do the trick.” Bennett used the bottom of his shirt to wipe the perspiration from his brow. Trent could smell Bennett’s dampness, making him thirsty.

“Well, I don’t know about you but I’ve worked up quite a thirst. I’ll be right back.”

Trent needed to take a time out. Bennett was unknowingly turning him on and Trent didn’t want Bennett noticing the excitement growing in his jeans. This man was doing something to him. And Trent liked it.

Through the kitchen window, Trent watched Bennett remove the blue denim shirt he was wearing. He didn’t blame him; the late-spring heat was dreadful. Bennett’s arms and chest glistened with beads of sweat. He was everything Trent ever wanted in a man. He imagined Bennett in his bed, his arms coiled around him. Trent could almost feel Bennett’s smooth chest against his cheek.

Trent splashed cool water on his face. He had to get back to work. Bennett was probably wondering where he had gone off to. Trent grabbed himself and Bennett a bottle of water and tried not to think of Bennett pouring it over his chest. But that’s all he could think about.

“Thanks, man. This heat is somethin’ isn’t it?” Bennett damn near emptied the bottle in one gulp.

“How about we go in and take a break and get back out here later?”

Bennett agreed with a semi-nod of his head and followed Trent back inside.

From the corner of his eye, Trent watched Bennett’s brown nipples harden as he entered the air-conditioned room. What Trent really wanted to do was

turn around, grab Bennett by his hips, pull him in, and taste his mouth. He wondered how Bennett would react to that.

“So you said you’re new here.” Bennett asked swigging down the last bit of water.

“Been here about a month now. Finally got the boys enrolled in school.”

“Boys?”

“My neph—sons. They were my nephews but...” Trent’s words drifted, he didn’t want to talk about her. He opened the fridge in search of more water for Bennett, trying to buy a few seconds so the conversation could change.

“I’m sorry if I said something...”

“No, no. You didn’t.” Trent took his wallet from his back pocket and opened it up. He proudly displayed the picture in the centerfold.

“That’s Jules, he’s five. And that’s Brody, he’s seven going on thirty.” Trent’s pleased smile faded as his finger turned the picture over. On the backside was a picture of his sister. “And that’s Julia, my sister.”

“She’s very pretty.”

“Yeah. She was the prettiest girl I knew.” Trent closed his wallet and packed it away back in his pocket and forced a smile on his face.

“How long has she been gone?”

Trent didn’t take offense to Bennett’s bluntness. He understood death couldn’t be sugarcoated. “It’s been six months since her murder.”

Bennett’s eyes dropped to the floor. His tone fell soft. “I’m... so sorry.”

“I’ve had some time to get over it. I’m just angry. Angry they haven’t found him.”

“Him?” Bennett looked up, his brow scrunched in confusion.

“The bastard that killed her.”

Unfortunately, that bastard had a name. Mitch. What an asshole name.

“But why?” Bennett asked.

“Why did he kill her? She tried to leave him. Wanted a better life for her and her boys. No kid deserves an abusive, drug-addicted father. So one night, while he was passed out drunk, she tried to leave. But he woke up.” Trent shut

his eyes and smiled. "I could barely tell it was my sister lying in the hospital bed. That's how bad he'd beat her."

Bennett shook his head, disgusted. "That's..."

"Crazy. I know. No, what's crazy is that he used Brody's baseball bat. Bashed her face in. It's a miracle she survived long enough for me to get to the hospital." Trent rubbed his hands down his face. "But I guess that's life."

Chapter Five

Bennett

I could sense something inside him break. Like the mirror my fist so easily shattered. Something inside him was not whole, and it was in that moment that I knew I could be the one to fix it. Silently, in my heart, I pledged to seek justice for his sister. For her murder, for him, for the love growing in me.

I know what you're thinking. This is crazy. They just met. No one falls in love that easily. Again, I would say you were right. In most cases—sure. But this certainly isn't most cases. Since the beginning, since I first saw him, I loved him. And yes, it is crazy.

“Do the cops have any leads on where he may have gone?” Maybe my interest wasn't too invasive.

“No, I don't think so. It's been long enough for them to stop caring. If they ever did.” Trent turned to the kitchen window and his voice wilted. “I never stopped caring.”

Instincts kicked in. Nurture him, they said. Protect him.

I drew closer to him. He didn't turn around or shift from my presence.

Deep breaths. Touch him. Just place your hand on his shoulder, see how he reacts. If he reacts. Just whisper something to him.

My hand nervously trembled as it rose to his shoulder. Though, when I placed it gently there, it ceased. Trent crooked his head baring a glint in his eye, a shimmer of comfort. His eyes spoke the words better than his voice could. They told me all the things he couldn't say. And I simply stared into them and listened.

“Are you really okay?” My hand left his shoulder after a quick squeeze.

His eyes thinned slowly as he smiled. “Yeah. I am.” Trent looked into my eyes. And then I watched his pupils traipse downward, examining my bare chest. I had almost forgotten I was standing there without my shirt.

“Oh. Sorry. I wasn't thinking. The heat... I'm sorry. I'll put it back on.”

“Don't. I mean. No. It's fine. If you're already comfortable, I mean.” Trent's cheek rouged, but his eyes once again took notice of my body. This time he wasn't trying to hide it. Trent wanted me to notice him checking me

out. And I'll admit that kind of turned me on. Okay, it really turned me on. So much so that I moved into him.

He clutched my sides and pulled me closer, pinning himself between my body and the counter. His fingertips felt like feathers rising up my ribs and I could feel a tautness building between our hips. He brought his mouth to mine. His cool breath drifted against my lips. But then he turned.

I thought I had done something wrong. Maybe we were moving too fast? He barely knew me. Hell, he didn't know me at all.

"Did I..."

"No." He stopped me. "I'm a mess, my life is a mess. I don't think I could..."

"You don't have to do anything. And you're the sexiest mess I've ever seen." The words were easy to say. Yet, deep down I knew my life was a mess too. My life was one he probably couldn't begin to imagine, believe in, or accept. Even I was just now learning how.

My arms secured him for a time I didn't count. I didn't want to count. I just held him. And he may not have known, but he was actually holding me. Holding me up, together.

When Trent reluctantly pulled away, aware there was still work to be done, he spoke ever so carefully. "I didn't see this happening."

"See what?"

"I didn't see you caring. I didn't see myself spilling my heart out to you. I don't normally do that to someone I just met."

"But you did. And I do, I care. You had to talk to someone. Bottling it up wouldn't do anything but hurt you. And I'm glad you told me."

"But we just met. You don't know me. I don't know..."

"It doesn't matter. Fact is, now you do. And I don't want to stop knowin' you."

"I don't want to stop knowing you, either."

A million thoughts raced through my head. *Know me?* I said it, but did I really know what I meant? *Know me? I don't even know me.* All I knew was I no longer felt lonely. Not now that he was here.

"There's not much to know about me." *Lie again why don't you?*

“I doubt that.” His lips rose to a smile. “A handsome stranger lands on my porch step asking for work, yet there’s not much to know about him? Doubtful.”

He was right. Why deny it? “Nothing interesting. I’m just a single guy. No friends. No family.” None I wanted to mention.

“Well it looks like we’re in the same boat then. Family is sometimes overrated anyway. And sometimes all you need is someone showing up on your porch step.”

His sentiment was sweet and I needed sweet in my life right now.

“And don’t forget worn out sheds. Sometimes you need a good worn out shed too.”

I was happy to make him laugh a good genuine laugh. A pleasing, forget-about-the-world kind of laugh. A laugh that faded into a boyish grin. I wanted him now more than ever.

I acted without hesitation. The need to know if what my heart was telling me to do was okay drove me. *Kiss him. Do it. You know you want it. Kiss him already.* The hormonal forces within me compelled my lips forward. He didn’t shy away but this time I stopped short of his lips. I looked for a go sign. A look in his eyes that said “Yes, I want this too.” And there it was again, that shimmer of desire in his eyes. *Go.*

The taste of his lips reminded me of something. Something I had long since forgotten. Something I have long since craved. Home. Not the home I was used to, but a home that lived deep within me. A home I only knew as a boy. Before the shifter in me took over.

His lips were soft, his tongue sweet. He didn’t take a single breath as we kissed there in the orange glow of day that escaped through the kitchen window. Everything around us became more exciting, sharper as all of my senses intensified. The birds outside sang louder, the rain from the coming storm smelled damper. All the colors of the room more vibrant, deeper than before.

The kiss didn’t last long; in reality, it wasn’t any more than a minute. Cliché as it may sound, something about being entwined with him made it seem as though we had kissed for an eternity.

Trent rested his forehead on mine. “I wasn’t expecting that either. I... I really needed that right now.”

Never in my life had I kissed with such emotion. “Me, too.”

“Since I took the boys in I haven’t been able...” Trent stole a quick glance at the clock behind my shoulder. “I haven’t had the time to get out to the clubs.”

“I don’t think the clubs are really the place where true love awaits.”

Trent shrugged. “Probably not.” Another look at the clock.

I was beginning to think maybe the kiss wasn’t as magical for him as it was for me. “I can go if you have something you have to do.”

“I’ve got to get the boys from school. Can you come back tomorrow?”

“Yeah. If I’ll get another kiss like that.” I tried to ease the tension with no avail to Trent’s obvious sidetracked mind. I reached for my shirt which was a bit dryer. “I’ll see you then.”

Trent scratched his head. “Thanks for your help today.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

Trent grabbed his keys from the counter and walked me to the door.

“You’re a really great kisser. I’m sorry I have to go.”

“It’s fine honestly. I’ll be back tomorrow.” I gave Trent a wink and headed out the door. The air was thick. I had to be quick getting back home. Home, yeah right. I felt more at home inside with Trent.

I was half a block away when the rain came. So much for my dry-ish shirt. And the hot air didn’t make matters any better.

I could shift. *Ducks like rain, maybe I’ll be a duck today.* I laughed to myself. That would be a first.

Chapter Six

Trent

Trent waited a couple minutes before leaving. He had to catch his breath. He had to collect himself. He had to do so much. But right now the main priority was his nephews. Sure he'd sent Bennett on his way a little early but after that kiss he didn't know what to do to keep the conversation afloat. Most of the time a kiss led to sex and sex, too early on, always led to heartache. If there was one thing Trent did not need in his life, it was another heartache. Another failed relationship. But this wasn't a relationship. At least not yet. Trent could see himself with Bennett. Then again, Trent could see himself doing a lot with Bennett.

Trent only noticed the rain when he stepped off his covered porch. Damn, now he looked like a big ass, sending Bennett off in the rain. Maybe he'd still be close enough to catch him and offer him a ride. Trent jumped into his work truck, his best means of transportation. Plus he thought it made him look official.

The rain was fierce, beating down on Trent's windshield. He was probably going way too fast for the quiet neighborhood street but he needed to catch up with Bennett. And there he was. Trent let out a sigh of relief, and then a different kind of sigh when he saw that Bennett was once again shirtless. Trent contemplated how wet the seat would be after he dropped Bennett off but determined that it was a fair price if it meant he'd get to watch droplets of fresh rainwater trickle down Bennett's bronze skin.

Trent eased to the curb and honked his horn. He powered the window down.

"Come on, jump in. I'll give you a lift."

Bennett tossed his drenched shirt in the tail bed and shook the rain from his hair before climbing in next to Trent.

"Who saw this coming? One minute sun, next minute thunderstorm."

"Gotta love Mother Nature, right?" Trent shifted the truck into drive.

Bennett huffed, "Just like all the other women in the world. Never know what mood she's going to be in. That's exactly why I'm..." Bennett paused.

"You can say it, ya know. I mean after what just happened, it's sort of obvious. Most straight men don't kiss other guys. At least not all of them."

“I guess you’re right. But it’s all the same right? Love is love. Most people don’t seem to care these days. Which is kind of nice.”

“True. So you gonna tell me where I’m takin’ ya? Where do you call home?”

Bennett looked uneasy, which gave Trent the impression he didn’t want to know where Bennett lived.

“I uh... I live near Fern. You can just drop me off there. Corner of Fern and Birch.”

Trent didn’t know much about the new town in which he lived, but he had heard many things. And most of the crime took place near the Fern and Birch side of town.

“In this rain? Come on, at least let me get you to your door. After all, it’s the least I can do. And I totally forgot—” Trent said, retrieving his wallet—“I never paid you.”

“The job’s not over. Usually don’t get paid ’til the job’s done. Plus, we didn’t really do much actual work today.” Bennett tapped his finger on the armrest between them. “I live in a pretty shady place. I understand if you’re uncomfortable going there.”

“Hey, I like to think of myself as a pretty strong kinda guy. I think I can fend for myself. So where do you live?”

“You know FairWood Place?” Bennett turned his head. Shamed.

Trent could understand but wasn’t one to judge. FairWood Place had a reputation for drugs and gang violence. Not an easy place to call home. Not even for the toughest kind.

“Yeah. I know where it is.”

“It’s okay. You really don’t have to...”

Trent came to an abrupt halt at the curb. Rain drummed on the metal roof of his truck.

“I’ll take you wherever you need to go. You don’t have to worry about me judging you. Okay?”

FairWood Place was ten minutes away. Ten more minutes of nothing. Silence. Until Bennett spoke as they neared the complex.

“Thanks for the ride. I appreciate you going out of your way.”

An emotion unfamiliar to Trent boiled over. "Are we going to pretend that what happened at my place didn't really happen? I don't know about you but I enjoyed every minute of it. And I like you Bennett. I could see myself *really* liking you."

"You can?"

"Yes! I can. And I know you can, too. That kiss back there was more than just a kiss. Wasn't it?"

"Yeah. It was. But that's what scares me." Bennett opened the door and stepped out, letting the rain fall over him as he peered with sad eyes through the window.

Trent looked deeply into his brown eyes. The red ring around his iris seemed to glow under the grey sky. Bennett spun around and ran off to the apartment complex. He was gone. And Trent hoped that he'd keep his word and be back in the morning.

Twelve minutes. That's how long Trent had to race to Anderson Elementary before looking like the most irresponsible parent ever. Parent? Trent thought that one over. What is a parent? A parent doesn't have to be the creator. A parent can be anyone, any positive influence. And Trent knew deep down that he was probably the closest thing those two kids had to a positive influence. Thankfully, they were young. Maybe too much of what happened wouldn't be engrained in their memories. He worried for Brody. That poor kid witnessed it all and never spoke a single word of it to anyone. Not even the police. Trent always wondered if Brody knew something that might lead the investigators to finding that son of a bitch.

Trent couldn't sleep. If it wasn't that damned owl carrying on outside, then it was the thought of Bennett standing outside his truck window. He thought of the rain and how it dripped down Bennett's body like his sweat did. Only colder, sadder.

Can't that owl find another person to bother? Trent stared at the clock. Two fifteen a.m.

And how would things go tomorrow if Bennett came back? After the way things went today, Trent wasn't sure he'd even return. He only hoped he would. Trent needed a chance to prove to Bennett how badly he really wanted him.

If that owl hooted one more hoot, Trent was going to lose it. He went to the window and pulled back the hefty curtains. *There he is. Look at him perched there just happy as can be.* Not tired one bit of keeping Trent awake. Trent envied the owl for some time. He didn't know why he envied it. Maybe because it didn't have to worry about being a human and all the troubles that came with it. Trent would admit the owl was beautiful. And big. Really big compared to the limb he was attaching himself to. And it was studying Trent just as hard with his big, saucer-shaped eyes.

Wait a minute. Those eyes. How strangely familiar they were. Trent thought how much they resembled Bennett's, which led to Trent thinking about Bennett sitting out on the tree limb instead of the damn owl. Creepy but kind of sexy. Would he be naked? Trent hoped so.

The owl stretched his massive wings and jumped from the barky perch. Trent watched him fly up to the moon. A postcard silhouette, beautiful. Maybe the owl wasn't so bad after all.

Trent dragged his feet back to bed and curled up under the down feather comforter. He left the window curtain open just in case the owl was curious about what he looked like while he slept. His last thought before finally drifting off to sleep was how much his sister Julia loved owls. Her house was overly decorated with them. Owl-shaped lamps, bookends, clocks. She even wore owl-shaped slippers around the house. *Okay, maybe the owl can stay.*

On any normal occasion, Trent couldn't remember his dreams. That was before Bennett. All night Trent dreamed of his body, his eyes, and that kiss. He dreamed of things he'd soon plan to do to Bennett. Flashes of Bennett's wet body dazzled Trent's dreams.

It wasn't the owl to wake Trent at seven the next morning. Not even little Jules jumping on his bed. Nor was it Brody running amuck down the rickety hardwood floors with a red towel wrapped around his neck pretending to be a super hero. Trent woke to a thunderous boom echoing from his back yard.

Trent raced downstairs, both Jules and Brody close behind him. He was shocked to see Bennett standing in the doorway of the shed tossing heavy scrap into the back of a rusted blue pickup. *Must be his truck,* Trent thought.

"Umm, Uncle Trent, who's that?" Brody asked.

"That's Bennett. He's a work friend and he's gonna help us get that shed fixed up."

“Oh. Okay. Well, he sure is loud.” Jules agreed and both of them ran upstairs to continue meddling in whatever they were meddling in.

Trent gazed out the sliding glass door. *He came back.* Trent was relieved to know that he hadn't scared him off for good. Trent, too, ran back up stairs and quickly threw on some old clothes, ready to get to work. It was Saturday, the boys would be home and he was still on his long weekend, which meant he had more time with Bennett.

Trent checked his teeth in the mirror and made sure he'd chosen a shirt that would show off the definition in his chest. On the way out, Trent grabbed a small ice chest, filled it with all of the ice the refrigerator had to offer, and then dumped in an array of bottled beverages. He thought about how he'd say “Good morning” or “Hey there” or “You're here early” but decided to go with whatever his gut told him.

Trent carried the chest out in a way he knew would cause his pectorals to flex.

“Mornin' Sexy.” Maybe not the best of salutations, but when Bennett smiled he knew he'd done okay.

Bennett jumped down from the tail bed and ran over to Trent.

“Let me help you with that.” Bennett took the ice chest from Trent and set it down. He wiped his hands down his cargo pants and put them on Trent's arm. “How are ya this mornin'?”

“I'm good, really good. You seem to be hard at work.”

“I was up so I figured I'd get an early start. Did I wake you with all my bangin' around?”

“Nope.” It was a lie, but why make this sexy man feel bad about his generosity. “So what are your plans for today?”

“Well I got the inside completely gutted. The walls are in fine shape, but the floor is rotting. I ripped it up, as you can see.”

Bennett's tail bed was weighed down with mushy particle board and plywood. He'd even loaded the rest of the junk that had been piled on the ground the day before.

“You've really been at it.”

“This kind of work is second nature to me.” Bennett opened the chest and popped the cap of a pineapple-flavored drink. Bennett didn't come off as a fruity person so his choice was strangely endearing to Trent.

The back door slid open and out came two tiny supermen. They ran circles around the yard, makeshift capes in tow. Trent looked to Bennett who seemed to be enjoying the show.

“Kids...” Trent said hoping he hadn't lost all chances of winning Bennett over.

“They seem like great kids. I think all little boys pretend they are Superman. I know I did.” Bennett laughed at the thought. “To be a kid again, right?”

“I just wish I had a fraction of their energy. If it isn't Superman, it's cops and robbers, or cowboys and Indians. Dinosaurs even. Jules, the little one, swears he's a Velociraptor.”

Brody and Jules rounded the yard and came to a halt at Bennett's feet. They stared up at him with wrinkled eyebrows. Jules used his hand to shade the sun so he could get a better look.

“Who the heck are you?” Brody asked.

Bennett stood tall and strong and let out a ferocious growl. “I'm The Big Bad Wolf! And I'm hungry.” Bennett barked a very believable howl sending the boys screaming and running in all directions. Bennett chased after them beating his chest.

Trent was amused by Bennett's participation in their games. And they seemed to enjoy it, too. Bennett made a couple laps of chasing them before running out of breath and stopping at his pickup. Sweat gathered between Bennett's shoulder blades and between his pecs.

“Think fast!” Trent hurled a bottle of water to him.

“Haha, thanks.” And then sexy Bennett did exactly what Trent had imagined him doing many times before. He poured the remainder of the refreshing water over his head and shook it out like a wet dog. Damn him for being so fine.

“I'm gonna haul this out to the lumber yard where I work and pick up some good wood to replace it.”

“All right, how much will something like that cost?”

“Don't worry about it. I get a pretty good discount.” Bennett's long, black lashes curled high above his eyelid in a wink.

Bennett slammed shut his driver's side door and rolled his window down. His elbow hung out while his hand gripped the shifter ready to drive when Brody ran up to his window.

“Where do you think you’re going, ya big bad wolf?”

“Yeah, where you think you goin’?” repeated Jules.

Bennett’s voice deepened, harsh and torn. “I must go before my hunger overtakes me and I eat both of you!” He bolted out one more snarling growl. Even Trent was taken aback by its authenticity. Bennett grinned, his sharp canines ricocheting sunlight, before hitting the gas.

Trent stood still but his nephews ran into the house. Bennett’s connection with his children made him that much more attractive. Trent had always wanted a family. Like the ones you see in picture frame stock photos. Happy, wide smiles, large, suburban home and a retriever playing ball. Trent had been seventeen when the actuality of what he’d end up with hit him. He was sure he’d be the single gay guy jumping from bar to bar looking for hookups, gaining nothing meaningful. Yet, after meeting Bennett, Trent was coming to a new actualization. Maybe he had found his family. Maybe he had found what he missed at night.

Chapter Seven

Bennett

Harold's Lumber was quietly positioned deep off a back road not too far from FairWood Place. I stepped out and quickly observed my surroundings. I was alone. Good. Harold was a prick of a boss, but at least he paid well and gave weekends off. After all, who would hire a guy with no real papers to prove he actually existed? Better yet, who needed papers to prove they existed. Not me, that's for damn sure.

I threw the last bit of soggy wood onto the mountain of decaying furniture, tree trunks, and countless other forgotten pieces. Four or five sheets of decent plywood would be all I needed to get the job done, but I wasn't going to just half-ass it. I chose the best quality treated wood. Maybe I was trying too hard to impress Trent, but unless he was a lumber genius, he probably wouldn't notice how expensive this wood actually was.

I thought about the day before on my way back to Trent's. I hadn't been the best Bennett I could have been, but I was scared. The kiss was magnificent, yes. Better than that even. That's why I went back last night. To watch him. Perched outside his bedroom window wasn't good enough. Though thinking about it now, it did seem we had a connection even then. Like he'd known exactly who was inside the owl that beckoned him. How the hell could I ever tell him it was me? Think about it. Would you believe me? Maybe I'd never have to tell him.

His kids seemed to like me. Maybe I got some points in with them. God knows I tried like hell. And it was fun showing off my wild side.

Wild. The word always made me think of my life before I left the pack. We called ourselves "The Feral" because we were. We hunted for pleasure, killed for fun. For the blood. It started out with deer and other large game but it quickly progressed to bigger prey. Humans. People. Real-life innocent people. Human blood was unlike any other. It's like whiskey for wolves. After a little you just don't know when to stop. And then I remembered my brother's little threat. I knew he was surely bound to show his face again. Soon.

I will not go back to that life. Not even if it kills me. Not even if it means I'll be Alpha. In which case, I'd have to kill the current Alpha, my own brother. It wasn't like the thought hadn't crossed my mind before. He was worse than dead to me after what he did to that little girl and her mother. He was a monster; the kind of evil you didn't want to mess with.

I parked curbside in front of Trent's house. His neighborhood was pulled straight from a 1960's sitcom. Every yard's lawn was greener than the last. Children played hopscotch and jumped rope in the street. Wives kissed their husbands good-bye as they carried their leather briefcases off to work. It was exactly the kind of place I always wanted to live but never had the privilege.

Trent appeared at the front door just as I was heading around back.

"Hey, come on in. I was just getting lunch ready."

I couldn't deny the rumbling in my stomach. It had been empty for some time. Inside, the aroma of chili filled the air.

"I hope you like chili dogs and potato chips. It's damn near the only thing the boys will eat. And one of the few things you can't really screw up."

Brody greeted me like he was a host at a fine diner.

"Here you are, sir." He pulled a chair out from the table and bowed.

I graciously took my seat. "Thank you, sir," I said, returning the courtesy.

Trent returned to the table and took a seat facing me. For a moment, I felt like we were on a date and he was officially mine.

"Oh, by the way, the chili doesn't have beans."

"Beans make me fart," Jules brazenly admitted.

Trent hung his head, embarrassed. "We don't talk like that at the table, do we, Jules?"

"No, sir." Jules mischievously leaned over towards me and whispered, "But it's true."

"So how do you know Uncle Trent?" Brody bit into a messy chili dog while staring me down. I'll admit, for a second, I was intimidated. By the question and by his stare.

"I've already told you, Brody. Bennett is a work friend and he's helping repair the shed."

"You gonna be here for a long time?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but Trent answered. "Yes he will be. There's a lot of work around here that needs to be done."

Brody shoved a handful of chips in his mouth. "Good. I liked it when you growled just like a wolf. You made Jules pee his pants." Brody laughed, blowing pieces of chips all over his plate.

“Nuuu-uuhh! No I didn’t.” Jules cheeks turned pink. He picked up his half-eaten hotdog and was just about to smash it in Brody’s face when Trent intervened.

“Boys, boys. Chill out. You don’t want Mr. Bennett thinking you were raised by wolves, do you?”

Instant flashback of my childhood. Of my teenage years, after puberty took my innocence away. The night I turned for the first time was excruciatingly painful. My bones bent and snapped as my body took on the form of a young grey wolf. I remember it so clearly, my brother stood over me, laughing. He was so proud of me for turning into the monster he’d soon raise me to be.

Snap out of it.

Trent refilled my glass of sweet tea. “Everything okay?” he asked.

I nodded. I didn’t know. Was it?

When Trent sat down, I felt something crawling up my leg. Shielded by the tabletop, Trent began playing footsy with me. His toes found their way up my leg. Up, up, and even up some more. I tried not to flinch when he was no longer on my leg but somewhere between. He looked at me with squinted, sexy eyes. He was arousing me at the table. With his kids right there. I reached my hand under the table and inconspicuously tapped his foot away. He giggled and removed his foot from my stiffening crotch.

Trent was clearing the table when young Brody spoke again. “Do your growl, do your growl!”

Trent smiled at me from the kitchen sink.

“Yea, yea. Do it!” begged Jules.

I swallowed all the air my lungs could handle and burst out a monstrous growl. The glasses on the table vibrated. In front of me, Jules and Brody stood wide-eyed. Unmoving. Maybe, I had done too good of an impression. Trent carefully set the bowl in the sink, and gave me a where-the-hell-did-that-come-from look. Looks of fear turned to looks of amazement.

“Wooooow! Dad, can Mr. Bennett stay over for supper, too?”

Dad? I looked to Trent who had the same look on his face as I did. Obviously this was the first time Brody had called him dad. Up till now it was Uncle Trent. I felt proud for Trent. I could only imagine the sense of honor I would feel if I was called “Dad.”

Brody and Jules turned facing Trent with big, wondering eyes. Trent fumbled with his words but finally managed to answer.

“Would you like to stay over for supper, Mr. Bennett?” Trent’s upper lip shook into a grin.

“Depends. Whatcha cookin’?” I was too smug for my own good sometimes.

“I... ugh. What day is it? Saturday? Saturdays are normally Chinese.”

“Homemade stir-fry?”

“Ohh... no. Takeout, did I not say takeout? I meant takeout.”

Damn him. Even in his shyness Trent was fucking adorable. Had his boys not been standing there, I would have thrown him to the floor and sexed him right then.

“I like takeout.”

There was a knock at the door. I stayed seated as Trent went to the living room to answer it. I heard a woman’s voice, then Trent calling for Jules and Brody. I followed them, curious. It wasn’t my place to be nosey, I know. Sue me.

“Colby is having a birthday sleepover and Mrs. Talley, here, is inviting you two over. What do you say?”

“Heck yea!” Brody exclaimed running upstairs.

Jules, fast on his heels, mimicked, “Heck yea!”

Mrs. Talley fit the mold of Suburban Mommy to a T. Her long, dark curls and perky, red-lipsticked smile was PTA approved. She was bubbly and laughing away when she took notice of me standing idly by, near a bookcase filled with vintage World Books. Her spry lips straightened and her head crooked to the side as she looked to Trent and then back to me. She quickly erased the question from her face. She was young enough and smart enough to understand the situation without asking. That much was clear.

“Well, hello back there.” She waved a jolly wave.

Trent offered her in and she plowed straight past him right to me. “Hi! I’m Mrs. Talley from next door. But you can call me Sarah. My son is friends with Trent’s here. I don’t think I’ve seen you around before.” If Mrs. Talley smiled any harder, her lips were going to break off. Which would be a sad state of affairs for Trent’s crème-colored carpet.

“Sarah, this is Bennett Grey. Bennett, Sarah Talley.”

“Bennett. Ohhh, I like that. It fits you. A strong name for a strong man.” Mrs. Talley was a no-holds-barred kind of woman. She quickly took my bicep in her hand and squeezed. “Very strong,” she reiterated.

“Bennett’s helping get that old shed out back fixed up.” Trent’s uneasiness showed when he swiped his hands through his hair.

“Is that right? Well, when you get that taken care of I think I’ve got a few things that need a lookin’ at, over at my place.” This woman wasn’t the least bit discreet. Her pink tongue slid across her lip, not taking her eyes off of me.

Trent rolled his eyes behind her back and made gagging motions.

“So, Sarah, how is Langston... your husband.”

She sucked her tongue back in her mouth. “He’s just fine.”

The boys dashed down the wooden staircase and landed in front of Mrs. Talley. She patted each one of them on the head and told them to head on over.

“Well I better be on my way too. Thanks again for letting them stay over. And don’t worry, I’ll get them safely home tomorrow.”

“I appreciate that. Thank you.”

“It was really, really nice meeting you, Bennett Grey. I hope I’ll be seeing you around more often.” Mrs. Talley poked her buoyant breasts out and catwalked to the door. “Later guys!” Mrs. Talley was one fascinating neighbor to have. She left, but the smell of her sweet pea perfume lingered.

“Okaaay.” Trent turned and fell back against the door. “Glad that’s over with.”

“Looks like it’ll be just me and you then.” I moved into him still keeping a bit of room between us.

Trent didn’t waste any time filling the space with his body. He took a handful of my shirt in either hand and planted a single kiss on my wanting lips.

“I’d prefer it that way,” Trent said, unbuttoning my shirt. His fingernails scraped at my chest and his teeth at my neck. “About yesterday.”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me, babe.”

“Babe?” Trent returned my bold statement with a bold glare.

“If you want to be. I want you to be.” I put my lips as close to his ear as possible and whispered softly, “I really want you to be.”

"I haven't been anyone's 'babe' in a really long time."

"Well, then now's a good time to start. Be mine?"

If I hadn't understood Trent's feelings, I would have been taken aback by the flash of uncertainty that came across his face. It didn't take him long to think it over. He burrowed his whiskered cheek into my neck. He held it there for just a moment before looking me in the eyes.

"And you'll be mine?" His voice was shaky. Clearly he had been hurt before.

"I'll be your everything, always." And I knew I would be.

"Your eyes. They are so familiar to me. I've seen them before."

"Well, I was here yesterday." Okay, sarcasm.

"No, somewhere else. Maybe in a dream."

"Oh, so you're dreaming about me now. This is progressing quickly."

"No, *this* would be progressing quickly." Trent moved his hands down my chest and stomach. His fingertips dipped behind my waistband. He drove his tongue from my earlobe all the way down my body.

He had just used his teeth to unfasten the button on my jeans when, without a single knock, in barged Mrs. Talley. Her painted lips fell, her eyes popped open as she dropped the slice of chocolate cake she was carrying. Thankfully, it only landed on the tiled threshold.

Trent and I scurried to put ourselves back together, but it was too late. Mrs. Talley had gotten an eyeful. But her smiling face and lip biting didn't say she was upset about it.

"I... I am sorry I didn't knock. I'll be going now."

"It's fine, Sarah." What more could be done? "Did you forget something?"

She pointed down to the flattened cake. "I didn't want you two feeling left out. I was bringing you some cake." She bent down and scraped the fudgy mess into her hands. "I should have knocked. I am so sorry. I'm so damn clumsy."

"It's fine really. I'm sorry you saw..."

"I'm not! It was hot! But I wouldn't have pegged you for a gay. Well, maybe you, Trent. Not you, Bennett." Mrs. Talley eyeballed me as gooey filling fell through her fingers.

“As they say—looks can be deceiving.”

“Yes. You’re right. They sure can.”

“Sarah.” Trent said. “Can we just keep this between us?”

Trent’s need for secrecy didn’t bother me. I didn’t say it, but I too wished for my own sense of privacy.

“Oh sure. No, absolutely.” Mrs. Talley pretended to zip her mouth shut and throw away the key.

“Thanks for the cake anyway.”

She looked depressingly at the disaster and promised to send some home with the boys tomorrow. She licked her thumb clean and waved goodbye.

Trent, laughing and shaking his head, swiped a morsel of the cake onto his finger. He ran to me and smeared it across my mouth and kissed me.

“I love kissing you.”

“Why? ’Cause it tastes like chocolate cake?”

“No. Because it tastes like you. You taste so good.”

The sun sank quickly on the flat Oklahoma horizon, turning the evening sky and all things under it orange. Trent and I sat on the steps of his porch talking about life. About all the things we ever wanted and all the things we dreamed of doing before we grew old. *How did I get so lucky to have found a man with dreams so much like my own?*

When the sun gave its final twinkling, I knew it was time to go.

“Can I see you tomorrow?”

“Why don’t you stay?”

Stay? No one had ever asked me to stay with them. It was a concept I wasn’t familiar with.

“Really?”

“Yeah, seriously. Stay with me.”

I gave Trent the I-ain’t-easy look. Though I kind of was.

“It’s not like I’m askin’ you to assume the position. I just want you to stay. I want you in my bed. We don’t have to do anything.”

I thought about my bed back home. Torn. Cold. And compared it with Trent's. Warm with a body to cling to.

“I think I'd like that, a lot.”

Chapter Eight

Trent

The stars cast just enough light into Trent's room to cut the darkness. Just enough light that he could make out the shape of Bennett's body lying beside him. After hours of lying in bed talking and laughing and of course kissing, it didn't take long for Bennett to fall asleep. He had complimented how soft Trent's bed was more than once and how warm his blankets were. Trent had never seen the inside of where Bennett called home but was sure he didn't need to. All he knew was that he didn't want Bennett to leave.

With the curtains pulled back, Trent noticed a difference in tonight. Something was missing. That owl. That damn owl, where was he? He had grown to really like that owl. But Trent had Bennett now. What more did he need?

And the best part of it all, they didn't have sex. Not a single bit of it. A huge change for Trent, who had always felt the need to consummate even the tiniest of attractions. But not Bennett, he didn't expect that. Either Bennett was scared or he wanted more out of their relationship. And Trent was sure Bennett definitely wasn't scared of anything. All Bennett wanted was company. And Trent had plenty of that to give.

The alarm clock sounded, seven o'clock, too damn early to wake up. Especially since Trent had the pleasure of lying beside the most beautiful man he'd ever known. He wanted to wake up to his face every morning.

Trent snuck out of bed and showered. He let the warm water freshen his skin. The steam awakened his lungs. But it was Bennett lying in his bed that made him feel as if he could take on the day.

He dressed in his usual attire, khaki slacks, forest green button up and brown tie. Trent even decided he'd wear his badge, proudly displaying his position for Bennett to see. Trent didn't need to fix his hair, a quick tussle with his fingers was all it took to style his dirty-blond locks.

Trent tiptoed through his room, hunting for his Dockers. Bennett woke at the sound of a creaking floor under Trent's feet.

"Mornin'." Bennett's voice was morning fresh. Coarse but still sexy. He stretched out his body, flexing, waking his muscles.

“How did you sleep?” Trent sat down beside him and pulled on his boots. He wasn't expecting Bennett to reach over and wrap his arms around his waist. Bennett rested his head on Trent's back.

“Best night's sleep I've had in a really long time.”

“I want you to make yourself at home today. My house is your house.”

“And the neighbors?”

“The only one you'd need to worry about is Sarah.” Trent turned to Bennett and rested his hand on his cheek. “Last night meant so much to me.”

“But we didn't do anything.”

“Exactly. That's the reason. I felt comfortable to just lie beside you and hold you and only that. Not that I don't want to, ya know. Do that.”

“It will happen. When it's time.”

“When it's right.”

“Exactly.” Bennett threw the blanket off himself. He stood up and walked around to face Trent. It was clear *every* part of Bennett was awake. His happy trail enticed Trent. How badly he wanted to run his tongue down it. He wanted to rip the blue satin boxers off of Bennett's brown body and do dirty things with him.

Bennett pushed Trent onto his back and crawled on top of him. He wrapped the blanket over them and let the warmth soak in. “I hope every morning starts like this,” he said into Trent's ear.

“Me too.” Trent raised Bennett up so he could get a good look at his strapping body. Trent's khakis were not holding up to the swelling taking place inside them.

Bennett took notice of Trent's excitement and began to rock his hips back and forth, grinding his rear against Trent's lap. He moved in a rhythm that matched Trent's heavy breathing.

“This uniform of yours is really turning me on.”

“What about the badge?”

“So sexy!”

Trent raised up and held Bennett still. “I really don't want to go, but if I don't head out soon, I'm going to be late for work.”

“Can I come back tonight?”

“You don’t have to leave at all, ya know. I want you to stay.”

“Stay?”

“As in, don’t go. Ever.”

“I won’t.”

“But I do have to go. Make yourself at home.”

Bennett nodded and gave a boyish smile. “I’ve never been asked to stay. No longer than a night. Or a couple hours.”

Trent kissed Bennett’s cheek and the new couple made their way downstairs. He opened the front door to leave, climbed into his truck, and cranked the engine when Bennett appeared, tapping on his window.

“You forgot this.” He said.

“Forgot what?”

“This.” Bennett put his lips on Trent’s and kissed him. “Have a good day at work, my Prince.”

“If I’m your Prince then you’re my Knight.”

Trent tipped his head and backed out of the driveway. Bennett disappeared from his rearview mirror. He licked his chapped lips to taste the kiss once more. For the first time, Trent felt the same joy he’d always dreamed of having.

Kim, Trent’s colleague, greeted him when he walked in. Her expression was one of concern and disbelief.

“Everything okay, Kim?” Trent inserted fifty cents into the vending machine and retrieved his granola bar.

“Wolves.” Kim said.

“Okay, wolves.”

“Wolves.” Her inflection greater this time. “In Oklahoma.”

“Nope. Bullshit. There haven’t been wolves in Oklahoma in decades.”

“Oh yeah?” Kim handed him a file with a small evidence baggy of fur.

“What’s this?” Trent examined the file.

“This would be the file of an attack on a young woman that took place over the weekend. And that’s wolf fur. Wolf. Fur.”

“And the woman?”

“ICU. She told the paramedics it was the biggest coyote she’d ever seen. We already ran tests, definitely not any coyote. Most definitely wolf.”

“And now we have to what? Find this mysterious wolf and kill it? Where did this happen?”

“Right outside town. Too close for comfort. I’ve heard some of the locals saying they would kill it if they found it. We can’t let that happen, Trent. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know. But if this animal killed someone, and the locals find it, chances are they *will* kill it. And if the authorities find it, they will still kill it.”

Kim threw her hands up in the air. “Wolves. Wolves in goddamned Oklahoma.”

“I’ll be in my office making some calls.”

Trent sat down at his desk. His degrees in Animal Science hung behind him, and in front of him sat a picture of his sister. He kissed his finger and touched her face.

He read the file over and over. And when he thought he’d learned enough, he read it again. Trent knew very little about wolves, but what he did know was that there were definitely no wolves in Oklahoma and there hadn’t been any attacks on humans in North America almost ever. Coyotes, yes. But wolves? Trent examined the file again. He read the statement taken from the woman. She described the “creature” as monstrous, black with red-ringed eyes. She mentioned the eyes twice, black with a red ring. Almost like that owl’s eyes, Trent thought. Like... Bennett’s. That’s where he’d seen Bennett’s eyes before. That owl. Trent thought of the chances of their eyes being so similar. And now the woman describing this wolf’s eyes almost exactly the same. Trent decided he’d have to see this woman. He rang Kim on the intercom.

“Yes? You rang?”

“I’m going to talk to her.”

Trent’s office door flung open. “Her, who?” Kim questioned.

“This Pierce woman. I want to talk to her. Get some more details about the animal.”

“Wolf.”

“Wolf, whatever. Do you want to ride with me?”

“Can’t. Leaving early today. It’s my husband’s birthday. Which means I’ll be forced to do my wifely duties. Cook, clean, sex, clean.” Kim twirled her finger in an annoyed circle. “Never-ending cycle.”

“Your poor husband.”

“What? I’m a good wife. When I wanna be. Which reminds me. Oh wait, never mind.”

“What? Tell me.”

“I promised I wouldn’t. Damn my big mouth.”

“You better tell me.”

“Okay, but you can’t say I told you.”

Trent gave Kim a tell-me-right-the-hell-now look.

“Okay, okay. Well I saw Sarah Talley in the grocery store yesterday. And you know her husband and mine are friends. So I stopped to say hi, even though I really don’t care for that woman. She has better tits than me. Mine sag some.”

“Get to the point, Kim.” Though Trent already knew what was coming next.

“Anyway, she told me she saw you…” Her tone fell to a whisper, “with another man.”

“What are you getting at, Kim?”

“I just wanna know.”

“Know what? If I’m gay? If I’m dating a guy? Yes. Yes I am.”

Kim bounced up and down, squealing like she’d won a prize. “Ohhh, that makes me so happy! I’ve always wanted a gay best friend!”

“Really, Kim? What are we, thirteen?”

“Seriously, we can go shopping and you can tell me if I look fat in dresses and I won’t get sad or cry ’cause you’re gay! And we can swap sex stories, too!”

“Um, no. I don’t think so.”

Kim’s expression dropped. “You don’t want to be my gay best friend?”

“I don’t want to swap sex stories. And I don’t like shopping for dresses. Sorry. We can be friends but right now I have to go. Time’s a wastin’.”

“Hmph. Well let me know what she says.”

Anderson Medical Center was just like the rest of the town. Small and unkempt. Though, the doctors inside were some of the best.

“Room 164,” the frumpy receptionist said as she chowed down on a candy bar.

The door was open, but Trent still knocked just to announce his presence. An elderly woman’s voice told him to come in.

There she was wrapped up with bandages covering nearly half of her body. The elderly woman to her side gently patted the victim’s hand.

“Hello, ma’am. My name is Trent Moss and I’m with Oklahoma Forestry.”

“Talk to her, I don’t know nothin’.”

Okay, not all old people are sweet apparently.

Ms. Pierce turned her long, blond curly head and spoke carefully. “I’ve already told the police everything.”

“Yes ma’am, but my team and I may can find the animal that did this to you...”

“Werewolf. Not animal.” Ms. Pierce turned her attention back to the open window.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Pierce, did you say *Werewolf*?”

“It’s fine. Go ahead and laugh, just like the police did when I told them.”

“Ms. Pierce, I’m not here to laugh at you. Please tell me what you told them. I’ll believe you.”

“Jenny, call me Jenny.”

“Okay Jenny. What did the creature look like?”

“Werewolf. Not creature. And it was huge. Bigger than any wolf, or coyote I’ve ever seen. Bigger than a Grizzly, even.”

Trent took a notepad from his pocket and began scribbling notes, “Okay. Tell me everything you remember.” Trent thought to himself how he’d make a damn good investigator.

“Well, it was Saturday, noon. I went for my usual jog around the lake near my house. About twenty miles outside of here. I had my headphones on so I couldn't hear anything. But near the water's edge I saw this...” Jenny looked to the elderly woman who was twiddling her thumbs and listening attentively.

“Continue. What did you see?”

“A naked man.”

The old woman chuckled then quickly returned to her concerned demeanor.

“Did you see his face?”

“No, He was hunched over. Like he was vomiting. I was so caught off guard 'cause he was naked. I turned my head for two seconds because I didn't want him to think I was watching him... like that. And when I looked back up, there it was.”

“The werewolf?”

“Yes. And the man was gone. Then the monster swiped me with its massive paw. Knocked the breath out of me. I couldn't move. And then he attacked me. I lost consciousness. But when I opened my eyes. I couldn't even believe what I saw.”

“What did you see?”

“It turned back into that man.”

“What do you mean turned? Like morphed?”

“Yes, exactly! It morphed. It was the strangest thing I have ever seen. The doctors said I hallucinated it because my body was in shock. But I wasn't in shock. And I know what I saw.”

All the while, the little old woman shook her head in agreement.

“Where did he go afterward?”

“I'm not sure. I passed out. And then I woke up here.”

“In your statement, you mentioned his eyes?”

“Oh yes. I'll never forget them. Before he attacked me, he stood over me. Foaming mouth and growling. And all I could focus on was his eyes. They were black but had this red ring...”

“Around its iris?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Lucky guess. Is there anything I can do for you now?”

“There’s one thing. If you find that thing. Kill it.”

“I’ll do my best. I promise you that. Thank you so much for your time. Have a good day ladies. And again, I’m sorry this happened to you.”

“Me too.”

Trent closed the door behind him and went down to the gift shop where he bought flowers and chocolates and inside the note he wrote. “*The animal kingdom still loves you.*” He thought it would be a sweet gesture and maybe just maybe Jenny wouldn’t lose faith in Mother Nature.

But, werewolves? Trent didn’t even know where to begin with Jenny’s statement. Clearly there was no such thing as werewolves. But she did seem so adamant and very believable. The doctors were probably right, the body does crazy things when it’s in shock.

“So, what did she say?” Kim asked over the phone.

“She said it was a werewolf.”

“A werewolf? Boy, she is nuts, huh.”

“Not nuts. She was in shock. Her insides were ripped out. But she did have an interesting story to tell. Almost believable. She said she was running and saw a naked man by the lake.”

“Oh, did she say if he was cute? Or ya know, hung. I bet he was.”

“Really, Kim? Anyway. She saw him then she looked away and he was gone but this massive beast, or werewolf as she put it, attacked her. She remembered its eyes. Black with a reddish ring around the iris.”

“Is that all she said? Nothing else about the naked guy?”

“You’re impossible. Go have sex with your husband.”

“Ew. Gross. No. Bye.” Kim disconnected.

Trent knew that would get her off the phone. Okay, Trent would just have to sleep on this for a while. He said he’d find this animal, and he would. He decided he’d go back out to where it happened. Cops aren’t the most reliable source when it comes to animal attacks. It takes a professional. Someone who knows animals, their habits. And Trent spent years studying these kinds of things. Plus, he wanted justice for Jenny Pierce.

Lake Osage was beautiful with crystal clear water, gorgeous islands, and all the wildlife to go with it. It was just another paradise. But not for Jenny Pierce. From the information given by Jenny, it wasn't at all hard to find the scene. Blood still stained the bright green grass. *So much blood.* Trent wondered how she was even still alive. He bent down in search of tracks. It wasn't until he was near the muddy bank that he found them. Human footprints, large barefoot prints. Definitely a man's, size twelve.

Wait. What's that? Trent took out his cell and turned the camera on. He snapped a picture of what appeared to be a *wolf's* track. But bigger, much, much bigger. How odd was it that they faded right into the human's footprint? Shivers pricked down Trent's spine. An odd feeling came over him. Like he was being watched. A twig somewhere behind him snapped. Trent spun around to nothing. He saw nothing but a group of birds hopping about one another. Trent laughed at his own overactive mind. Trent snapped a few more pictures of the prints and the surrounding scenery before heading back to his truck.

Something else caught Trent's eye. In the tail bed of his truck was Bennett's shirt. The one he'd taken off that day in the rain. Trent picked it up and held it close to his face. He breathed it in, trying to smell the man who had worn it. The man he was falling for. He missed Bennett. Trent read his watch; only an hour and he'd be home, with him.

It was the slowest hour in the history of hours and when Trent arrived home, Bennett wasn't there. His heart damn near stopped beating. Of course the worst came to mind, that Bennett didn't want him. Or he was hurt. But then Trent found a note on his pillow.

Gone home to get some things. Will be back soon. – B

Chapter Nine

Bennett

I don't think I've ever flown so fast. Through trees, over lakes, and under bridges I soared. One quick flight before I needed to get back to being Bennett. This time I didn't mind being Bennett. Every day I was with Trent was one more day I was okay with being myself.

My happy state of being was quickly curdled into anger upon entering my apartment. It was demolished, even more so than it normally was. Guy had been here, I could still smell him. That violent, stale-blood scent all over everything I owned.

He had been here. In my goddamned home. And he left proof all around. Every dish I owned was broken, strewn on the dirty kitchen floor. All of my furniture toppled over, their contents littering the piss-stained carpets. He had pissed on my possessions, another one of his Alpha ploys of getting me to succumb to him.

Not happening. Not in this lifetime. Not ever.

And then it hit me. Like two trains colliding head on, it hit me in my heart. My mother's necklace. The one thing I owned that meant more to me than anything else in this decrepit place.

I bolted to my room and threw open the closet door. Sorrow lurched up from my gut and choked me. It was gone. The box lay open on the floor, empty. Wait... not empty. A note, blood-spattered and written in my brother's hand, sat at the bottom of the blue velveteen-lined box.

Come back, The Feral misses you.

I could have, would have ripped his head off if he'd been standing in front of me, but I opted for the wall instead. I stabbed both of my fists through the paneled wall. The pain felt good shooting up my arms. I went to my knees, chin to chest and wept. No tears.

After I regained my strength, healed, and locked away the sadness, I gathered what little bit of clothing and other personal belongings I could fit in my truck. And I still had room for another person. Trent. That's all I needed right now. Just Trent.

I made sure I showed no sign of distress when I pulled into his driveway. Our driveway? Jules and Brody were next door splashing in the infamous Mrs. Talley's inground pool. Looked like fun, even in my current state.

My hand was turning the door knob when I remembered I'd forgotten my manners. So I knocked. He never appeared at the door. I knocked louder. Still nothing. I went against my instinct and opened the door.

"Hello, Trent?" Still no answer, but the shower was running upstairs and I could hear him singing. I followed his voice until I was right outside the bathroom door. The steam escaping from his shower moved across my face. I put my hand on the door and leaned my ear in closer. His singing voice was not like his spoken voice. It was gentle and saccharine. Then the water shut off and the music stopped.

Oh shit. Here I was, standing in his room. Uninvited, unannounced.

I stood back in the doorway of his bedroom when the bathroom door opened. A cloud of hot steam billowed out. From the steam came my man. Towel wrapped around his waist, water rolling down his chest. Instant arousal.

"Hey there." My greeting alarmed him. He stumbled back then realized who had intruded.

"Hey, baby! Didn't see you there."

"I tried knocking so I just came in."

"Uh yeah. This is your home now. No knocking. How are you? You seem shaken up."

I couldn't respond. All I was capable of doing, at the moment, was admiring. His body, his crooked smile, and the towel I so badly wanted to unravel from his body.

Trent caught me staring, though I wasn't making any effort to hide the fact. He flicked the bedroom light off, allowing only the light peeking through the thick curtains to illuminate his body. Trent dropped his towel. He stood, baring his all to me. My breath stuck in my lungs. I couldn't believe the perfection standing in front of me. He came towards me and placed his hands on my face.

"I want you. I'm ready." His hands stroked my cheeks. "Take your shirt off."

I tried speaking, but he put his finger to my lips. "Just. Let me." He whispered.

I gave in and let him have control. It was the first time I let anyone have control over me. I'd given him access to my heart, why not my body?

Trent pulled my belt from its loops, allowing my ripped jeans to hang loose. He kissed me while working at my fly, unzipping and lowering my jeans. He led me to the bed and sat me down, kissed me from my hips down to my ankles. He slipped my boots off and stared up at me with his radiant green eyes.

“Lean back. Close your eyes.”

I did as I was so sweetly told. With my eyes closed, his kisses were magnified. Each one sent sparks through my body like electricity through a gray cloud before a storm. My body trembled with nerves. How long had it been since I was laid out, exposed, vulnerable?

“Are you okay, my love?”

I didn't speak, only nodded.

Trent crawled on top of me and rested his warm body on mine. The trembling stopped. If ever there was a moment where I felt a bit of heaven, it was then.

More. Give me more.

“Keep your eyes closed, my Knight.” Trent blew a cool breath all the way down to my navel. He kissed me there tenderly. I felt his mouth take me in. My back arched and toes spread. I dug my fingers in the mattress as he took me to the edge. A pressure built in my groin. I was so close, so close, when he stopped.

Trent came back up to face me. Eyes still shut. “Open 'em.”

His stare lanced my eyes, serious about what he was about to say.

“Do you want me?”

“Yes.”

“All of me?”

“More than anything.”

Trent brandished a quick smile. “Close your eyes.”

He positioned himself above my waist and slowly, so very carefully, he let me inside him. I opened my eyes when he gasped. A perfect fit. He felt so good around me. I finally felt the blaze inside him that I fell for. He moved his body

up and down. Slow at first then quicker, harder. His breaths were firm and rigid like the rest of him. And though I could have climaxed right then as I placed my hands on his moistened chest; I didn't. I couldn't. Never end. I wanted this to never end.

"I'm getting..." I wanted to say close but, no.

Trent whispered one last thing in my ear, still rocking his hips. "Inside me. Stay inside me."

It was the heat of his skin, his soft chest hair scratching against my sensitive skin; it was the blooming yellow light cast from the afternoon sun, and the sounds of our love that sent me over. I rose up and latched my arms around him, pulled him down deeper, as I gave him all that I had.

It wasn't just sex. It wasn't just a damn good fuck. It was romance, lovemaking, and sensual. And it was the best I'd ever had. And all I'd ever needed.

We held still, embracing each other with me still inside him. I laid him down on his back and kissed him again. I could taste myself lingering on his lips. But I wanted to taste him. I went down and licked the soft hair growing below his belly button. My tongue explored ever lower.

"You taste so good," I told him.

He gave a shy grin. But he had no reason to be. He was bigger than me, bigger than any guy I'd seen.

Trent shuddered and let out a satisfied moan. It was sweet like the nectar of honeysuckle. I savored him. Every last bit of him.

We curled together under the sheets and didn't speak a word. We didn't need to. We knew what the other was thinking. How we wanted this to last forever. I thought about destiny, and if I had one. And I did. He was my destiny.

"I want you to live here. With me. With us. Be a part of our family."

All my dreams were coming true, and in one day. "I'd love that. I've always wanted a family."

"Then that's that. Let's go get your things. Why wait?"

"No point, babe. Everything I own is in my truck. Nothing else matters."

Trent kissed my forehead. "I'll get you everything you need and more. Anything you want, just ask. It's yours."

“And I’ll be yours. Forever.”

“And always.”

Trent patted me on the butt and hopped out of bed. He pulled on a pair of loose gym shorts and a tank. I followed behind him and dressed.

“I’ll clear out some space in the closet for your clothes. Is there anything you need, babe?”

“Just you.” I pecked a kiss on his cheek and ran down to my truck.

Family. I finally had one. And though it was new, it was already worth more than anything I’d lost in the past. Was this my happily ever after?

And Trent, that boy was damn good in bed. Yes sir, I could get used to this. I could get used to being his.

I was gathering my things when Trent stepped onto the porch and called out for the boys to come home.

“I’m getting dinner ready. And I’ve made room for your stuff right next to mine.”

Brody ran up to me with a curious look. “Whatcha got all your clothes for?”

How could I answer? He was a kid. He wouldn’t understand. Hell he’d only seen me twice.

“Bennett is going to be living here, with us, from now on.”

“Awesome! You can teach us how to howl like you now!” Brody ran off inside. Jules behind him. But Jules stopped and hugged Trent’s legs, “I love you, Dad.” He scurried off in search of Brody.

“Dad?” Trent asked me, laughing. His smile was wide and exuberant.

“Hey, I’d roll with it. Those boys really love you, babe.”

“Yeah. I guess they do.”

Later that evening, the boys and I sat at the kitchen table. I taught them how to roar and growl and snort. Jules especially loved that the moon in the sky was full, perfect for howling at. He was down on all fours like a wolf, howling through the window when Trent announced dinner was ready.

“Okay, boys wash up.”

The two of them ran to the kitchen sink and fought over who got to go first. Brody being the biggest, won the battle. They howled while washing up and I

couldn't stop from thinking about my own childhood. When I first learned to howl.

Trent set the table, plates, napkins, silverware and... wine glasses?

"What are those for?" I asked.

"This is a special occasion. Our first family dinner. Red or white?"

"Red, definitely."

Trent's cell rang. He didn't answer after reading the caller ID.

"Not gonna answer?"

"It's just my partner at work, Kim. Probably just calling to tell me how she loves the fact she has a new gay best friend."

"Oh, she's one of those?"

Then the phone rang again. Persistent.

"She doesn't normally call back. I should probably take this."

I heard only Trent's side of the conversation.

"She's gone? What do you mean gone? Where could she have gone? Claw marks? You have got to be shitting me. Alright, first thing tomorrow." And then he hung up. He stared at his phone in awe and shock.

"Is everything alright?"

"This woman I spoke to today. She was attacked by what she said was a 'werewolf.' If you can believe that. She damn near died, had her intestines ripped from her body. And now, she's disappeared! From the hospital!"

The blood drained from my face. Guy. It had to be him. His favorite prey was young women. And I knew he couldn't leave this town without leaving his mark.

"Apparently her hospital bed had been torn to pieces along with her clothes." Trent sat down at the table and started passing around the food.

I tried not to look nervous but something inside me told me that Guy had found himself a new protégé. A trophy. He'd had several.

The twisting in my stomach returned, this time only worse. I clinched the tablecloth feeling like I was going to lose it.

He was here. And he'd brought another shifter with him. I wrenched in pain.

Trent stood up. "Are you okay, baby?"

I pushed back my seat and fell over. Razors tore through me. He was doing this to me. Calling me out.

The moon shone brightly through the dining room window calling me to take notice. And there I saw it. A glimmer of metal caught the moon's glow. My mother's necklace. Around the neck of a woman I didn't know, but could smell. It was *her*. And beside her, stood Guy. Smiling.

A fire was burning inside me, I was on the verge of turning and I couldn't stop it. My bones began to crack and shift. My skin ripped open. I hollered in agony.

"Boys, go to your rooms. *Now!*" Trent demanded, "Baby. What's happening to you? Do I need to call 911?"

"*No!*" I said, my voice had already turned deep and horrific. I grabbed him by the arm. "Please. Don't. Leave. Me."

"I won't baby. I'm here. I'll always be here." Trent fell to his knees and wrapped his arms around me. "No matter what. We'll do this together."

As Trent held my shattering body I could feel Guy's grip loosen. And then it disappeared completely. He was gone, only toying with me.

My bones pulled back together. My skin stitched itself. The fire inside me burned out. But the look in Trent's eyes told me he was scared. Of me.

"Wh-what are you?"

"Things won't be the same if I tell you. You'll hate me. You'll leave me." I hid my face and cried. I cried for everything I was about to lose.

Trent wiped away my tears and looked me in my eyes. His fear turned to sympathy, "No! I won't! You are my everything. I love you, Bennett. It's okay." He took my hand and placed it on his heart. "Whatever this is. Whatever you are. You are still my Knight."

I looked him in his forgiving eyes. "And you're still my Prince."

Then. Right then. In that moment, I knew he'd understand. Accept me. Not judge me or turn me away like I was so afraid he would. And though Guy was out there, waiting, I knew in my heart I had someone to fight this battle with. A hero.

To be continued...

Author Bio

Up-and-coming author C. Dallas Floyd takes you on a compelling journey with his words. His romances send you on a pursuit for love, truth, and unconditional acceptance. Born and blossoming in the South, C. Dallas Floyd dreams of being an award-winning author and coffeehouse owner. He and his husband spend quiet afternoons on their balcony enjoying the Louisiana sunset and a good book. C. Dallas Floyd is a member of NOLAStars, The North Louisiana Story Tellers and Authors of Romance, and also RWA, Romance Writers of America.

Be on the lookout for book two of The Knight Time Chronicles, Morning, Noon, and Knight.

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THE LAST CANNOLI

By Tali Spencer

Photo Description

In this pretty picture, a forest green ceramic cup and saucer sits upon a table of warm amber wood. The cup is filled almost to the brim with luscious, creamy hot chocolate and it has a gingerbread man inside, sunk chest deep and smiling. The effect is one of happiness—and possibly pleasure—at having found his perfect place.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

MC is from a marketing background. His partner and he worked together on many campaigns, and MC was happy to let his partner take the fame, preferring to stay out of the spotlight. After all, they knew it was a team effort, and that's all that counted... right until being unceremoniously ditched in favour of a glamorous job offer in another city.

MC decides he needs a change of job and a change of attitude. What could be more different than working in a bakery? He expects it to be difficult, and his former friends and colleagues enjoy teasing him about this abrupt shift. MC doesn't mind—it's a temporary thing while he finds his feet. What he doesn't expect is to find himself enjoying like in the cafe/bakery as much as he does! Decorating and baking really appeal to his creative side... and the bakery's owner/manager is so passionate about his work that it is not hard to admire his drive. MC has to remind himself that he is falling in love with the bakery—not his boss! But lines blur, Boss is a friendly, supportive guy who views the bakery staff as an extended family and MC is starting to realise that this might be the best decision he's ever made! It's not perfect—Boss is staunchly against corporate-speak and MC is itching to use his business know-how and advertising contacts to push the bakery to the next level. But will success go against what Boss and the bakery stand for?

Help them find a satisfying balance, please!

Contemporary, any level of sex okay, but I would like to see Boss and MC clash at first and become friends before they become lovers. The growth of the relationship and the mutual support and understanding is important to me! Good luck!

Sincerely,

Gillian

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: culinary, humorous, Italian American, frotting, family drama, bakery, cannoli, in the closet

Word Count: 42,247

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THE LAST CANNOLI

By Tali Spencer

Chapter One

The sign over the door spelled “Dippolito’s Italian Bakery” in big green letters while garish neon writing in the fogged plate window shouted “Cannoli”. This place looked promising. Old brick gave the storefront character, as did the striped green, red, and white awning. Customers crowded inside. And there was a hand-lettered sign taped to the door that said “Help Wanted”. As good a place as any to test his luck.

Sean entered to a blast of warm air so thick with scents of bread, cinnamon, and anise it was like breathing inside a cake. Two women were busy serving customers behind a long line of curved glass cases, so Sean went to the rear of the store and approached the beefy guy in a white apron filling something brown with a pastry bag. The man looked up.

“Help you?”

“I’m here about the opening.” Sean realized he sounded awkward, like a kid asking for his first summer job. Looking into those penetrating, chocolate-brown eyes was short-circuiting his devil-may-care attitude. He pointed to the sign in the door. “It says ‘Help Wanted’.”

“You? You’re kidding me.”

Sean blinked. “No. I mean, I don’t think so.”

“Don’t take me wrong. You look like a man with bills to pay. Car. Apartment. Maybe a girl?” With a shrug, the baker went back to filling what looked like tubes of cookie dough. “Job pays peanuts and no bennies. I’m looking for part-time help in the back. Maybe a little cake decorating. You decorate?”

“My grandma taught me how to make flowers on cakes. Sweet peas. I also can make animal faces. Bunnies and bears. I write a mean Happy Birthday.” Sean put on what he hoped was a winning smile. Jill had been the gifted partner when it came to persuading reluctant clients. He did best behind the scenes. “Really, I’m a quick learner and the hardest worker you’ll ever meet.”

One of the women had rung up her customer and walked over. Her name tag said “Donna Mae”. “Who’s this, Joe? He buying some cannols?”

“Wants a job.”

“For crying out tears, give the man an application!” Donna Mae swept around to an area at the rear with a desk cluttered with paperwork beneath an antique wall phone. She picked up a sheet of paper and thrust it over the top of a case of refrigerated pastries. “Here, fill this out.”

“Thanks.”

With a long look of aggravation, Joe lifted one of the hollow cookie tubes. For some reason, that simple gesture was riveting. Commanding. The brown cannoli shell filled the man's palm perfectly and the way his fingers curled around it... Sean blushed. Was he really imagining Joe's fingers curled around a *cock*? He came back to his senses when Joe's deep voice intruded on that image.

“Hey, dreamer. I just asked if you want me to fill one special just for you.”

Sean nodded dumbly, hoping his thoughts hadn't found their way to his face. He watched Joe expertly insert the pastry bag nozzle into first one open end of the cannoli, then the other until creamy chocolate-flecked filling swelled deliciously from the finished product. When Joe handed it to him, he took it and used extra care to make sure their hands didn't touch.

“There you go. Eat it while you fill out the application.” Joe turned back to making more cannoli.

“You need a pen?” Donna Mae asked helpfully. “Here, use this one.” She handed him a cheap pen with a bank name on it and pointed toward the windows where two tiny tables sat with a few old chairs.

Sean opened his winter jacket and made his way to the table. The wooden café chair's loosened joints creaked under his weight as he sat.

While he filled out the grainy, copied form, he nibbled on the cannoli. It was good. No, make that great! It was amazing. Rich filling, a crispy light-as-air shell. So crunchy and sweet with every bite. He stuck his tongue down the tube at one point to lick out the filling. The neon sign made sense now. The bakery probably had a reputation for its signature dessert. Dippolito's could make a killing if they did more advertising, maybe print up a few flyers. He lived within a half mile of this place and had never seen any ads or promotion.

He turned his mind back to the application. Name, address, telephone... the usual. He hesitated at what to put down for work experience. Partner at Montgomery Whelan? The small marketing firm had won awards and made a name for itself in the region, though it was unlikely anyone in a business so

small it hired people by way of a sign on its door would have heard of it. "Employee" sounded less overqualified than partner, so he put that down instead, along with the Starbucks job from college and a summer working at Ray's Automotive while living with his parents. Education. Did an MBA from Wharton in Marketing Management qualify him to decorate Italian pastries?

He decided not to lie by omission and simply put down the facts. They could see the rest: male, average height and weight, reddish hair kind of wild from the windy day, boyish face and blue eyes, pushing thirty. Young enough to still find a career. Except he wasn't looking for a career. He'd had a career and look how that had worked out.

The store was empty of customers and Joe was nowhere to be seen when he returned to the counter, handing the application back to Donna Mae. The other lady was on the phone, taking an order.

"You a morning person?" Donna Mae was all business as she scanned his application. Purple reading glasses perched on her long pointed nose. "You'd need to be here by four a.m. and earlier for holidays. And bring your muscles. Trays get heavy, so do the racks. We clean the front, but you would do the grunt cleaning in back, including the ovens."

Hard work. That was exactly what he wanted. Something he could put his back into instead of his mind. "Sounds good! Really, I'm ready, able, and willing to do anything."

"Can you work a cash register? In case you're asked to help up front?"

"I worked my way through school ringing up coffee at Starbucks."

Donna Mae folded his application and tucked it into the deep pocket of her apron. "Boss wants to know when you can start."

"That's it? You're not looking at more applicants?" He was already headed for the door.

"He needs the help and it says here you stayed at one job for six years. That's what we like to see. Oh, and Delphine thinks you'd look good in a hair net."

The other woman had finished her phone order and shot him a grin over her shoulder. She was gray haired and cute, and looked like a middle-aged Audrey Hepburn. She seemed friendly. For the first time since Jill had dropped the bomb that they were professionally through and she was moving on without him, Sean actually wanted to work with other people. The last three months had left him craving more human contact than just going to the store and spending

his nights with box sets of *Six Feet Under* and *Nip/Tuck*. He was bored—and he couldn't imagine a greater threat to his well-being. If there was one thing a creative person needed in this world, it was an outlet.

Dippolito's Bakery, watch out.

"A bakery?" It was amazing how Sean's mother's voice managed to convey so much disdain in two words. It was a gift.

"An Italian bakery."

"That doesn't make any sense. You're Irish. And you stopped eating pastry when you started that running thing you do. Are you still running?"

"Yes, Mom. This is a job, a way to get out of the house, make a little cash. I'll be decorating cakes."

Silence.

"Mom?"

"Are you doing this because you're gay?"

"You know, not every decision I make is based on my sexuality."

"Well, most men I know stay in careers they went to school for and like getting paychecks." No one had ever accused Mary Whelan of being anything but practical. The high point of her life had been when her daughter, the lawyer, had married a doctor. Sean, on the other hand...

"I'm happy. Happy enough." Nothing he could say would make a part-time bakery paycheck sound good.

"Are you sure? Sean, you can come home. Start over. Charles can get you a job at the hospital. You don't have to stay out there."

"You know I hate winter, Mom, and Wisconsin's are the worst. Really, I'm doing fine here. It snows just enough to be seasonal." He didn't want to hurt her feelings by telling her he preferred living in the Philadelphia area. It was easier to be gay here than in Oshkosh. Even if he was sometimes lonely, he blended in. He had theaters, shopping, restaurants, and public transportation all within blocks of his house.

He didn't tell her the even bigger reason he wanted to stay in the area was it would feel like failure to go home.

Chapter Two

Donna Mae had told him to show up for his first day at three a.m. and to use the door in the back of the shop. She'd left out the important parts like how dark it would be because there were no nearby street lights. The alley behind State Street looked like the perfect place for a mugging. Though he knew Dippolito's was sandwiched between an attorney's office and a rundown bookstore, from the back he couldn't tell which building was which. There were clues, though. Squaring his shoulders, Sean walked across a gravel loading bay and approached the one door with a light. He gave the steel surface a sharp couple of raps.

When Joe opened the door and stood there, his broad frame backlit like a character in a video game, Sean grinned. "Sean Whelan, reporting for duty."

"What kind of name is that? Get in here before some thug mistakes you for a leprechaun."

The back of the bakery was larger than he expected. Sean followed Joe past the open door of what looked like an office to a large area where a big table holding bins of flour and sugar and labeled bags of spices awaited. Two huge ovens hogged the brick wall at one end of the kitchen. To the right was a long deep counter with storage shelves and an open entry to what he assumed was the bakery. Rows of pies lined the counter. Joe reached up and pulled something white off one of the shelves.

"Here's your apron. It gets dirty, you put on another. And grab a hair net, too." Joe showed him the box.

"Fear not." Sean briskly looped the apron over his neck and did his best to tie it behind him. "I'll keep up appearances."

"Appearances?" Joe apparently didn't like that word. "Did you know this shop's so clean inspectors bring their families over so they can eat off our floors? That Chef Ramsey guy on TV stopped by here once for a couple cannoli and thought he'd gone to heaven."

"Really?" Sean had caught a few episodes of *Kitchen Nightmares* on TV.

"Yeah. Donna Mae tried to jump his bones in the break room, would you believe it? Made the top ten list that year." Joe pointed to the area that looked like a kitchen. "Ready to start?"

“You bet.” Sean looked around, trying to spy cakes to be decorated. He’d bought icing yesterday and spent hours last night with a box of plastic bags, filling them as pastry bags and practicing his sweet peas and bunnies.

“We clean before going home. Right now you fire up the ovens so I can work on baking bread and rolls.” Joe must have noticed his look of dismay. He heaved a sigh. “I gotta show you how, don’t I? Come ’ere.”

Joe hunkered down in front of one of the ovens and opened a smaller door underneath. He motioned Sean to join him. Sean crouched and froze as their thighs touched. How was he supposed to concentrate?

“See here? That’s the pilot. And see this?” Joe held up his right hand. “Yeah, it’s a dollar store lighter thing. You turn this valve, just a quarter turn... click this thing... light the gas. See the blue?” A blue flame burst to orange within the oven’s bowels. “Turn this thing here to that mark. Do that for the other one, got it?”

Sean got it. He’d also gotten a jolt of solid masculine thigh. One thing for sure, Joe wasn’t beefy, no way. He was working class hard as a rock. Up close, some of the man’s intensity felt almost intimate, a seductive sense of being in his element. His voice vibrated with competence. He also smelled faintly of olive oil and garlic, like sitting down with friends to eat pizza. Sean gripped the lighter Joe had pressed into his hand and shook it to clear inappropriate thoughts from his head before he could finally manage to light the other oven’s pilot.

“Do they take long to heat up?” he asked.

“No. They hold heat all night. You have a thing for fire?”

“Me? Hell no. I’m scared of it.” Time to trot out another winning smile. “What now?”

“See those big buckets beside the oven over there? Bring one here.”

And that’s how Sean learned dough could be stored in fifty-pound plastic containers, by nearly throwing out his back. Every possible ingredient was oversized and heavy as hell. Dippolito’s apparently bought flour by the ton. The walk-in refrigerator held vats of butter, milk and huge tubs of ricotta cheese. None of what he was doing so far was even remotely creative. But there were short breaks and he used them to study Joe.

He’d never seen a man so completely focused on his work. Joe was like some kind of bread-making witch doctor. He manhandled dough efficiently in giant bowls, resorting occasionally to ancient mixers. He poked dough he’d

mixed the night before with his fingers. He punched it down. In some cases, he kneaded the balls before putting them aside to rest. It was a kind of ballet. While Sean washed bowls and wiped down table space, Joe formed the dough into logs, pulled them, patted them, pinched and slapped until ready for the oven. What would it be like, Sean wondered, to be worked over by hands like that?

By four thirty, the first trays of breads and rolls were ready. Dozens of loaves had been put in to bake when there was a loud banging on the door. It swung open with a blast of frigid air.

“Jesus! Winter’s biting ass this morning. Want me to tell you how cold it is?” A stocky man in jeans and wearing boots stomped into the bakery. “Hey! You finally got you some help.” He eyed Sean up and down. “Where the fuck did you come from? Look like you got lost on your way to some reality show.”

“I’m learning the business. I’m Sean.”

“Is that so? Name’s Fred. Give me a hand and leave the maestro here to babysit his buns.”

Sean soon understood why Fred wanted help. He’d backed a truck up to the door and it took the two of them a minute or so to slide out a heavy duty ramp so Fred could roll out two dozen rattling cupboards, each filled top to bottom with tray upon tray of doughnuts, cookies, pastries and cakes.

“There you go. See you again in two.” Fred walked over to where Joe was engrossed in shaping smaller balls of dough into rolls. “He know how to put ’em out?”

“Donna Mae will be here in an hour. I thought she could show him.”

“Fuck that. Come here, kid, let me show you where things go.”

Fred flipped on a couple overhead lights in the front of the store. By the way he worked without error, sliding open refrigerated cases, telling Sean which trays to pull and carry up front and on which racks to put them, he clearly knew his way around the bakery. Before long, trays of delicate cookies, hearty donuts, jewel-like tarts, and lavish cupcakes filled the glass cases. Soon, they were setting pies and cakes along the display shelves.

“So most of this stuff isn’t even made here?” Sean moved a lemon pie from one end of the display shelf and put it beside a strawberry torte that presented a more delectable contrast.

“You mean here in the back? In those two bread ovens? Nah. We have a bigger kitchen over on Brooke Street. It’s a family business, but hey, you ever try to bake ten dozen *sfogliatelle*, or *pignoli* and maybe twenty rum cakes at the same time in Mama’s kitchen? Don’t work too well, let me tell you. But the ovens here are great for bread, you know? So we got Joey doing the rolls and the cannoli and keeping shop, and Angie cracking the whip over on Brooke making sweets. Which leaves me to be the guy driving all around Philly making sure the restaurants get their just desserts.” Fred rolled a glance his way and must have seen the dawning look on his face. “Didn’t know, did ya? Joey and me, we’re brothers.”

Now that he took a closer look, Sean could see it. Fred had the same dark hair and same warm brown eyes. He also had a few more pounds and laugh lines, and a slightly larger nose, but there was no denying Joe and Fred sprang from the same Mediterranean roots. Fred popped him with an elbow.

“The Dippolito brothers. The Terrors of Cardinal O’Hara. Angie’s the baby. And Mama still lives in the apartment upstairs from here.” He jabbed a finger toward the ceiling. “I’m popping up for some coffee and biscotti now that I’ve showed you how to set up the cases and make Donna Mae a happy woman. Because believe me, you don’t never want to make a woman unhappy.”

“And Freddie should know, because he’s a married man.” Joe laughed as he shoved the big plastic bin he was carrying beneath the counter where he’d been making cannoli the day before.

Sean fought a grin and thought Joe should definitely laugh more. He’d been right about a family bakery being a good place for him to be with people. Whether or not he’d be able to keep his appetite under control was another question. The delicious aroma of bread baking in the ovens now wafted from the back, mingling with rich anise notes from the biscuit things filling the tray nearest him. Biscotti. Jill used to bring them to the office sometimes, back in the days before she’d decided croissants denoted class.

“You know, married life isn’t bad.” Fred grabbed a white paper bag from a compartment under the bread shelves and picked out three of the biscotti. “I keep her happy, she keeps me happy. It’s a very civilized arrangement. You should try it sometime. Oh wait—” he slapped his brother on the arm—“I forgot, you don’t qualify. Besides, women prefer men who actually have a life.” He paused, then said, “I’m headed up. Anything you want me to tell Mom?”

“Nope.”

Fred shrugged and left. Sean, meanwhile, mulled the news that Joe was unmarried. There were only a thousand reasons a man who looked to be about thirty wasn't married. Being gay wasn't even a reason anymore, though Sean wondered now after Fred's remark about Joe not qualifying. Pennsylvania law didn't allow gay marriage. He soon heard boots clomping up the stairs.

"Your mother lives upstairs?" Living above the family bakery sounded incredibly quaint. Sean couldn't imagine his mother living anywhere but in a suburban rancher. The one he'd grown up in, in fact.

Joe chuckled and wiped his hands on the clean white towel he kept perpetually in the ties of his apron. "Yeah. Dad brought her there as a young bride and they never moved out. My grandparents moved out instead after I was born, said Mom and Dad could stay because the rent was free. Young family and that. It was a good deal."

"I'll say." The mortgage on the house he'd bought just two years ago was his greatest expense.

"It's a nice place, bigger than it looks from the street. Four bedrooms, great big kitchen. The grandparents expanded over the back of the store in the '50s."

"Do you go up and have breakfast with her, too?"

"Nah, that's Freddie's thing. I see her plenty. She'll come down later and park herself in the office. Got a bad knee but still likes to see to it the orders get filled."

Joe clicked down the lights again as they returned to the back. The ovens radiated heat, but the place was cavernous, and Sean felt comfortable in long sleeves. Joe had rolled his up to reveal forearms corded with muscle and biceps a body builder might envy, all covered by olive skin and visible dark hair. When he opened the oven doors, he looked gilded.

"Heads up. They're done."

Using long-handled bread paddles, Sean helped Joe transfer the hot loaves to cooling racks. The damn things weren't heavy, but the work was hot. In the time it took Sean to unlade his paddle, Joe somehow shoveled two dozen new loaves into the hot brick oven. Between the two ovens, they were filling up the three-tiered rack pretty good.

Heaving a sigh, Sean wanted nothing more than to slump into a nice cozy chair. Since college he'd never done any work more manually taxing than reloading the copy machine. He'd even hired a lawn service to mow his grass.

“You do this every day?”

“For twenty years.” Joe took a deep drink from his water bottle. “I started in middle school. As far as Dad was concerned, labor laws were for wimps. Haven’t taken a day off in years.”

“I guess I should be happy I’m getting minimum wage.”

“You’re getting what I can afford. If you don’t like it, you know where to find the door and, if I were you, that’s what I’d do.” He cocked his head with a look so completely mystified Sean knew he’d hear more. “I looked over your app. You got a freaking degree from Wharton!” The way Joe’s Philly accent drew out the first vowel was so adorable Sean bit back a smile. “Wharton! You know where my sister went? She went to Penn State down the road. And you worked for some fancy-ass marketing outfit—”

“Montgomery Whelan.”

“Yeah, well you’re the fucking Whelan. So tell me again: why the hell you here?”

Sean tightened his jaw. He wasn’t going to tell his tired sob story to his overworked boss. “I was kind of looking forward to decorating.”

“Decorating?”

“You told me that was part of the job. Putting flowers on cakes and cupcakes and things.”

“You’re freaking unbelievable.” Joe snapped a glance at the big clock hanging on one wall and reached for a paddle. It was time to take some more loaves out of the oven. Sean stepped up and grabbed a second one. He was being paid to help, wasn’t he?

“So, tell me—” Sean took the initiative once they’d filled the top tier of the racks—“why did you hire me?”

Joe’s deep brown eyes locked onto his and a little smile lifted his lips. “I liked the way your mouth worked that cannoli.”

When the bakery opened its doors, the place came to life. Customers who’d been waiting outside filed in and voices rose in greeting. Commuters catching the trolley that stopped on the corner, attorneys and office workers from the courthouse two blocks away, utility workers, people from the neighborhood—everyone seemed to know each other and the movement never stopped. Bread

flew off the shelves. Before Sean knew it, he was putting boxes of pastry together like a pro and sheathing loaves of bread in long wax bags.

Joe rocked the front of the store, though. After the bread was baked and shelved he took over the cannoli station, where customers gravitated to him. He struck up short conversations with judges and contractors, winked at flirty Main Line matrons, and endured the determined assaults of mothers and grandmothers armed with pictures of eligible sisters or daughters. Sean noticed he always reacted the same, a pleasant laugh and shake of the head. For such a serious guy, Joe had a nice smile. He had full, expressive lips and one of his front teeth ever so slightly overlapped the other. As imperfections went, it was pretty damn cute.

At one point, Joe sent Sean to the refrigerator to fetch a tub of cannoli cream they'd mixed fresh that morning. The stainless steel bowl weighed a ton, and Sean plunked it gratefully onto the counter. He pulled off the plastic, sure he would have python arms just like Joe's after a few more weeks of this. He noticed Joe reach into a pants pocket and pull out a flask of black glass, from which he added a splash of something dark and spicy to the bowl.

“What's that?”

“Secret ingredient.”

“That's cool.” A suggestion of alchemy was always fun. “What is it?”

“Can't tell you.” Joe stirred the cream with smooth strokes until the darkish streaks vanished. “If I did, it wouldn't be secret.”

Whatever it was and whatever mysterious quality it bestowed, Dippolito customers loved their cannoli. Whenever Joe had to go to the back, Donna Mae or Delphine took over cannoli-making duties. Sean served a few customers once he'd demonstrated his cash register skills, though he struggled when it came to ringing up some of the more ethnic pastries. He'd grown up eating apple pie and hot cross buns, not *sfogliatelle* and *pignoli*.

“That's a *zeppole*.” The new voice critiqued Sean's latest attempt. He looked over his shoulder at a short older woman with dark brown hair, a full figure and tag that read “Mama Jo”. She beamed at the laughing customer. “He's new, but I'll have him speaking like a *paesan* in two weeks.” To Sean she said, “When you're done come in the back. I need your picture.”

There were still plenty of customers, but Josephine Dippolito took Sean by the elbow and hauled him into the back office, where she stood him against a

wall and snapped his picture with her phone. Last time Sean had visited his Mom, he'd had to take his own picture with her phone and assign it to his phone number to remind her what he looked like. Mama Jo was practically a pro. Barely a minute later, she plucked a copy of his image out of a little photo printer, labeled it "Sean", and pinned it to a board on the facing wall that said "Dippolito Bakery Family". A snapshot of Josephine and a handsome man named Nick, probably her late husband, was at the top, younger and smiling. A robust mustachioed man named Dom shared top billing. Immediately under them were pictures of Joe, Fred, and a dark haired young woman Sean figured must be Angie. A lot more pictures were arrayed under them. Dippolito's Bakery employed about twenty people, most named Dippolito or Franzone. Sean was in Joe's group. His face smiled out just below Delphine's and beside those of the two high school girls who came by to help in the afternoons and on weekends.

"That's a really big family," Sean teased.

Josephine laughed and returned to her desk. "And now you're part of it. You get a paycheck end of the week. You can pick it up in the office any time after I get here on Friday morning. My son showed you the timecard system?"

"He sure did, Mrs. Dippolito."

"Call me Mama Jo. You're doing a good job out there. Do me a favor? Go back and tell my son I need two dozen small hoagie rolls tomorrow morning for Father Phil."

Sean lucked out when he found Joe relaxing and talking to Donna Mae between customers. The rush hour of morning traffic had eased up a bit. Both tables near the window were occupied by people sipping bottled water as they ate their pastries.

"Um, Joe?" He gained the man's attention. "Your mother says she needs two dozen small hoagie rolls. For Father Phil."

Joe's jaw clenched. "Here's what you do. You take whatever you can from the day olds. You know which are the small hoagie rolls, right? Well, you take the day olds first. Count 'em. And then before you go home, you make up the difference from the ones we made this morning. Got it?"

Sean nodded. Donna Mae had wandered off to take care of an influx of customers, but he didn't need her insight to interpret that Joe's mood had turned sour. His best move was to do exactly as he'd been told. Grabbing a bag, he went to the day old case and took all the small hoagie rolls. Seventeen. He used

a marker and a Post-it to slap “Father Phil” on the bag and took it to the back where he put it on a shelf used for orders. He returned to the front and dove back into serving customers.

It took Sean a few more days to notice that Mama Jo never called Joe by name or talked directly to him, or he to her. Mama Jo would find whoever was free and say to them, “Tell my son he needs to make four extra Italian breads for tomorrow.” And Joe in turn would tell someone, “Tell my mother I won’t be home tonight for dinner.” And that was the way they passed messages to each other. Sean had never seen anything like it.

One day in the break room when neither Dippolito was around, Donna Mae explained it. “Get used to it. Something happened between them, don’t ask me what, and neither will apologize. They haven’t talked to each other for more than a year.”

“A year? That’s ridiculous!” No matter how furious Sean got at his parents, which was often, they still talked. Awkwardly maybe, or snippy, or hurt. But silence was unthinkable.

“You’re not Italian. I am. I know how this works. They might go this way to the grave.”

Delphine breezed in to pick up a new pack of hand wipes, which were stored in that room and not the main store room. “Did you tell him they live together?” She rushed right back out.

Sean blinked at Donna Mae. “They do?”

“Oh yeah. The boss never moved out, happens all the time with Italian sons. He lives upstairs. She does his laundry and cooks him dinner. Mother and son, they never stop being that. They love each other.”

But they didn’t talk to each other. The more Sean knew about Joe, the less he understood.

Chapter Three

The next Saturday, Sean picked up his paycheck when he left at noon. Two hundred bucks and change. The plus side of his part-time hours was he had spent most of the last week of afternoons prepping for his rotisserie baseball draft that night. He got to Waverly's pub in Drexel Hill early enough to find a parking spot around the corner and staked out a booth. By the time Dan trudged in hauling a ten-ton briefcase worth of research, he'd spread his own materials across half the tabletop and was nursing a root beer.

"I hate that fucking hospital." Dan shoved the briefcase along the bench and wedged his large body into the booth. "I signed off on a shit ton of flyers about our valet parking and you know what operations did today? Raised the parking rates! Now I'll be getting calls from irate oldsters who think they should only have to pay what's on the snappy piece of paper. Because what I put on the paper was right on Monday, but it was dead wrong on Thursday when we mailed the damn things."

"It's nice to see you, too, Dan." Sean handed his friend a menu.

"Don't fuck with me. I've had it up to here with wise guys." He cut his hand across the top of his head, the hairline of which had retreated a bit more since they'd seen each other last.

Sean had met Dan Wisniewski when they were classmates at Wharton. They'd realized within minutes that they were both from Wisconsin, both lapsed Catholics, and could talk in Dairy State code. Recognizing fate, they'd joined forces, found two female students—Jill and Jenn—who wanted to move out of their tiny apartment, and set up house in a rundown row home two blocks from the university. At some point Dan found out Sean was gay and said, "Well, fuck me," quickly followed by "Don't you dare." After graduation he'd married Jenn and gotten a job making big bucks doing marketing for the region's largest cancer hospital.

Dan ordered a draft beer before reaching into his bag and pulling out a stack of player ranking lists. "So how *are* you doing? I couldn't believe it when I heard Jill took that job in New York and didn't take you with her. I always knew she was a bitch. Jenn agrees. You were the brains of that outfit."

"I was the creative partner. She was the face, the one who could work clients and sell ideas. Personality plus. I'm all ideas but no flash." Sean began

laying his player rankings out with Dan's. "I guess when she was wooed by a firm as talented as Anvil, she decided she didn't need me." Actually, she'd told him that to his face.

"For God's sake, tell me you made her buy you out before she dissolved the firm."

He nodded. Dan did, too.

"Good. Good riddance and now you can move on. A guy with your talent should be able to land on his feet. Sent out resumes?"

"No." Sean studied his lists. Pitchers. Where was his list of value relievers?

"Why the hell not? The job market's not that tight. Want me to put a word in for you at the hospital?"

"Don't. You're this close to sounding like my mother. She's threatening to get Charles to give me a job at the hospital where he's Chief of Staff back in Wisconsin." Dan snickered. Sean sighed. "I don't think I'm cut out for corporate politics. I'm thinking of doing something else. I took a job at Dippolito's Bakery."

"A *bakery*?"

"Now you do sound like my mother."

"Hey, we're both from Oshkosh." He scrutinized a list and then threw it on a pile. "What are you doing at this bakery? Marketing cupcakes? Easter's coming on."

"Actually, day after tomorrow's St. Patrick's Day. Keeping busy mostly. I've only been working for a few days, but... I like it. The boss is a nice enough guy and he's fair. Donna Mae and Del, the ladies up front, have adopted me. And I've found I like decorating cakes."

"Seriously? It's a stage, right? Something you gay guys go through?"

Sean shot him a glare. "No. That would be a penchant for musical theater, like breaking out in song while bidding on sizzling prospect Rosario Puente's hot knuckleball pitching ass. Which I plan to do."

"Hell no," Dan groaned. "You know I hate those damn floaters."

To Sean's relief, a few more of the guys came through the door. After hollering greetings, they set up at another booth. About an hour remained before they would move to the big meeting room to begin the draft. Everyone

would be well-prepared and the competition for players would be fierce. He and Dan co-owned the always dangerous but never successful Drexel Hill Bingles, and they'd both vowed that this would be their year.

Go Bingles.

For the next fifty minutes, he and Dan talked about which players they would bid high on and which they thought could be gotten for lesser bids. At the end of their brainstorming session, the plan had come together, they'd put their research in order, and they both felt pretty good. The fantasy baseball league was the one thing they still did together, year after year.

Dan studied him, serious hazel eyes sharp in his round face. "This bakery thing... you'll be underutilized. You know that, right? You put all that time and money into getting an MBA from Wharton and—I'm just going to say it—you're not a pastry chef. You're a hell of a creative marketing guy who helped Jill Montgomery build an award-winning firm. Someone will want you."

"But that's what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid someone will hire me and I'll be trapped on the same hamster wheel I was before, just running with different hamsters—ones with sharper teeth. I'll be paid to come up with ideas so other people can look good and take all the credit. I thought it would be different with Jill, because we were friends and she told me how brilliant we would be as a team. And we were. We were top of the game until the day I didn't quite make the cut—"

"Hell, Sean."

"What she did *happened* because I let it. I was happy to let her take all the credit. I hate touting myself. I want my work to do the talking for me."

"What work? Bunny cakes? Cannoli?"

"I don't make the cannoli. Joe makes the cannoli. It's a secret family recipe." Sean grinned when Dan rolled his eyes. "Hey, bakeries are serious business!"

"I guess it's as good a place as any to park your ass for a while until you get your head screwed on straight. If there's anything I can do, you let me know."

"There's one thing."

"Yeah?"

Sean started picking up their many lists. At other tables around the pub other fantasy owners were doing the same. He wanted him and Dan to get good

seats near the draft board. "Let's try to get through this draft quickly, because I don't want to be here all night. I have to show up at work at four in the morning."

Sean showed up for work the next morning with his ass dragging a half block behind him. That any part of him made the trip bordered on miraculous. The draft had run late—it always did, because half the owners got too drunk to give a crap about time—and he hadn't gotten to bed until after midnight. Operating on three hours sleep wasn't something he did well. He crossed his fingers and hoped Joe was coming off one of his own long nights. It didn't happen often, but there were mornings Joe had clearly not gotten much sleep and showed up with heavy, sleep-deprived eyes. He was quiet those days.

This looked like one of them. Joe was muttering as he punched down a bowl of dough. He already had the ovens fired up and heating.

"Hi," Sean said. He hung up his coat and went for an apron.

"Hey you." Joe didn't bother to look up, though he did stop the muttering.

"I had my rotisserie baseball draft last night." Sean figured that was as good a conversation starter as anything else he might try.

"Hope you didn't load up on Phillies. The Phils are going to suck this year."

Sean thought he saw Joe punch the dough extra hard. "No," he said, "just Ben Revere in the outfield. But we got some good pitching. I held out. We picked up Rosario Puentes for a buck."

"A knuckleballer? Never pegged you for a guy who lives dangerously." Joe looked up, a question in his shadowed eyes. "Who's the 'we' in your baseball?"

"Dan Wisniewski. He's a friend from college. We were the only two cheeseheads in our class, so we banded together to survive football season."

Joe cracked a smile. "Cheeseheads? You're from Packer land? Tell me the truth: is the frozen tundra for real?"

He was kidding, right? "There's no tundra in Wisconsin. Some sportscaster made that up one day and it stuck."

"But it does get pretty frozen?"

"Know what we Wisconsinites call our lakes in winter? Parking lots."

This time Joe let out a laugh. “Don’t need to help me today. As you can see, I got a head start. Why don’t you see what you can do with the day old?”

Sean glanced at the rolling cupboard holding six trays of bakery that hadn’t sold the day before. It would be put out in a case off to one side, against the wall, marked down as half price. Some customers came in especially for it, but mostly the stuff went unnoticed. He could do something about that. Joe had just handed him an opportunity.

“Thanks!” He rolled the case out and flipped on the one bank of lights he’d need. A quick hunt turned up the supplies to do what he wanted. Scissors, a bakery box he could cut for a nice big sign. He found some red and green markers languishing in a drawer and was thrilled they still worked. He arranged the bagged breads and rolls on one side and the pastries and cakes on the other, cutting one cake into slices and putting two slices out on paper plates with little plastic forks from the break room. His final act was to tape his sign low on the outside glass: “Just as Good—Half the Price!” The lettering was sharp, professional. He’d always been artistic.

Donna Mae walked in just as he finished. “Why’d you cut up the cake like that?” She looked in the mirror behind the bread rack as she repinned her little white cap atop her helmet of impeccably sprayed hair.

“Boss told me to do something with the day olds. I thought maybe someone would want to buy just a slice.”

“They might want to buy a whole cake and then what do we do? How much we supposed to charge for slices?” She frowned, but made no further protest. Day old bakery was hardly her top priority. “Can you fill in up front until Del gets here?”

“I think so. Let me ask.” He liked being in front and serving customers far more than he did working in the back. For one thing, people sometimes wanted writing on their cakes. Just the other day, a woman had asked Donna Mae to let him do the honors because, as she put it, her mother had said his “Happy Birthday” was exuberant.

That was him. Exuberant.

“Hey Joe—”

“I heard Donna Mae. Answer’s no. You want to decorate? See those cupcakes over there—I want you to put some shamrocks on them.”

Shamrocks? St. Patrick's Day, of course. Green icing, little clover leaves. He could do this. Joe must be warming up to him. By now he knew where to find everything. He used his cell phone to look up how to do it on the internet, whipped up a bag of green icing and practiced making shamrocks on a piece of wax paper before he went to town on the two trays of cupcakes. Joe came over to look when he had just six left.

"Those are good." They were. Sean had always been a quick study. His shamrock leaves looked like little hearts and had cute little stems. "Donna Mae said you were doing good with writing the cakes."

"I like this sort of thing. I think I have a gift."

"You have something all right."

Sean shot a surprised look at his boss. Joe didn't hand praise out often, but he wasn't quite sure what to make of the last part. Joe laughed and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey, I'm agreeing with you. Put those up front and help Donna Mae."

Sean did, but for the rest of the morning it seemed he could feel the warm imprint of Joe's hand on his shoulder.

When he got off that afternoon, he stopped off at Trader Joe's and bought a few items, including something special. The next morning, he poured his surprise into a side bowl at the cannoli station and waited for Joe's response. As the only genuine Irish person working that day, he'd even put a stick-on embroidered shamrock on his name tag. He had just finished giving a regular, Mrs. Rossi, her order when Joe grabbed him by the arm and steered him to the back. Joe pointed at the offending bowl.

"What the hell is this?"

"Green chocolate chips. For the St. Patrick's Day cannolis."

"First thing, cannoli is plural, like deer. And second, St. Patrick never put his mouth on a cannoli. He was eating potatoes in Ireland."

"He had way more chance of eating cannoli than potatoes." Sean was feeling his Irish and sticking to his guns this time. "Potatoes come from Peru."

Joe restrained a sigh and glanced at the shop. It wasn't so busy they risked being overheard. "Listen, I may never have gone to Wharton, but I know when potatoes reached the Old World. I'm making a point, and my point is cannoli aren't Irish. They're Italian. I'll be more specific: they're Sicilian, and so am I

on my mother's side. So I think I know more about cannoli than you do. And I say we don't put anything in the cannoli that doesn't *belong* in a cannoli. That means nothing Irish."

"But it's just chocolate. You put chocolate chips in all the time."

"Yeah. Chocolate chips that look like chocolate chips. You know, like the stuff Columbus discovered."

Had Columbus discovered chocolate? Whether that was true or not, Sean wasn't winning this argument, but he wasn't ready to go down without another salvo. "I think they'd look fun and still be true to the product. And I think customers would buy them."

"And you know what? This is my bakery, and I don't care what you think." Joe put the green chips underneath and brought up a bowl of brown chips to mix into the cannoli cream.

Stung, Sean headed to the back. He could take two breaks and he was taking one now. As he passed the back office, Mama Jo looked over from behind her desk. Catching his eye, she gestured him in and that he should close the door.

"I have the hearing of a bat," she said. She laid aside her reading glasses. "Sit down. I can always tell when a man needs to cool off."

Sean slumped into the chair. He'd enjoyed the job so much until now. What had he expected? He wasn't an executive anymore, certainly not here. He'd been crazy to think he could act like one. When he heard Mama Jo say his name, he looked up and hoped she couldn't see the film of tears lining his eyes.

"Sean, Joey's a proud man. This bakery, it's more than his living. It's his art. He has high standards, he's very picky. He's picky about ingredients: only the best, no preservatives or anything that might compromise the integrity of our products. Homemade breads and pastries and cookies, nothing like what you can get at the local Giant. Quality—that's what we sell."

He nodded. "I understand."

"Do you? Because I want you to understand. I think you could be good here." When he looked up again, she smiled. "I watch things. You work well with Joey. He likes you. He told Freddie he was glad he hired you, and that you're always cheerful in the morning and he needs that. He likes what you did with the day olds—the sign, cutting slices of the cakes—because now we sell almost all of it. And your shamrocks were so pretty a judge at the courthouse bought a dozen cupcakes because he said they brought out the Irish in him."

“Mrs. D—”

“Mama Jo.”

Sean smiled in spite of the sting he was still feeling. “Mama Jo, I like working here. I’m not going to quit. It would take more than a few cutting words. And I like Joe, too.” Maybe he even liked him too much. He could think of no other reason for hurting like this.

“I’m glad to hear that.” She wore a big smile too. “Now go out there and tell my son I’m heading out tonight with Mr. Renard to some jazz thing at the Desert Rose—but I’ll leave him some lasagna in the oven and a green bean salad in the fridge.”

Things were rough the rest of that day, with Joe being silent for all that his glances weren’t angry, just filled with frustration and confusion. For his part, Sean walked on eggshells. He didn’t know how to take Joe Dippolito. The man was all smiles and easy to get along with one moment and closed off and touchy as hell the next. His employees loved him. His mother didn’t talk to him. He laughed readily with people he knew, remembered the names of everyone’s partners and children, where they worked... everything. But he himself was impossible to read. Sean didn’t doubt for a moment Joe was smart. He also knew Joe was sensitive about not having a college education. So why the hell had Joe hired him?

Sean left at three that day and walked the seven icy blocks from the bakery to his house on Jackson Street. Just blocks off the main thoroughfares, the residential street was narrow and quiet, lined with trees. The compact brick house sat back on a deep lot with mature trees, and it had been renovated recently. He’d thought it a great investment, located in a community of hip professionals within walking distance of work, shopping, and the commuter train into Philadelphia.

He’d barely gotten in the door when his phone signaled a text. He looked. Jill. She was in Philly for the night and wanted to meet for dinner. The Arbor.

Was she nuts? Probably. He texted back.

U drunk?

Meet me.

He didn't need this. Not Jill and not a night of feigned fun in the city. She'd insisted breaking up their partnership wasn't personal, but for him it had been. Sheer fucking pain. But he'd agreed they could keep in touch.

No.

No way was he driving into Philadelphia at rush hour. A place to park near Rittenhouse Square would cost him at least fifteen dollars and probably valet tips. Coming home late at night on the train didn't appeal to him either. Another text.

You won't regret it!

He wasn't that easy! But Jill clearly wanted something. He'd do it for the chance to see her grovel. The least she could do was make the dinner worth his while. Sean texted back:

Send a car, you pay. Door to door. Dinner, too. Otherwise no thanks.

To his great surprise, Jill said a car would pick him up at six. Great. She'd charge it to her expense account. What the hell. He'd wear a suit for the first time in months and get a really good meal out of it, and it would be something to think about other than the bakery and its confounding boss.

The car arrived promptly, and he was at least able to enjoy the ride into the city. Lights streaked outside the tinted windows to the tune of light jazz. When he entered the restaurant, there was Jill, as corporate sleek and perfect as an ice sculpture. A champagne silk dress hugged her body and diamond bracelets ringed her wrists. She looked beautiful, as always.

"Sean!" She hugged him lightly and he hoped to hell her lips hadn't left any lipstick on his cheek.

"I don't know why I agreed to see you again."

"Because you have the curiosity of a cat and never could turn down a great meal. And you can't wait to hear the latest industry gossip." Jill laughed and flashed something at the maître d' that caused him to usher them to a table without further delay.

"I really don't care about industry gossip." She was right, though, about his curiosity and how much he enjoyed a good meal. He liked the artsy décor and sophisticated ambience of this restaurant, something Jill would have remembered.

“What have you been up to?”

“This and that. I’m still evaluating my options.” He mentioned Dan and Jenn, and they exchanged news of other classmates for a while, catching up, stopping only when the waiter appeared for their order. After that, Jill told him about her hunt for an apartment in Manhattan. He wasn’t sure if she was insensitive or just oblivious.

When their food arrived, he paid more attention to the lobster bisque than Jill’s complaints about an unreasonable client. She’d moved past oblivious and was zeroing in on “heartless”. There had to be more to this than her needing a warm body to talk at.

“I have a new client—” she poked lightly at her beet salad—“with the most amazing product. It’s an app that gives an owner access to all of his fantasy teams, no matter the provider, through a single interface.”

Sean choked down the bisque threatening to come out his nose. At least now he knew why she was meeting him. Jill Montgomery knew nothing about fantasy sports. She *despised* sports of any ilk. If she knew the names of the home teams in whatever city she was visiting, she was doing well. “Hell, Jill,” he said once he’d cleared his throat.

“Don’t give me that look.”

“You mean the look that says you’re *crazy* if you think I’m going to brainstorm with you all night for a client in whom I have absolutely no interest?”

“We’re just talking.” Jill smiled at the waiter as he whisked away the appetizer plate.

“Keep talking. But I’m not playing ball.”

She narrowed her lovely violet eyes. “At least stop with the sports metaphors.”

“Sure. When you stop playing stall ball. Admit it. You don’t have ideas for this client.”

“I have ideas,” she sniped. “I just thought you would be interested, seeing as the product is one you might find useful.”

It did sound useful. Very useful. He only managed one fantasy team, the baseball one he shared with Dan, but a great many fantasy owners managed several teams at a time and sometimes sports seasons overlapped. He might

have been tempted to find out more about it if he didn't know Jill would take that as a declaration of consent to help her for the night. He sat back as the waiter placed their entrees before them.

"Shall I tell you what I've been doing?" Sean grinned as he sliced into his medium-rare filet. Being the cause of Jill's sour little expression was giving him more pleasure than any decent human being should feel. "I work at a bakery."

She looked down her elegant nose. "A client?"

"No, as an employee. I help bake bread. And I decorate cakes and pastries. My shamrocks got really high marks."

"Now you're just mocking me."

"Not at all. That's what I do now. And you know something, I like it. I like the people I work with. Do you?"

She laughed. "You just can't get over it, can you? You can't get over knowing Anvil wanted me and not you."

"You never told them about me." He shrugged. He'd learned from Aimee, Jill's assistant, the whole story of how Jill had gone behind his back and planned how to jump ship without him. She'd dumped Aimee, too. "And I've realized you did me a favor. Yeah, a favor. Because I liked it when we were small and our clients were small and local. As we got larger, I stopped liking our clients, Jill. But you would never turn them away, even when they were assholes. You just kept wanting bigger clients and more money, more exposure. Maybe you planned to use the company as a jumping board all along."

"Don't be ridiculous. You want the truth? Winning the Brandie marketing award opened my eyes. I saw what was possible. I guess you never noticed. Maybe you just didn't care. But I saw where I wanted to be." She looked like a college girl again, flushed with excitement. "I love the big time. I do. I love my Park Avenue apartment, no matter how much it's put me in debt. I love the parties and the kudos and the backstabbing. All of it. This is where I belong."

"So why are you eating dinner with me?"

"I met the client this morning at his office in King of Prussia. He listened to my spiel and wants better ideas. So naturally I thought of you."

"Naturally."

"We were good." She stabbed a fork into her *branzino*. "And you still are. You're good at what you do. I should have brought you with me."

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Come on, Sean. Give me an hour of your time. Talk fantasy baseball with me.”

“I’m out of the business, Jill.”

“Bullshit. You just think you are.” Her smile deepened. “You have my word, Sean. If I hook the client with one of your ideas, I’ll give you ten percent. Finder’s fee.”

She looked a little desperate, but just a little. Jill Montgomery would always land on her feet. He couldn’t do anything more to make her squirm, and he still needed her to pick up the tab and pay the car to take him home. Besides, she had done him a favor, all things considered. He now knew for a fact where he *didn’t* want to be.

“Two hours,” he said. He’d never see a dime from this, but he didn’t even care. It just felt good to be doing something someone—even Jill—wanted.

Sean pulled out his cell phone for demonstration purposes and began to talk about draft kits, scouting reports, rotosports, and key words.

Chapter Four

He went in the next morning bleary-eyed but content. In a way, he'd finally gotten Jill and what had happened between them out of his system. Their dinner had been like a rebirth, burying Montgomery Whelan for good so he could finally move on. Oddly enough, he felt better about himself. Jill was still a selfish, hateful bitch and he pitied any man she lured into a partnership, of any kind, but she had a peculiar kind of predatory honesty and he respected that. He also realized that he never, ever wanted to be in business with someone like her again.

Walking into Dippolito's again felt like coming home. Joe had given him a key to the place the week before. He closed the door, hung up his coat, and grinned happily at inhaling the yeasty aroma of rising bread dough. The kitchen was empty but the marble table top held a paper plate with little green shamrocks around the edge. Sitting on the plate was a cannoli. Winking in the filling were little green chocolate chips.

A Post-it rested beside the plate. *For Sean.*

"It's for you." Joe came out from the break room. He walked over to the table and pulled on a pair of nearly transparent poly gloves just as he did whenever he handled food.

"I see that."

"I lost my temper. It's a bad trait and one I'm not happy about. I say things and... anyway, I made up a batch of filling with your chips and handed some cannoli around to the family. You have to understand, I don't know what's in those chips, so I can't serve 'em to customers. But you know, family—" the look he gave Sean was hopeful of understanding—"they said the cannoli were fine, just a little funny taste to the green chips, but they looked real good. I made this one up for you this morning. If a cannolo's not fresh, it gets soggy."

He was trying so damn hard. Sean decided to accept the apology. "It's okay." He picked up the cannoli and licked up a nice portion of icing. After taking it into his mouth, he passed his tongue across his upper lip with satisfaction, deliberately coating it with white cream. A look at Joe's face told him he was getting the reaction he'd hoped for.

He'd wondered for weeks if Joe might be gay—and now he was damn near sure of it. The next act would either get him fired or nail the answer for certain.

Tipping back his head and opening his mouth wide, Sean put the cannoli, cookie tube and creamy filling both, in a good two inches. Oh yeah. Joe's mouth slackened slightly and he never looked away. At least, not until Sean bit down, cracking the cannoli and filling his mouth with sweet crunchy goodness.

"Whoever said fags don't show off?" Joe wasn't backing off.

"You calling me gay?" Sean asked as soon as he'd swallowed enough to speak. He'd taken a big risk just now.

"Yeah. And I'm gay too. Looks like you figured it out." Joe began punching down the dough.

"I wanted to know for sure."

"Why?"

"Because—" why had he wanted to know? "—I like knowing I'm not the only gay guy in the room. I'm not used to being the only one." That much was true. There'd been a gay illustrator at Montgomery Whelan, gay clients, and quite a few gay classmates in college.

Joe appeared to accept that. Sean exhaled in relief. It wasn't like he was interested in Joe, other than that the other man—the other *gay* man—was his boss. He wondered if Joe being gay was the reason he and his mother weren't talking.

The door opened and Fred brought in the daily delivery. "Hey Sean! Those cannoli with the green spots weren't bad. A little on the commercial side, but hey—we could call 'em seasonal. Gotta get better tasting chocolate, though. That stuff wasn't even real."

"It was just an idea." That really was all it had been. He'd only bought the one little bag of novelty chips.

"What you got, Freddie?" Joe shouted over the clatter of cupboards.

"Couple of cakes for display. Easter orders coming in!" Fred hauled out a tray with three egg shaped cakes. They were already decorated with flowers and bunnies and little eggs. Sean's disappointment must have showed, because Fred clapped him on the shoulder. "You'll get your shot at the cupcakes, shamrock boy." He slid a tray of two dozen dark chocolate iced egg-shaped cupcakes on the counter. "Go to town on 'em."

Fred rolled out the empty cupboards, and they heard him heading up the outside stairs for his daily breakfast with Mama Jo. Joe laughed when Sean looked his way. He waved a gloved hand.

“I got the bread. Have fun with the cupcakes.”

Icing! Coloring! Pastry bags and tips! Sean had been hoping for this chance for weeks. He could do bunnies, flowers... anything he wanted. But what would a Dipolito's customer want? That was the question. He'd gotten lucky with the Irish judge and the shamrocks—or had he? A lot of Irish lived in this region and the holiday was almost universal. Easter would have a slightly different appeal, secular but also more religious. He would make some of the cupcakes light hearted and fun, with bunnies and carrots, and the others would be a little more formal, maybe a pretty lattice design with Easter flowers. He'd been practicing bunnies and flowers at home for two weeks.

When he was done, he wiped at an itch on his cheek and looked over his handiwork. They looked...

“Beautiful.” Joe was standing behind his left shoulder.

“Thanks.” Sean beamed.

“You've got a good hand with the bag. The crisscross thing is nice.”

“I wanted to do something a little bit elegant, you know, delicate and pretty.”

“Let's see what the customers think, right? Leave them here for my mother to see. She'll know how to price them. Then Donna Mae can put them out.”

Sean went home tired and happy that night. Mama Jo had loved his decorating and, even better, the cupcakes had flown out of the store. Several customers had placed orders. Mama Jo had sent photos of the cupcakes to Angie at the Brooke Street kitchen so her decorators could replicate the designs for the orders. Sean was glad about that last part. Two dozen cupcakes had been fun. Several times two dozen would have been impossible. After getting home, he reheated some pizza from two nights ago and plopped onto the couch to relax. There was a Grapefruit League baseball game that afternoon he wanted to watch.

Dan called during the game. “You watching Puentes?”

“Hell yes. Watching knuckleball is better than comedy. Batters don't know what the hell to do. The ump is being a dick, though.”

“Yeah. Well, umps.” Dan paused. “Do you still read *Market Insight*?”

“My subscription ended with the firm.”

“Jill's landed a client with some new app for fantasy sports.”

“Good for Jill. Did I tell you I had dinner with her the other night at The Arbor and we talked about that very client?”

“Do I want to hear this?”

On the screen, Puentes walked one too many batters and got pulled in the eighth. Sean clicked off the TV. “It’s all good. I was in a funky frame of mind and seeing her again actually helped snap me out of it.”

“The woman’s a vampire. How much blood did you lose?”

“None. She paid for the dinner. And the car that took me to and from. And the expensive dessert I ordered. Let me tell you, that place should dump whoever makes their cannolis. Dippolito cannolis are ten times better than the overpriced atrocities I ate last night.”

“You keep praising this place. I might have to drive over someday and pick up a box of those things.” Dan had always been the guy to count on to bring donuts to a meeting. “Ever consider working up a marketing plan for them? You know, social media, ads, publicity—maybe some T-shirts?”

“It’s a Mom and Pop outfit, minus Pop. I don’t think Joe—the son who runs the place—would go for it.” He’d looked into Dippolito’s Bakery as a business and learned its particulars. The business had been founded in 1913 by Grandpa Dippolito, named Geno. Son Nick, Mama Jo’s husband and Joe’s father, had inherited the business. Nick had died four years ago and left the business, which employed his uncle and most of the Dippolito family, to Joe and Fred. A year after that, Fred apparently got into some kind of legal or financial trouble and Joe had bought him out. Joe really did run things. He owned the business.

“Just saying you could help them. You seem to like the place.”

“I really do. And I’m working quietly on the inside.” He chuckled. “I singlehandedly increased the sale of day old bakery. I’ve spruced up how the cakes are displayed. I’m not sure Donna Mae has caught on to what I’m doing yet. Tomorrow I’m going to start working on Joe to put better tables and chairs up front, but there’s really not very much room.”

“Ever consider going to a meet up? I just read about one for food entrepreneurs. And yes, I’m looking out for your ass. It’s right up your alley.”

“A meet up?” Sean loved meet ups. Meet ups were the party line of marketing.

“I’m sending you the link. Philadelphia Food Biz Connections. Marketing gold.”

“You’re evil. I think you’re more evil than Jill.”

Dan did his best demonic cackle. “By the way, the reason I called... Jenn and I, we’re expecting.”

“You dog! I’m happy for you.” Sean was reasonably sure Dan would be a good father. Hell, he was very sure. For all Dan said he didn’t like children and called them noisy and messy, kids loved him.

“I want to ask you to be the godfather.”

“Gosh, Dan. I mean, yes. Of course I will.” The tears that rose to Sean’s eyes surprised him. He’d never been asked before, not even for his niece and nephew. His sister and Charles had asked married couples they knew to do the honors. “The baby, do you know what it is?”

“It’s hard to be sure, but my money’s on it being human.”

“You know what I mean. Boy or girl?”

“We’re old fashioned. We want to be surprised, you know, the way nature intended.”

“You’re going to be a great dad.” They talked a few minutes more about parenting, a new house the couple had just bought, and baseball—because Dan was going to make sure the kid played. Sean hung up on a happy, contented man. Strangely, talking to his immensely straight best friend made him think about sex... and thinking about sex drove home that he hadn’t been having much of it.

It helps to get out of the house, he ragged on himself. He wasn’t going to get down and hot with anyone unless he met them first. Trouble was he didn’t like the club scene. He didn’t like crowds—or strangers. And though anonymous sex could be thrilling, it involved taking risks. Sean Michael Whelan was all about not taking risks, at least when it came to his body and life. The riskiest thing he’d ever done was turn his back on a career in marketing and take a job at Dippolito’s Italian Bakery. His bank account was still quaking in terror from that move. But he had savings enough to live for a while. More than enough. It was just...

He liked the bakery. He liked everything about it. He liked the location, the customers, stolid Donna Mae and elfin Del, the smell of baking bread, and the way hunky Joe Dippolito punched down bowls of dough and laughed at the jokes of crusty Judge Riddle and gently fielded the attempts of matchmaking

women who didn't know he'd be more interested in their grandsons than their granddaughters. Salt of the fucking earth. And Sean was going crazy trying to figure him out.

But it was true the bakery deserved more attention. It wasn't doing badly, not by a long shot. It was busy and prosperous. But it could be so much more. There were so many things Dippolito's could do in terms of promotion. Dan's comment about T-shirts, for example. Sean spent the next hour on the computer, then the phone, talking with a graphic artist he knew in Chicago. Then he looked at the link Dan had sent him and signed up for a Food Biz Connection meet-up in Center City that weekend.

Chapter Five

“That’s a damn shame, Mr. Renard. I like having you as a neighbor.” Joe continued filling cannoli while he talked with the old man. Jean Renard owned the dilapidated bookstore next door to the bakery. “And it’s nice of you to offer to sell me the building. But I took a hit a couple years ago and I’m pretty sure I can’t swing it.”

Sean was getting good at writing on cakes while listening in on Joe’s conversations. The little desk by the phone was the perfect place to work. The customer ordering the cake watched from the other side of the day-old case as Sean made an exuberant flourish to the tail end of “Birthday” and began on the name. “Carol with an ‘e’ or without, Mrs. Boyle?”

“Without. Can you put a star on there too? Because it’s her day!”

“You got it.” Sean picked up a bag of yellow icing for the star.

“I’m not leaving soon.” Renard’s voice was pleasant and light, like someone ruffling the pages of one of the old books he sold. “I’m making plans. Your mother told me she bought that unit in the Winchester senior community in Chester County. A lovely place. I checked it out yesterday.”

“Yeah, it’s real nice.”

Sean handed the birthday cake to Mrs. Boyle, who looked at it and smiled back in delight. Sean had done a big star with a swirl of several little ones. “Oh, this is perfect! Thank you!” He boxed it for her and she bustled out the door, leaving behind a trail of happy. Sean could now indulge a few moments watching Joe filling and laying out cannoli in a big flat box. Renard was taking them to his daughter’s for dessert that night.

“What are you going to do, Joe, when she moves out? Live upstairs in that big place by yourself?”

“Well, I’m sure not moving into any senior home to keep her company. You know her cousin Carmela is buying a unit in there too? A regular flock of old South Philly birds.” Joe gave him a sly grin. “You should get yourself a place there. You’d be in demand. Most of those ladies buried their husbands and might be looking.”

Renard chuckled. “Ah, one of women’s many kindnesses, to properly put us in the ground.”

The door to the back room opened and Sean, hearing that signal, headed back. It would be Fred with the last delivery. As expected, burly Fred bounded up to throw open the back door of the truck. But there was also a woman dressed in khakis and a purple coat, with short black hair and big dark eyes of chocolate brown. She was like a flashier, prettier version of Joe.

“This him?” she asked Fred.

“Yeah, Sean. Sean meet Angie. Angie, meet Sean. Help me unload these cupboards. She gave me extra this morning.”

Angie removed a gold-studded glove and put out her hand. “Happy to meet you. You’re the talk of family Sundays but I’m always too busy it seems to come over. Help Freddie out and then I’ll tell you what I need.”

Sean had his shoulder bracing the last of seven carts—three more than usual—when Joe walked into the back.

“Angie!” Hugs ensued. “Why you on this run?”

“LaPorta’s.”

“Something wrong with their order?” LaPorta’s was a hot Italian bistro and one of Dippolito’s biggest contracts. They provided the restaurant’s breads, rolls, and desserts.

“Only if you think Fat Jimmy ordering three dozen super-sized cannoli cupcakes with hard icing is a problem. Which it’s not, because you know I can make as many of those as he needs. But then Fat Jimmy says he wants them decorated by the guy over in the shop on State.” Angie flicked a glance at Sean. “He told me his mother bought some cupcakes last week. It’s the color, she says. I don’t know. I think Roxanne does great and Jimmy says yeah, she does, but her squiggles aren’t as perfect. Squiggles! Who would have thought, right? Anyway, Jimmy wants holiday cakes decorated by *this* guy. So here they are, all three dozen.” Angie sighed. “You know how he gets. A damn perfectionist.”

“So are we.” Joe cocked a look at Sean. “So here’s what we do. Sean will decorate Fat Jimmy’s cakes. But you find a day to send Roxanne over to watch and learn. Sean here will teach her. ’Cuz I don’t want you bringing stuff over for him to decorate on a regular basis.”

“You could always send him over to work by me.” She gave Sean a wink. “He’s cute and the girls like eye candy. He’d fit right in.”

“Yeah, he is cute. And he stays right here.”

Basking in the praise, Sean almost missed Fred's smirk. Just as he noticed it, the conversation ended and both Dippolito siblings left. Fred gave a wave on the way out.

"So now you met Angie. Get to work making squiggles," Joe said to Sean. "Freddie will be back to pick the load up in an hour and haul them over to the restaurant."

He was on it. He had three dozen special desserts, mouthfuls of sweet cake and ricotta cream destined for the eager palates of discerning customers, and he was going to make each and every one of them a visual masterpiece. Which was fun for the first dozen, after which his back started to ache. By the time he'd finished the last of the small oval cakes—a latticed delight with blue forget-me-nots and lacy sprays of white and pink hearts—he could barely stand up straight. He made a mental note to teach Roxanne how to make squiggles and dainty flowers in exchange for her secret of how to do this all day.

He helped Fred load the finished cakes into the cupboards and locked up after he'd left.

"You all right?" Joe asked. He'd brought back the stainless steel bowls in which he made his cannoli cream and put them in the big double sinks for washing. Great, more work to do. But Joe was good about cleaning up on his own.

"That's a little more decorating than I was counting on."

"Yeah, I'll have to have a talk with Angie about this commercial stuff. It's profitable, but I don't want it to become the elephant that runs away with the business."

"You mean you want to keep business focused on the shop? On this being a *family* bakery?"

Joe tilted his head and paused. "That's right." He said it with a little lift on the end, as if answering a trick question.

"Just asking." Sean tossed out his used up pastry bags, now empty of icing, and washed his hands. "For what it's worth, I think you're on the right track."

"Do you?"

"You bet. This business is great! It's authentic and you can't teach authentic. It's organic. Your customers are loyal. You have a rock solid brand."

"Is that a bona fide assessment from a Wharton scholar?"

“It is. You know, you should show me some respect. It was only last year my partner and I won a Brandie.” It had been a good day and Sean was getting the hang of the family brand of communication. He was all prepared to explain the significance of his Brandie.

“Your partner?”

Oh fuck. Joe had zeroed in on the wrong word. Though, come to think of it, what did he care? Sean sighed. He might as well get it out there. “Jill Montgomery. The Montgomery in Montgomery Whelan.”

“You mean the one who kicked you out of the business?”

“I mean the bitch who dissolved the business right out from under me so she could be free to become a superstar on Madison Avenue. She’s lighting up New York.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry.” He sounded like he meant it. The expression on Joe’s face was one Sean hadn’t seen before. Like they had something in common. Rejection was pretty much universal.

Delphine popped her little bespectacled head around the corner. “Hey, Joe. Got a moment? Customer wants to know if we have more of those bunny rabbit cannoli.”

Joe’s mouth fell open. “What bunny cannoli?”

“I had some extra icing—” Sean began to explain. But Del made explanation unnecessary by bringing in one of the offenders. There on the plate was a regular cannoli but with a cute bunny face on one end and even cuter fluffy pink tail on the other.

“It’s the last one,” said Del.

“You bet your ass it is. If she wants it, sell it to her—” apparently Joe was certain no self-respecting man would want to buy a bunny cannoli—“but we don’t have more. Go on, Del. She’ll live.” If Vesuvius ever needed a light, it would have found that and more in the furious brown glare Joe turned on Sean. He dropped his voice so no one else could hear. “What the fuck are you doing? That thing looks like a bunny in bondage!”

“It does not! Anyway, I only made eight—and customers bought them all!”

“You see, that’s *the problem!* There’s just one lesson here and it’s that you don’t make a joke outta the cannoli! You know what a good cannoli is supposed to be? A life-altering experience. Life altering! You eat a great

cannoli and, sweet baby Jesus, it's like the saints come down and deliver you to heaven. Kings don't die so good. And it doesn't happen if the guy's laughing while he eats a bunny."

"People die laughing."

"Not while eating a Dippolito's cannoli, they don't!"

Sean was on the brink of laughing himself, except he could see he was in real danger of Joe going completely over the edge. That wasn't something he wanted to see. Or cause. The man's passion for his cannoli was, well... kind of amazing.

"I won't do it again. Really. I promise."

"You're damn right you won't. I won't have you mess with perfection. Look, I might try the colored chocolate chips, because they don't change the essential product, but there's no way in hell or California this bakery starts selling bunny cannoli. Got it?"

Oh yeah, he got it. This wasn't about him, or creativity, or even Joe. This was about something so much bigger it occurred to Sean, at last, to treat it as a religion. Joe's religion, which honored traditional methods for the production of perfect baked goods. Joe wasn't trying to kill his creativity, he wanted Sean to respect his beliefs. It was only fair. Sean knew what he had to do. He assured Joe not once, not twice, but ten times over that he would observe the sacrament of the perfect cannoli.

The Networking for Food Entrepreneurs meet up was an eye opener. Sean almost felt at home surrounded by people as incompletely versed in the food industry as he was. The group fit comfortably in a meeting room at a busy pub in Northern Liberties, and the information flew at the speed of cozy chatter. At least three of the men were gay, which should have interested him more than it did. One of the men, tall and blond, undressed him with seductively playful blue eyes, but Sean was put off when the first suggestion out of the man's mouth was to hope Sean had some coke on him. Whether the asshole was a cop or a player didn't matter because Sean wasn't what he was looking for. Within a minute of his refusal, the man moved on to a cute twink wearing a chef's toque.

Sean introduced himself as marketing manager for Dippolito's, an outright lie but it helped him fit in. He connected with a pair of women who ran two

start-up bakeries—one for gourmet croissants and the other for potato chips—and a man who was trying to drum up vendors for a street festival in Manayunk that June.

“Dippolito’s?” Dave the event organizer actually did a double take. “Any chance I could get them to set up a stall? I mean, seriously, I’d waive the fee.”

The croissant lady shot Dave an evil look. He hadn’t offered to do that for her.

Sean shook his head. “I’ll ask, but I don’t think so.”

“No offense, but you don’t need this group. Dippolito’s is an institution out there in Delco. They make damn good cannolis, and my aunt raves about their lobster tails.”

“*Sfogliatelle.*” If nothing else, Sean now knew his Italian pastries.

“Yeah, those. You know what would be perfect—I’m giving you the best advice you will ever get—enter Dippolito’s into the Philly Cannoli Festival. You’d be in against the South Philly boys, all the big names, but the publicity is top rate. Radio, TV, newspapers. It’s major league.”

Joe would never go for it. Never in a million years. The verbal fireworks would be epic and then, to top it all off, Joe would personally decapitate Sean with his big bare hands. But it was *perfect*. The ultimate celebration of the perfect cannoli.

Even Joe couldn’t stay mad for long about that.

When Sean got home that night, he found the event website, printed up the forms, filled them out, and mailed them in.

Chapter Six

The Saturday before Easter was mayhem. The shop opened early, which meant Sean was asked to start early, promptly at two a.m., right around the time the tail end of Saturday drunks were staggering out of the bar down the street. He let himself in and found Joe, already looking tired, baking bread. Little wonder. He was staring at a stack of orders three inches high. At least the bakery's anise-scented Easter breads—rings and loaves—were being made by the bakery elves over at Brooke Street. A dozen flat plastic bins of hollow cannoli shells stood stacked near the table.

“What do you need me to do?”

“Just help.”

They'd worked together long enough they knew how to move around each other. The huge ovens practically glowed from the heat as dozens upon dozens of baked loaves and rolls were pulled from them to cool on twice the usual number of racks. Before long they were full and the last breads stood cooling on a little used counter.

Joe heaved one of the plastic bins onto the table. “Put on fresh gloves. You're about to experience one of your wet dreams.”

Really? Sean quirked a smile. He'd had a particularly interesting one a couple nights ago. His smile dimmed only a little when Joe led him over to the big mixer where he made batches of cannoli cream. Dipping in the big scoop, he filled a large pastry bag fitted with a tip and shoved it into Sean's hands. He then filled another for himself.

“We're making cannoli. You've seen me do it. Hell, every time I turn around, I can tell you're getting a hard on from watching. So now put that knowledge to work. Just think of it as putting icing in a hole.” Lifting a shell from the bin, he demonstrated the technique. “Make sure you fill the center. Don't chintz, because customers hate that. No cream in the center is the mark of a crappy cannoli. I'll hear about it. And put a little flair in the finish. Make the ends pretty.”

By his fourth or fifth cannoli, Sean had the hang of it. By his second dozen, his right hand was ready to fall off. Squeezing dainty bags of decorating icing was ten times easier than squeezing hefty bags of thick creamy cannoli filling. But Joe was unflagging—not to mention twice as fast—so Sean kept pushing

the cream, bag upon different flavored bag, into both sizes of shells. There were large cannoli and small cannoli and by the end of the hour he was sick of filling them both. At last there was only the last bin of shells and Joe told him to stop while there were still a dozen or so left.

“We made enough for the orders. I think you deserve a break.” Joe snapped off his gloves.

Sean lifted one of the remaining large shells, and, while Joe looked on, filled it. He extended it to his boss. “I want you to be my first.” It wasn't completely a tease. No one had yet test-tasted one of his creations. “I filled it special just for you.”

Joe shook his head and chuckled. He understood what Sean was doing, of course. With just the hint of a swagger and a look that said “fuck you, I got this”, he reached over and picked up the cannoli. Sean held his breath as Joe lifted the cannoli to his open mouth and his tongue emerged, strong and pink, to lick suggestively at the creamy tip before he leaned back and enveloped the end with his smiling lips. He looked like a porn star showing off a parlor trick—bold nose and head of wavy hair, dark eyes half closed, with his beautiful lips wrapped around the thick golden cannoli tube. Watching Joe's jaw and lips move, cheeks hollowing while he thoroughly licked and sucked out the creamy filling, brought a groan to Sean's throat and a boner to his pants. Damn! What he wouldn't give for his cock to be that cannoli. Joe's demonstration was so unbelievably hot it was even worth the little smirk of satisfaction when he finally finished and showed off the hollowed tube.

“You did good, Sean. You filled the creamy center. Made me work for it.”

“That was... how did you do that?”

“It's a skill Italian men are born with. Women, too. You get a bunch of us around a table with a plate of cannoli and anything can happen.” He turned his head. “I think I hear Freddie with the truck.”

Sean never caught his breath again. Mama Jo and both of the high school girls, Jordana and Penny, arrived at four a.m. and set to putting together orders. Sean quickly learned the sorting system and before long the shelves and counters overflowed with boxes, bags, and names written in black marker on order sheets stapled or taped to bundles. Donna Mae and Delphine arrived and turned on the lights, opening the doors to a flood of customers all in a hurry to procure their Easter orders.

The chaos had the rhythm of choreography. Freddie came with deliveries so often Sean lost count. Over five hundred customers went away happy. All but two of the orders were picked up by the time the shop closed at six p.m. and Mama Jo turned off the lights, then sent everyone home. Sean stayed behind with Jordana to clean up.

“You have a place to go? Isn’t your family far away?” Mama Jo wrapped a cashmere scarf around her neck. She was heading out to Fred’s house in Springfield, so she could spend the night with her grandchildren and go to Church with them on Easter morning. Joe waited outside with the car. Sean had been surprised to see him back a late model SUV out of the garage tucked under the apartment. He’d never seen Joe anywhere or doing anything except in the bakery.

“Wisconsin. But I’ve been invited to spend Easter with friends.” Dan and Jenn had invited him over. It was a chance to see the new house. They’d bought a place in Montgomery County in a community with good schools.

“Drive careful, then. It’s supposed to storm tomorrow night. I’ve been following this all week.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Monday will be dead. Not many customers except for the commuters. You can stay home if you want.”

“Joe has me on the schedule.”

“He has you on the schedule every day. We may not talk, but I’m not blind. Have a happy Easter!” She headed down to the car and climbed into the passenger seat. Sean watched as Joe steered out of the alley and tried to imagine what that car ride would be like. Knowing both of them as he did, silence didn’t even seem possible.

By the time Sean left Dan and Jenn’s house the following night, it was snowing. Pretty swirls of white flakes flew past his windshield, reminding him acutely of winters in Oshkosh when he’d dance with anticipation of running out onto the pond behind his house just to skid across the fresh snow atop the ice. He would spin and play on a world split between the vast blue bowl of the sky and the brilliant white covering everything below, except him, dressed in defiant colors. A girl had fallen through the ice one year, though not while he was around, and drowned. His mother had forbidden him to go on the pond after that. But he did it anyway.

Beautiful things were always the most dangerous.

The snow was three inches deep when Sean trudged to work on Monday morning. The sturdy warm snow boots he'd brought from home and worn all through college left deep tread tracks in the snow. It rather pleased him that his were the only tracks to be seen, marching up the hill from his house to Baltimore Pike, where they got lost in the slush created by traffic. Even at this early, post-holiday hour, there was some of that. The traffic lights on timers switched from red to green. He walked the two blocks further to the bakery, the crisp air tickling his nose. Though he wore a scarf over his shoulders in anticipation of a more arduous walk home, he didn't bother to wrap it around his lower face. A little snow never hurt anyone.

There were no footsteps in the snow on the loading bay outside the bakery door, and he unlocked it to find the interior dark. He switched on the light and looked around, seeing things exactly as he and Jordana had left them. Clean. The ovens off but the bricks still radiating heat. Bowls stacked and waiting to be put to use. He closed the door behind him and wondered where Joe was. It felt strange to be here without him.

Maybe it was a test. He didn't put it past Joe to want to see what he would do without direct supervision. If so, he was up to it. The most likely explanation, though, was that Joe had spent a late night having fun with his big Italian American family, playing the board games Fred often teased him about later, gorging on lamb and Easter bread, and perfecting obscene cannoli tricks. Sean got out of his coat and boots, put on the work shoes he kept in the break room, and set to mixing the batches of dough he and Jordana had set up according to a game plan laid out two days before. He could fire the ovens after that.

He had things well under control when Joe clomped in a half hour later, his chef whites crisp but the jacket unbuttoned at the top. One hand gripped a brown paper bag.

"Looks like I could have stayed in bed a little longer." He grabbed an apron. "Things are going to be real quiet today. I should have told you not to come in."

"But you didn't."

"Yeah, I can be a real ass that way. What can I say? I like the company." He put the bag on the table. "Breakfast. Aunt Rose made *Torta di Pasqua*, ricotta cheesecake. Doesn't make sense, right? We got us a damn bakery and what do we do come holidays? We bake more crap. It's really good, though."

“My mom always serves hot cross buns at Easter time. Then we move right on to potatoes.” It was good to hear Joe chuckle at that. But the memory made him nostalgic, too. His mom’s skillet potatoes for breakfast were to die for.

The morning went quickly though it was, as predicted, the slowest Sean had ever seen the place. Donna Mae came in but Del called to ask if she was needed. She wasn’t. Penny called in to say schools were canceled and she wouldn’t be in for the afternoon. Freddie made just one delivery. Sean helped handle the commuter rush without any problem. By ten a.m. the snow was six inches and still falling, now much more heavily. Donna Mae started fretting a half hour before she asked to leave, saying she was afraid the trollies would stop running. She wanted to go home.

“I can stay,” Sean volunteered, though he could see Joe was going to let her go anyway. “I walk home.”

“Thank you, doll. I owe you one. I’ll make it in tomorrow if the trollies are running, or maybe I can get Bob to give me a lift—if he can get the car out of the driveway.” Donna Mae threw on her coat and boots and hurried out the front door to catch the next trolley along with two customers who had been waiting below the awning. Sean had already cleared snow from the awning twice that morning and could see he’d have to do it again soon.

Surprisingly there were still customers. A logjam of people stopped by when the courthouse closed two hours later. They ran out of cannoli shells and, because Freddie wasn’t making another delivery, Joe made a batch of shell pastry and rolled it out in the kitchen for Sean to cut into rounds and fry some more shells in the shop’s ancient deep fryer. He’d done it a few times before but this time he got creative with the last several shells, shaping them into tapered, spiraled unicorn horns and figuring out how to spoon cream into the openings. He liked the idea but the execution needed more work.

By late afternoon, most of the bread and rolls had flown off the shelves, along with cookies and the heartier pastries like turnovers. The lawyer whose office abutted the bakery on Olive Street decided to spend the night in her building and bought two rum cakes to tide her over. The guys at the firehouse nearby stopped over and carried out enough to feed an army. Snow had the wonderful side effect of making everyone they met feel like comrades in a kind of adventure in which nature was the adversary. Clearly it also made them hungry. But there was still enough product left over when the bakery closed that night for the day old case to look like it would be a challenge the next day.

“Don’t worry about it.” Joe wasn’t the least bit concerned. “When this happens we just pack up the overrun and send it to Father Phil. He gives it to the nuns who teach at the school, or sometimes hands it out to shut-ins. Nothing goes to waste.”

“What about these?” Stifling a grin, Sean flourished two of his unicorn horn cannoli.

“What the hell are those?”

“I call them Unicorn Horns—” he knew better than to call them cannoli— “I think they might sell. A little powdered sugar to make them white, or a glittery glaze—”

“You don’t give up, do you?” Despite looking put upon, Joe accepted one of the horns and gave it a looking over.

“No. But I’ve learned not to put anything in front of customers if you haven’t okayed it.”

“We’re making progress. And this idea isn’t bad, but it might work better with a puff pastry dough, softer and prettier. So you can get a better spiral.”

They ate the cream filled horns and then washed down any equipment that needed it. Finally Joe said, “Let’s take a look.” He opened the back door and together they looked out into the alley. Snow curtained down so thickly Sean couldn’t see anything past the loading dock. Either the power was out on Baltimore Pike or snow obliterated the street lights. Joe gaped at the desolation. “Fuck, that shit’s two feet deep! No way I’m letting you go out in that.”

Sean grinned because the snow was deep, a foot at least, but not *that* bad. “Are you offering to drive me?”

“No. Because there’s no way *I’m* going out in that.” Joe closed the door. At least that stopped more snow from blowing in. “Look Sean, I know you’re from Wisconsin and can probably make snowshoes out of bakery boxes and paperclips like some kind of cheesehead MacGyver, but I think you should stay here for the night. I’d ask Mom to let you sleep in Freddie’s room but, well, you know we’re not talking, so I can’t do that. But you can sleep over in the break room. That’s what I do sometimes when things get tense and I can tell you right now: the sofa’s top rate. I’ll get you a pillow and some blankets.”

“Look, I—”

“Do it for me. If you don’t, I’ll stay awake all night listening for sirens because I’ll be sure you got hit by a snowplow. I’ll drive you home first thing tomorrow once they get the roads clear.”

Sean battled his desire to push Joe’s buttons and couldn’t resist. “Where I grew up this is nothing. It’s just seven blocks.”

“Yeah, and maybe in Bumblehump where you grew up there’s nothing but cornfields and cows. What we got here is a city full of people who can’t drive worth shit—and that’s on a good day. I saw a news guy on TV get plowed under last year. A lot of bad can happen in seven blocks.”

Yeah, maybe. Sean didn’t doubt for a moment Joe was genuinely worried about him going out into a raging storm. There was no mistaking the pleading in his expressive brown eyes as anything other than a desire to see Sean safe and warm... and right here. The break room was cozy enough and had everything he might need, including a bathroom. Sean had no pressing reason to be at his house, which was locked up tight with lights on timers. He had no pets. No plants to water. No family waiting.

“My staying here will really make you feel better?”

“Absolutely.”

“Fine, then. Bring me a pillow and blanket and I’m good.” He undid the zipper on his coat. Joe’s smile sent an unexpected warm, melty feeling straight through him.

“I knew your intelligence would eventually kick in. I’ll be right back.”

While Joe went upstairs, Sean finished getting out of his coat. What the hell was going on here? He was behaving completely out of character. He would have been perfectly fine out in the snow. Back in college he’d braved snow storms to fetch pizza and beer for dorm parties, or just so he could hook up with some guy for a blow job. He’d driven in a blizzard to see Springsteen in concert. Maybe he didn’t like risk, but *snow* on foot and city streets was a risk he could manage. The only reason he’d capitulated was to make Joe Dippolito happy and because being near Joe didn’t just feel good—it felt wonderful.

Which meant this was a risk... a really big risk.

He stared around at the bakery he’d just spent the last few months of his life falling in love with. The meet up... the cannoli contest... and now this...

He was screwing it all up.

Joe appeared again, his arms filled with pillows and blankets. Plural. Joe wasn't making up a bed, he was feathering a nest. Sean followed him into the break room. The sofa was nicely out of sight from the door, against an inside wall. A big bright carpet covered the floor. The bathroom was at the other end of the room near the lockers. An old lamp plastered with china flowers and what looked like kissing geese, probably handed down from some Dippolito relation who'd spent too much time in South Philly, gave the room good light. Joe dumped the bedding on the sofa.

Sean's heart hammered against his breastbone. He couldn't let Joe see what he was feeling, especially when he couldn't even put a finger on it himself.

Joe apparently noted his nervousness because he cracked a smile. "Mom's curious as hell, but the beauty of our arrangement is she couldn't bring herself to ask."

"I don't want this to be awkward."

"You mean you staying here?" Joe made a sound between a snort and a chuckle, then turned it into a sigh. "That's not awkward. Me and Mom, that's another story. Maybe it would help if I explain it."

That would work. Sean managed a nod.

"A couple years ago I told her I was gay, mostly to stop her from setting me up with girls she thought I might like. It was getting harder to find new excuses for why I didn't want to go out with them. But that's not what the problem was, even though she told me flat out I broke her heart. That was pretty bad, but I could understand her disappointment. I mean, you know... it wasn't easy for her." Joe looked unhappier about his mother's distress than hurt about her reaction. "Freddie and Angie handled it better. But Mom, she couldn't let go. She kept trying to find a way to fix it. About a year ago she got to talking to Father Phil, which is where it all went in the toilet. She brought him home one night and they ganged up on me. He started telling me how being gay is a willful sin—you know, 'so whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it', that kind?—which means I'm giving God the finger any time I feel attracted to a man. And when I screw a guy it's two fingers. It was the worst night of my life. He was relentless and she was crying. I waited 'til after Father Phil left and then I lost it. I told her she betrayed me and I said, 'Fuck the Church and fuck you, too!'"

"Shit—" A Catholic saying something like that was a sin in itself. And an Italian son to his mother was worse.

“Well, I told you once I don’t always mean what I say in a temper. I told her I was sorry about the last part, what I said about her. But not the other. The Church is wrong and I’m not a worse kind of sinner just because when I lust it’s for a man and not a woman. But that’s why she stopped talking to me, because I keep on being a willful sinner. I won’t say I’m wrong about the Church or go to Mass. And so I said fine, if she won’t talk to me then I won’t talk to her. We’re just waiting to see who breaks down first.”

“Doesn’t that strike you as just a little much? My mom would just tell me what a disappointment I am and be done with it.”

A fragile smile tugged Joe’s lips. “She did it, too, didn’t she? Tell you what a disappointment you are?”

“More than once,” Sean admitted.

“Well, mine tells me every day. Every *hour*. It’s my punishment. Being Sicilian isn’t for wusses. Neither is being gay. And the truth of the matter is I don’t like any of this any more than she does. I don’t think she hates me for being gay. She just doesn’t know how to fit it into her life, how to fit me in.”

Sean cocked his head at something Joe had said. “You don’t like being gay?”

“Not especially. I mean, it’s the way I am—but it’s not like I said I want to be this way. It’s got its ups and downs. Like how hard it is for me to find, you know, men I can be with. For you it’s probably easy. I mean, look at you.” He shook his head and stared at some point over Sean’s shoulder. “There’s a bar I go to sometimes over in Center City—far from here, you see, so I don’t run into anyone I know. The place is loud, people smoke... I don’t really like going there, but most of the time I can pick up someone for the night, some other guy who just needs to get off the same way I do, but then I wake up in the morning feeling like shit about myself.”

Which probably explained the mornings Joe dragged in looking like he hadn’t slept. Sort of like now, except his face was stark with repressed emotion and his eyes were so intense they looked almost black. Sean wanted to look away, but couldn’t.

“I thought you might be gay when I hired you. I don’t know why, I... I don’t usually think about that kind of thing in the shop. It’s personal. But something told me to hire you and now I think I know why. Seeing you every day, being normal with you... it makes me feel good.” Joe’s voice was barely above a whisper.

Time slowed down. The space between them sharpened. Sean noticed how the day old scruff on Joe's face enhanced his strong features, his big dark eyes, his vulnerability. There was no reason in the world a man like Joe shouldn't have willing partners line up for a chance to be with him. Hell, Sean would have jumped the line for such a chance.

"Joe, I—" Sean never got the rest of the words out. Before he realized what was happening, Joe grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him against the break room wall.

Sean gasped as Joe's mouth slashed hot and hungry over his. His response was an immediate *Oh, God, yes!* He opened to a kiss he hadn't even known he wanted. Joe's lips worked over his as their teeth met and their tongues twined. All he tasted—all he smelled—was a call to sex so forceful he wanted to hand over the keys to his body on the spot. He ground against Joe's larger, harder frame, rolling his pelvis so his stiffening cock answered the other man's.

That was when Joe stopped and stepped away. "Fuck this, I can't... I can't do it."

"Do what? Fuck like rabbits? Because right now I'm on board with that."

"Oh yeah? I'm your employer! I can't just push you up against a wall and have my way with you!" Joe had far too good a grip on himself for Sean to be happy about it. "You know what I'm talking about, Sean. Employees are hands-off. We can't do this, it's illegal."

"Have your way with me? Are we living in the same century? For God's sake, Joe, it's not illegal for two men to find each other hot as hell. It's only illegal if *you* refuse to give *me* a raise unless I let you screw me."

Joe looked like a man who really wanted to believe that. But he shook his head. "It's family policy. We don't screw employees."

"Seriously? Never?"

"Never." Joe looked as frustrated as Sean had ever seen him, but not like he was about to make an exception.

"You're telling me you won't touch me because I work for you?"

"Yes!"

"Fine, then!" Sean threw up his hands as though Joe held a gun on him, which in a sense was true. "I quit!" He walked to the locker, picked up his boots, and sat down on the sofa to begin putting them on again.

“Hey, Sean, calm down already. You’re taking this wrong. And you can’t go out there. It’s a state of emergency!”

“You can’t tell me what to do any more. I don’t work for you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” Leaving his boots untied, Sean stood and walked up to him. “Yeah,” he said and laid his hand on Joe’s cheek. The prickle of stubble teased his fingers, but it was the firm yet yielding shape of Joe’s gorgeous lips as he passed his thumb across them that thrilled him. When those lips moved ever so subtly to kiss his thumb, he knew he had permission to go on.

Joe’s breaths were measured, deep but not exactly even, as Sean undid the buttons of his white chef jacket. Joe always dressed professionally. Sean had never seen him wearing anything else. Under the jacket was a white T-shirt with curls of black hair poking over the collar. Oh yeah. Chest hair was nice. Locking eyes with his surprised but now willing former boss, Sean let his hands drop to Joe’s waist. He smiled. Joe lifted an eyebrow. How far was he willing to go?

What he was doing was all kinds of insane. Genies never went back into bottles. All they ever did was blow up the worlds of the guys that rubbed them. Sean hooked his fingers into Joe’s waistband and undid the clasp. The thick push of Joe’s cock against his fingers as he tugged down the zipper granted him a new set of permissions. He couldn’t wait to uncover the man—everything about the man. The little bits he’d seen so far only left him wanting more. He eased Joe’s pants down to free a thick, just slightly up-curved cock with a beautiful rosy crown. Joe Dippolito really was the perfect man.

Sean’s happy smile certainly must have conveyed his appreciation, because all at once Joe’s big hand was around the back of his head and pulling him in for another kiss. It might have been less heated, but Sean melted into it even more, happy just to have this again... the feel of a man’s mouth sealing his, sharing his breath, exchanging tiny caresses that pulled at his soul. When Joe’s right hand found his shirt and lifted it, when he felt Joe’s warm palm slide along his skin, curve over and up the cage of his ribs, fingers finding and seizing a nipple, Sean moaned. Joe’s mouth released his, and he gasped for air, only to yelp softly with pleasure when Joe began to suck and nibble down the column of his neck. He tipped his head back to give the man more to work with.

He groped for Joe's cock and wrapped his fingers around it. Hot and thick and... God! What would it take to get this inside him? He worked his hand up and down that mesmerizing length, pre-cum wetting his palm. Though he battled to regain any kind of control, his attempts were futile. He wanted this too much. And Joe... Joe had his shirt completely ridden up under his arms, his pants undone. Sean nearly lost it when Joe's fingers curled into his pants and lifted out his cock, circling it in his fist and returning Sean's ministrations stroke for stroke. For the second time, Joe crowded Sean against the wall, this time so he could push into Sean's grip, their slick, excited cockheads bumping each other with every thrust of his hips.

Sean wrapped his other arm under Joe's, bracing himself against the other man by clamping down on his big, broad shoulder. Every part of Joe was hard and driving him into the wall.

"Fuck! I'm going to come!" Sean gasped a warning, but it was already too late. Semen spurted over his belly, his hand, as Joe continued to thrust, breathing hard. Only now did Sean feel Joe's cock swelling in his hand—once, twice—two spurts adding to the sticky wet heat. It took another minute before it slowly began to soften.

Joe's head was bowed beside his now, sweat beading his forehead and finding its way into Sean's hair. They were face to face. Hot breath kept pace with heartbeats. Sean turned so his lips brushed Joe's cheek. He half expected Joe to taste sweet, like the baked goods he made, like cannoli cream and anise, but he only tasted salty and faintly, pleasantly musky. One hundred percent male.

And they were both a mess. Clothes half-off, pants down around their knees, and their hands glued to each other's cocks by the cum of two men who'd both been sporting sets of blue balls until a few minutes ago.

"Hey you." Joe's soft voice broke into Sean's stunned afterglow.

"Totally worth it," Sean murmured blissfully. And it was. Totally worth screwing up the best job he'd ever had.

"You mean this?"

"You."

"Yeah, you too." Joe pushed back from the wall. There was room enough between them now to breathe. "I guess we better clean up."

They took turns using the sink in the bathroom. Sean was glad he'd just restocked the paper towel dispenser, because it took a few to mop up. While Joe was running the water and probably doing the same, Sean sat on the sofa. He was still feeling slightly stunned. Deliciously dazed was more like it. Hearing a knock on the break room door was a rude awakening. He jumped to his feet and checked to make sure his clothing wasn't looking like he'd just been fucked silly.

He opened the door and stared down into the cool condemning eyes of Mama Jo. Oh. Fuck.

Chapter Seven

“If you’re staying here for the night, you should sleep in Freddie’s room upstairs. It’s much nicer and you’ll be warmer.” Mama Jo didn’t bother to try to peer around Sean. She knew where Joe would be found. She rolled her eyes slightly. “And tell my son I made a big pot of peas and pasta and expect you both to join me for dinner. I already got the table set.”

Sean watched her walk away and waited until the door leading to the stairs to the upper flat had closed before he turned to look behind him. Joe stood just outside the bathroom looking scrubbed and damp and... sorry.

“You want me to go? I’m still okay with that.” Sean felt for the man. Caught in the act by his mother. God only knew what she’d heard.

“No. It’s still more dangerous out there than she is. Actually she handled that better than I would have thought. She likes you, you know.”

Maybe not any more. But if Joe didn’t want to go up there alone, the least Sean could do was face the music with him.

Dinner with the feuding Dippolitos was among the more surreal experiences in Sean’s life. Mama Jo bustled contentedly between her state-of-the-art kitchen—surprising in a walk-up apartment above a store—and her tidy dinette. Joe conversed with Sean about sports, which was safe, because neither of them wanted to start thinking about how they’d just been dry humping each other like randy teenagers in the break room. Though Mama Jo didn’t say a word to Joe, she was graciousness itself to Sean and lit up when he admired her apartment. She had a certain flair in decorating, though it leaned toward lots of flourishes and the display of garish glassware, and Sean pleased her to no end by saying he liked the family photos lining the walls. He had only to express curiosity about Joe as a boy for her to dig out albums of family pictures. Though Joe groaned and hid his eyes with his hand, he was helpless.

“There’s me and Nick on our wedding day.” She pointed out various family members. Strains of easy listening music filtered in from the radio. “See this man? That’s my father Angelo. Angelo Gennaro. Everyone called him Jerry. And there’s Nick’s brother Dom, and my cousin Carmela. And see there, that’s little Donna Mae.”

Sure enough. Donna Mae had been the flower girl. “This is great!” Sean exclaimed. He grinned at an unsmiling Joe, who had surely seen the pictures a

thousand times before and, by the heat in his brown eyes when they met Sean's, was thinking of things far less sacred than his mother's wedding photos.

"And here—" Mama Jo picked up another album and laid it on the table in front of Sean—"there's little Joey." An infant with huge brown eyes and a startling shock of black hair atop his round head gazed wide-eyed from the photos, page after page.

"He's named after you, isn't he?"

"You'd think so, but no. Nick named him after his other brother, who died in the war. Giuseppe. And then he went and named our second son Fortunato."

Clenched jaw and all, Joe looked ready to snap—but Sean was all over that piece of news. "Giuseppe? And Freddie is Fortunato?"

Mama Jo winked and gave him a sharp little smile. "Don't tell him I told you."

"Never." But Sean recognized a fine display of Sicilian revenge when he saw one. Mama Jo was on top of her game. It was time to change the subject before Giuseppe kicked him out into the blizzard. "What's for dessert?" he quipped. And then he began talking about growing up in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and building snowmen on the shores of Lake Butte des Morts.

She sent them off when it came time to clean up the dishes, even though he offered to help. While Mama Jo futzed in the kitchen, Sean joined Joe for a look at the heart of Dippolito's Italian Bakery. Muttering something about not making up his bed, Joe didn't turn on the light in his room, leaving its details shadowy. What looked like a comfortable full bed, appropriately rumped and unmade, occupied the far end of the room and an oversized armoire hugged one of the walls. Joe was more intent on showing him the adjoining office and flicked on the overhead light, revealing a space packed to the rafters with bookcases, filing cabinets, a huge desk covered with catalogs and inboxes, and a sweet computer setup. Though cluttered, everything looked organized.

"This room is between mine and Mom's. When I took over I built this new door and that door over there leads to her room. She doesn't come in here much anymore. She used to do the accounting but now all the main accounting is done over at the Brooke Street location because we have more room there. I hire an accountant to audit the books. I keep on top of things here. Computers are great."

"When do you have the time?"

“It’s hard sometimes, but I make time. After I get off my shift, I come here and look over the spreadsheets. I stay on top of things. It’s all in my head—” he tapped his forehead and met Sean’s inquiring look with a self-conscious smile—“I’m not kidding, it is. I just need to update the information.”

“You need to get out and play a bit more. Show me Freddie’s room.” Getting Joe away from the business was now a priority.

Freddie’s room was across the hall. No sooner did he have Joe inside, than Sean closed the door, plunging them into darkness. It was the perfect trap. He wound his arms around Joe’s neck and angled up for a kiss. To his surprise, Joe grabbed him by both his arms and broke the embrace.

“Not here,” Joe whispered urgently. “Not in my mother’s house. It’s disrespectful.”

“Why? Because we’re gay?”

“No. Because my mother deserves a little respect. She doesn’t approve of people who aren’t married locking lips in her place. She caught Angie kissing one time and that kid was never allowed back in the house.”

Okay then. Sean didn’t want to be banned from the premises. When in Rome... Sean stepped back and allowed Joe to fumble for and find the light switch.

Low, thoroughly respectful light bathed a neat room that clearly hadn’t seen an occupant since Freddie had moved out. The twin bed had a Darth Vader bedspread and Linkin Park posters papered the walls. Boxes of different sizes filled most of the room, neatly stacked into rows and labeled.

“Sorry about the boxes. Mom’s moving in a few days. I was hoping she wouldn’t be able to find the albums.”

“Not a problem.” Sean propped himself on the bed and beckoned Joe with an impish grin.

“You’re becoming way too comfortable.” Joe sat down at the foot of the bed. Sometime before dinner, while Sean was busy helping Mama Jo serve up the peas and pasta, he’d exchanged his chef whites for jeans and a polo shirt. Informality suited him. It also changed his looks drastically, replacing the hard-ass baker with a more vulnerable, rather adorable looking man. “Listen, Whelan. We’re good together. I like having you in the shop, and Angie will kill me if I do anything to make you quit.”

What was Joe saying? Sean popped up higher on his elbow. "I didn't really *want* to quit. I *said* I quit so I could get in your pants."

"Yeah. And I didn't resist that as hard as I should have, so I guess we're on the same page. What that means is I'm not accepting your resignation. I can't decide if I'd rather have you in the bakery or in the bedroom—but I guess that's something we're going to have to figure out."

"And we can have sex, too?"

"Keep your voice down." Joe practically dislocated a vertebra looking to see if Mama Jo had heard and was about to come through the door. When he turned back, he gave Sean a sexy smile and a look that went straight to his cock. "What do you think? You think I'm only keeping you on so next time you quit I can nail your ass? We're adults and... I know you're right about the legal part. But I'm not going to conduct a relationship in front of my staff. We can have our fun, but only if it's outside of work. Maybe I can do that. One thing for sure, I'm not going to make you find another job. I like having you around."

"That's good." Because there was nowhere in the world Sean wanted to work more than at the bakery. And no one he wanted to work with more than this man. He could always quit again if needed. The thought made him smile. But then he remembered something he had to do—sooner now rather than later. He had to tell Joe about the meet up, and how he'd gotten a little ahead of himself.

A little? He'd gotten *way* ahead of himself, even if he and Joe were lovers. Which they weren't, not even now. They'd just agreed they could have sex under the right conditions.

"Joe, I—" the first words were always the hardest—"I think you know I love the bakery, right? Really. You run an amazing business. I just think, well... I think more people would love to know about it."

"What? You don't think enough people know about my bakery? I'm not going to tell you how much we make, but it's enough to employ twenty people gainfully. As far as I'm concerned, that's enough business to go around." Joe looked so relaxed, so open. They were finally being real with each other, and Sean wanted to slit his own wrists with a knife. "Hey, Sean, I appreciate your ideas. You think I don't notice things? I notice everything... your little fixes, the way you make sure the products and shop look perfect. Donna Mae told me you took over the chalkboard and people now buy more of the specials. The day old has never sold better thanks to you. Those trolley schedules you taped

on the wall near the tables—I said leave them because customers came up to thank me.”

“Well, I might have gotten carried away... with other things.”

“Really?” Joe lifted his brows.

“I might have ordered some T-shirts.”

Sean might as well have said he'd put bunny faces on all the cannoli. Joe rose from the bed and gaped down at him.

“Oh, don't tell me you did something to mess us up before we even get started! Fucking T-shirts? Who's going to wear them?”

“You. Me. Staff. Your family. Any customers who want to buy one. But I didn't order that many, just a few. As samples. They have the bakery's name on the front.”

“Do I look like the kind of guy who wears a shirt with *my own name* on it?”

“I think you'd look great in one of the shirts. I think you'd be proud of that name, too.” Sean drew a deeper breath because Joe wasn't anywhere close to the top of his rage range—and soon he would be. “I might also have signed the bakery up for a cannoli bake-off.”

“*What?*”

No one could load one word up with as much disdain and incredulity as Joe. Sean's mother, the queen of the two-word put-down, would be crushed in a syllable. Sean pulled out his cell phone and brought up the website he'd bookmarked. There in neon green, red, and white was the home page for the Philly Cannoli Festival. He handed the phone to Joe.

“I thought Dippolito's should be there. Our cannoli are great—no, they're life altering. Everyone says so—someone even said so at the meet up.”

“There was a meet up? What the fuck's a meet up?”

Sean looked up sheepishly. “The Philadelphia Food Entrepreneurs Connection. I went to a meeting.”

“For what—award-winning marketers? Who do you think you are, some kind of bakery executive? And you didn't tell me none of this? 'Til *now*?” Joe was staring in stark disbelief as he flipped through page after page about the Cannoli Festival.

“Well, the shirts were supposed to be a surprise. I designed them and paid for them myself. They’re not official. I just thought—”

“*Thinking?* Do you even know what that means? If you for one moment think I would even consider something like... This is a big deal! They’re closing Passyunk Avenue! And look at this lineup!” Joe showed him the glowing face of the phone, though the lettering was far too small for Sean to read from the bed. “Termini Brothers! Isgro’s! You’re throwing me to the lions!—Peretti’s Pasticceria, The King of Cannoli!?”

“He’s not *that good!*” Sean bounded to Joe’s side, pointing to Peretti’s on the screen. “He says he makes the best cannoli in Philly, but I went to South Philly one day and I tried them and... Dippolito’s cannoli are ten times better! Sal Peretti’s a fraud!”

“Sal Peretti can afford to be a fraud!”

The bedroom door flew open so hard it crashed against the wall. Mama Jo walked in, dark eyes huge and her face a masterpiece of fury. They were screwed. Two gay men behind a closed door in the house of an Italian matriarch? Things weren’t looking good. Joe looked ready to jump out the window. Sean stepped away.

“Did I hear you say Sal Peretti? Is that *chooch* still braying about making Philly’s best cannoli? He’s nothing but a crook! That piece of garbage ran my father outta the business!” She marched up to Joe and practically put her finger on his nose as he stared at her in amazement. “Don’t let him get away with it. You hear me, Joey? We’re taking him down.”

“Mom—”

“I need to sit. I’m so angry I can’t stop shaking.” With Joe on one arm and Sean on the other, she made her way to the bed and sat on the edge. “This is giving me *agita*, but let me tell you the unvarnished truth about Sal Peretti. When I was a girl in South Philly, I worked in my father’s bakery and, let me tell you, we made the best cannoli in the neighborhood. In the city! Peretti was just a two-bit hood who started up a bakery around the corner from us, and that’s when the trouble began. He told my father to pay him or he’d drive him out of business. My father wouldn’t do it. Next thing you know, the health department comes in and finds enough violations to shut us down! We were clean! But Peretti, he had connections. He said he’d kill my father if he tried to reopen and shot him in the knee. I was behind the bread slicing machine. I saw

the whole thing go down.” She patted Joe’s hand. “That’s why your Pop Pop Gennaro moved back to Sicily and opened a bakery in Castelvento.”

Joe picked up her hand and clasped it between his much bigger ones. “Hell, Mom, you never told us that.”

“We weren’t supposed to say nothing. He was very ashamed—but such a gentle man, he never hurt anything bigger than a fly. I was old enough to stay with Aunt Giovanna, Carmela’s mother, which is how I ended up meeting your father.” She smiled and gave Joe’s face a wistful pat. “Such a handsome man. But the thing is, he was a baker, like *his* father, so we had lots in common—and I had your Pop Pop’s recipes. He wrote them all down for me before he ever left.”

“The cannoli!” Sean was sure of it.

She nodded. “The best cannoli in South Philly. In the city. But now made here at Dippolito’s in Delaware County.”

“We have the best recipe!” Sean couldn’t believe their luck. Maybe all bakers believed their recipes were superior to those of their competitors, but in this case he was too in love with the romance of the origin story to question it. Of *course* Dippolito’s had the best recipe!

“Mom—” there was no denying the warm tone of Joe’s voice as he spoke to his mother—“even if we do this crazy event, I’m not going to be doing it to Salvatore Peretti. He retired a few years ago. His son runs the business.”

She lifted her chin. “I know. That *stunad*, Sal, lives at the Winchester. During my last visit there, I heard him boasting about his pasticceria. Once I moved in there I was planning to put something in his soup. But now I got a better idea.” She looked them both in the eye. “We’re going to make off with Sal Peretti’s ‘King of Cannoli’ crown!”

Chapter Eight

The next day was heaven and hell. It started well, with Joe waking up early and Sean being able to lay warmly snuggled in Fortunato Dippolito's childhood bed, listening to Joe sing in the shower. Joe didn't sing so loudly as to wake his mother, but Sean smiled down to the tips of his toes when Joe belted out the lyrics to "Centerfield". Fogerty... baseball... perfect. Just as perfect as seeing Joe stepping out of the bathroom with wet, tousled hair, bare feet, and a pink towel wrapped around his best parts, a vision of virile Italian male. Sean licked the corner of his lips, hoping to maybe... but Joe gave him a shake of the head and a look that told him to cut it out, so he showered alone like the respectful guest he was. He emerged to the smell of coffee and eggs. He sighed with happiness.

"You really can do everything."

Joe's shoulders squared and he shot him a look. That was not good. "I'm still pissed off at you about the meet up thing."

"But you're still talking to me. That's a good thing, right?"

"I'm only talking to you because you're not Italian. You don't know the rules. You might think it was about the other thing. But it's not. It's about you stepping over the line into my business."

"I really thought—"

"Look, you're going to have to give me some time to get over it. And for all I know, Mom's listening in. She's got big ears. So not now, okay?"

"Yeah. Okay."

Things went downhill after that. He and Joe were all business at the bakery... something both of them found difficult. First there was a close call in the break room when Joe actually looked like he was relenting and about to say something conciliatory, but then Freddie chose that moment to make his delivery. After that, whenever Sean was around Joe always had someone else with him. He also never spoke to Sean about anything other than work. What surprised Sean most was how much it hurt to feel Joe pulling away from him... and to know he was doing it because of him. He'd predicted there would be repercussions and had gone ahead anyway. He just hadn't known making Joe unhappy would cut him like razor blades. He was fucking bleeding. That could only mean one thing and it terrified him.

Was he in love with the business—or with Joe?

By the time his shift ended, all Sean wanted in the world was to be on the receiving end of one of Joe's devastatingly soulful looks, or one of those secret smiles that made him melt. He was in the break room putting on his boots in preparation for the hike home when he heard Joe's voice boom from the other room.

"I'm driving Whelan home." Joe popped his head around the door of the break room. "That was our deal, right?"

"Yeah. But we're half staffed."

"Angie is sending Freddie over. So many clients closed for business today he got his deliveries done early. Let me get my coat."

Though the streets were treacherous, the drive to Sean's house was tense for other reasons. For once in his life, Sean couldn't think of a single thing to say. Joe wasn't giving him the silent treatment. Sean simply didn't know how to respond to Joe's stiff civility. He didn't know how to push past it. And he wanted to push. He wanted it so much it was almost a relief to reach his house and find out his driveway was plowed in. Joe would have to drop him off.

At least someone had done a good job clearing most of Sean's actual driveway and walks, probably his neighbor Brian, who never turned down a chance to play Good Samaritan with a snow blower. In return, Sean took care of Brian's dog when the older man and his wife took their twice yearly cruises.

"Got a shovel?" Joe eyed up the two-foot barricade of snow, slush and ice.

"I can do it. You go back."

"Look, Whelan, I'm mad at you. I don't hate you and want you to die of a heart attack on me. So do you have a shovel?"

"Please. I'm from Wisconsin. I've got two."

Joe left the SUV in the street and together they cleared the end of the driveway in fifteen minutes. When they were done, Sean took the shovels and headed to the porch at the back of his house and expected Joe would leave. Instead, he heard a vehicle crunching its way up the driveway. He looked around in surprise when Joe climbed out of the car.

"Nice house, Whelan."

Sean wanted to smile but fought it. He used one of the shovels on the two steps leading up to the back door and kept speaking as he shoveled. "My

grandfather told me to buy real estate. Over the years he collected a bunch of rental houses in Milwaukee and now he sells one off every couple years to fund his retirement.” He finished and shot Joe a hopeful look. “If you’d like to see inside, I can treat you to some frozen pizza and a beer.”

Joe nodded. “Works for me.”

Sean fumbled with his keys for a moment before he could open the door. He mentally ticked off his checklist for visitors. Floor recently mopped... check. Carpets vacuumed... two days ago. Bathroom... he always kept that clean. The clutter was another story. His pack rat tendencies would be on full display the moment they walked through the door.

He ushered Joe into the combination mud room and pantry, where they sat on the bench to take off their heavy snow boots and hung up their coats. From there, he gave the grand tour of the first floor starting with the kitchen and ending in the living room. Books and magazines overflowed the end and coffee tables into stacks on the floor.

“I guess you’re a reader,” Joe observed.

“I tried to break the habit but ended up buying cereal just to read the boxes. Sit down. I’ll get the pizza started and come back with the beers.”

Usually he just microwaved his pizza, but for Joe he opted to preheat the oven. At least he could give his guest a better crust. When he walked back into the living room, he saw Joe looking at something on the mantel above the fireplace.

“This it?”

“The Brandie. Yes.” As awards went, it was impressive. Blue agate globe and gold-plated wings, with his name prominently engraved on the plaque in front.

“That’s really nice. You should be proud of it.” Joe’s brows drew together, and Sean could see the thoughts lining up behind his boss’s serious eyes. “We need to talk about some things.” Sean sat on the luxe leather couch and Joe followed his example. Despite still wearing his chef jacket, he looked at home amidst Sean’s books. “What were you thinking? You know my feelings about the bakery and how I hate all that corporate crap. It’s all I can do now to keep the commercial side from becoming a problem. You got the fancy degree, so you know already what happens when a company grows too fast. If I outgrow my facilities, I need to acquire new ones, right? Hire more people. Maybe I

have to borrow money. I did that already two years ago. My father baked everything right at the shop and upstairs. When I took over, I got us some restaurant contracts and bought the Brooke Street kitchen, and we're finally making enough to pay off the loan."

"You're right." And he was. Sean understood what Joe was saying. Many small companies failed to make the transition to larger operations, and Dippolito's was doing *well*, not badly. "Look, Joe, I don't want Dippolito's to change. I'm not suggesting you do change. I love everything about your operation, I love the people, the place—and your emphasis on quality most of all. It's brilliant and successful and... I just think you can do something really special and, well, I guess I want to be part of it."

Joe put his forehead in his hand. "I wish you would just talk to me about these things before you run out and do them."

"Every time I try, you shut me down."

"And you're not used to being shut down, are you? But maybe that's what I gotta do. I have a lot of responsibility. More than half my family depend on this bakery. They have mortgages, kids, cars, some have college loans. Take Freddie. He has a wife in a wheelchair and two kids. She works in the office over on Brooke. The oldest kid needs braces. This is the real world and not some marketing exercise. People depend on me and I can't take crazy chances with the business."

"Not all chances are crazy. Some are opportunities."

"Like you. And me. I get that, you know." At least Joe no longer looked angry. He was trying, and he was sorting things out in ways Sean found revealing.

Sean grinned. "Will you let me tell you about an opportunity that's even better than me?" The look Joe bestowed said he didn't think he would escape *without* hearing it. "Buy Renard's bookstore. Connect it to Dippolito's and make it into a coffee shop."

"A coffee shop? There's a coffee shop down the street next to Trader Joe's."

"Yes. And it sells crappy donuts. It's a competitor. It steals business. What's the most common question—aside from 'What do you call that?'—we get every day? It's 'Do you serve coffee?'"

“I get that. Believe me, I hear it more than you do. People want a cuppa to go with their cannoli as they ride the trolley to work. We tried coffee a couple years ago. A coffee pot, some cups. But people want sugar, and cream, and flavors—and places to sit. It took up space, there was paper everywhere and spills and... it became too much of a problem.”

Sean leaned forward. Couldn't Joe see that this was not just an opportunity, but a golden, once-in-a-lifetime shot at redefining his bakery? “But that's what Renard's bookstore is. Space. Imagine what you could do with it. The possibilities are endless!”

Joe laughed and shook his head. “You're hard to argue with, but if I bought that building, I'd have to renovate it. Buildings and renovations cost money, and the only thing I have to offer a bank as collateral for a loan is the bakery. Or the Brooke Street kitchen. And I'm not leveraging the business.”

Then that was that. Joe wasn't going to budge. He sat here on Sean's couch looking as solid and unmovable as an offensive lineman. Nothing that looked even remotely risky was getting anywhere near his baby. Dippolito's might not grow, and it might not shine as brightly as it could, but it was as safe and well-managed a business as Sean had ever encountered. He smiled and acknowledged defeat.

“I'm still going to throw ideas at you.”

“And I still want to hear them. I want you to believe that, because it's true.”

“Maybe we should pull out of the Cannoli Festival.”

Joe stared at him in disbelief. “Did you hear my mother? There's no way we're not going to be there! No one crosses a Sicilian when she's got her heart set on revenge. She's been on the phone all morning. She'll have the whole clan up in arms by the time I get home.”

“Are you serious?”

“You got to understand, it's a matter of family pride. It's personal now. We're going to have to show up and we're going to have to win. Nothing short of that will put this vendetta to rest.”

What had he set in motion? There was no way in the world anyone could guarantee a win in a contest involving judges and food. Especially if one's nemesis was a shady baker with underworld connections. Maybe those connections had frayed over the years, or died. Sean hoped so. He also hoped the Mafia was far more interested in drugs and gambling than bakery.

It was time to take a gamble of his own. He leaned toward Joe and locked eyes with those questioning brown ones.

“So maybe we can put this behind us, or forget it ever happened?” To emphasize the peace offer, he extended his hand.

“Behind us is good, as far as we can.” With a shy grin, Joe took Sean’s hand and lowered it to the couch between them, where he held it warm within his own. “But you’re going to have to deal with the fact I don’t forget things. It’s not just the family tradition of revenge. I told you—I’ve got one of those minds that remembers stuff. Recipes, addresses, names and faces of people. I can tell you every grade I got in every subject and also who I sat next to. It’s pretty useful. But I also don’t forget some things I wish I could forget.”

“Like what?”

“The time I woke up in a hotel room and found out the guy I’d picked up at the club had made off with my wallet and watch. If I ever see that fuck again, I’m going to wring his neck. I had to call Freddie to come pick me up.”

Sean laughed. He had his own trove of tales of misadventure. “I had a guy walk out on me at Olive Garden. He said he had to use the restroom and never came back. I even went into the bathroom to be sure, but he was nowhere to be found. For two days I called him and got no answer, but then Jill called him and... he told her he thought he might be gay but decided he wasn’t.”

“Kind of impolite not to let you know.”

“At least he got a free meal out of it. He finished his entrée, just didn’t stay for dessert.”

“And then there’s me—the guy who never got his entrée. As I recall, you said there’d be pizza.”

The oven had beeped. He’d ignored it. “Oh gosh, I am so sorry—”

“I didn’t come in for the pizza.”

Was that a glint in Joe’s eyes? Sean decided to pounce on the opening and leaned forward. “What did you come in for then? The beer—or me?”

“I’m not sure. Something I needed to find out.” Joe’s teasing smirk faded as his gaze searched Sean’s face. “I’m not sure I can do this, whatever it is we’re doing. I just know that I want to.”

He wasn't talking about the Cannoli Festival. He was talking about *them*. Sean was so relieved he threw himself at Joe, straddling him and pressing a kiss on the surprised man's lips. Just as he was thinking he'd made a mistake that would send Joe running from his house, he felt Joe's arms reach around him and pull him in. The warm soft lips he remembered welcomed his and then answered hungrily. Sean's hands went to work, tugging open Joe's white jacket while the other man's hands worked loose Sean's shirt and lifted it up. Sean mouthed Joe's lips, his face, tracing the strong line of his jaw, then dipping to explore the corded and wonderful hollows of his neck. Joe smelled so good, clean and male, and his big hands were laying claim to large expanses of Sean's body. Sean insisted on taking off Joe's chef jacket and then the T-shirt underneath. As he'd suspected, Joe's chest boasted a generous pattern of black hair over well-developed muscles, narrowing beneath his pecs like a silky funnel into his pants. Sean grinned and ran his hands over the dusky curls.

"Guess you don't mind all the hair." Joe's breath warmed Sean's neck.

"No. I like it." Lots of men preferred their partners to be smooth, but Sean liked chest hair—all the more because, well, he didn't have any. Or rather, he had seven. Seven chest hairs. He slipped out of Joe's embrace and sat up. "Look at me. I have so few chest hairs I've named them."

"You look perfect, Sean." If Joe's voice were any huskier, it would be a growl. "I can't believe I'm with a guy like you. You're the whole package. Education. Good looks—"

"Average looks. I'm average."

"Not on this planet. But then you are from Bumblehump—"

"Wisconsin."

"That's what I said."

With a grin, Sean moved his hands to Joe's pants. He licked his lips and watched the expression on Joe's face change as he understood. "You know what? I think both of us have been a little... cock deprived."

Joe was breathing heavily now. "Cock deprived?"

"You know."

"Yeah, it's a very serious condition."

Sean eased Joe's pants over his hips and down his thighs. He then stood to divest himself of his pants also. That done, he sank to his knees and took hold

of Joe's cock, already stiff and standing up for attention. One of the wonderful things about cocks was that they knew what they wanted. Joe's wanted to be stroked and admired. Just the heavy feel of the veined shaft in his hand, and the scent rising from Joe's dense bush, redolent of musk and male, was enough to drive Sean wild. He ran his tongue around the cock head, teasing its beautiful, flared ridge, wetting it before he wrapped his lips around the tip and gave a long lick to help take it deep. He hummed with pleasure when Joe wrapped a hand around his head, fingers threading through his hair, signaling him to continue.

Yeah, Joe wanted this too. The wet, hot, sucking pleasure Sean could give him. He slurped and hollowed his cheeks with suction and used every trick he knew until he had Joe clenching white-knuckled handfuls of the cushions.

“You got a frigging degree in cocksucking too? Fuck. Slow down...”

Sean did. Joe had given up on holding his head, so he drew back and stopped sucking, though he continued to lick, working his way all around Joe's cock and down to his balls. Big and round and warm in a cozy nest of fur. “I can't help it,” he explained. “It's what happens when I'm cock deprived. Besides, you really need this.” He began to lick Joe's full balls, rolling the left one with his tongue while fisting Joe's cock.

“Oh yeah, I kinda do—”

The way Joe's hips bucked up, shoving his cock in his face, was so needful Sean saw no point in teasing him too long. He didn't want to frustrate Joe, only drive him wild and then enjoy the results. Like having Joe's big body moving under his hands and feeling the taut swell of his buttocks, the powerful surge of his thighs as he dug in his heels to lift for more contact or less, and hearing his pleas for mercy or more—because Joe didn't know what the hell he needed anymore.

But Sean knew exactly what he wanted. Leaving Joe's balls wet and high, he sheathed his teeth with his lips and plunged down again on Joe's cock, sucking and licking and giving the other man what he needed. He knew he was right when Joe grabbed his head again and held him to it, demanding completion. A single guttural cry announced Joe's ejaculation, a jerk of the hips accompanied by the hot thick pulse of bitter semen across Sean's tongue. He swallowed in gulps and stopped his sucking, though he continued to ever so softly lave Joe's cock. He damn well loved that cock, at least at that moment. He loved that cock and the hot, gasping body it belonged to.

Joe's hand moved across his hair, petting him like a spaniel. There was something tender in that gesture, something utterly personal.

When Sean looked up, Joe lay sunk into the sofa cushions like a man well fucked and wore an expression so seriously adoring it struck him in the heart. A man like Joe who took things seriously was going to be the same way about sex. Such a look should scare him. Instead, it made him feel happy.

"Come here." Joe's delicious growl summoned more than Sean's body to rise and straddle his thighs. Joe tossed away pillows and wriggled around until he found the position he wanted. "Closer. You're too far away." He reached around and grabbed Sean by the ass, hauling him up onto his chest and shoving Sean forward. Sean braced against the couch and realized his dick was pointing straight at Joe's face. "Yeah, like that."

"Feeling a little cock deprived yourself, are you?"

"Well, you took care of some of that—but there's no way I'm going anywhere without getting a taste of you."

Sean gasped as Joe's strong tongue set to work. He'd wondered how Joe might be at sex, if he would be rough or gentle, awkward or experienced. Joe was all of those things, a heady explosion of raw enthusiasm coupled with a generous mouth and what had to be the world's most limber tongue. Sean's cock was being wrapped in muscle and pulled straight into heaven.

"God, Joe!" The words tumbled from Sean's gasping lips.

Afraid of coming too fast, he tried to pull back but Joe had planted his hands on Sean's ass and was kneading his buttocks, holding him fast. Whatever blood wasn't already in his dick rushed straight to it. Sean sagged into Joe's rhythm, focused only on pleasure. He hadn't been with another man sexually in months and, better yet, he loved it when the other man seized control. When Sean felt Joe running a finger between his butt cheeks and down across his hole, he nearly lost it then and there. Maybe Joe knew that, because he stopped sucking on Sean's cock and smiled up at him.

"Look at you. I think you like that." Instead of sucking Sean's cock, Joe now grasped it with his other hand. Firm. In control. He simultaneously flicked a thumb across the wet cock head while rubbing at Sean's anus. Sean quivered with anticipation.

"You're a tease. You could have just asked."

“Yeah, well—” Joe pushed with his finger until the tip entered and Sean pushed back with a happy groan—“I guess I’m asking.”

“Yes.” Sean loved the way Joe’s finger stretched him, the intimate burn of penetration. Being fucked was his favorite thing of all, and even if they didn’t quite get to that this time, he liked knowing it was on the table.

He clamped his knees hard against Joe’s ribs and pushed back eagerly, greedy for more. Between Joe’s finger working in his ass, finding and then massaging his prostate, and the glorious friction of Joe’s fist encasing his plunging cock, Sean reached the edge and pushed off. An orgasm that seemed to start in his toes rocketed to his cock and balls and exploded. He jetted come into Joe’s cupping hand and his ass bucked and clamped on the finger within it. He might have cried “Fuck yes!” out loud. He wasn’t sure about that. He rode that wave while it lasted, and then he scooted back and sank gratefully down upon Joe’s broad body. “God, that was good. You’re amazing.”

Joe kissed his head and nuzzled his hair with a few more. Their heartbeats tapped at each other through their ribs as their bodies settled back to normal. A few minutes passed before Sean turned so his face tilted toward Joe’s. The smile in the other man’s eyes convinced him to lean in for a kiss. Their lips met for a deep, slow communion.

“I think you’re pretty amazing too. I guess it’s been a while for both of us.” Joe’s gaze lay warmly on his.

“Yeah. I mean, for me, I haven’t been in a relationship since... there was a guy I was seeing for a while a year ago, but he took a job in Atlanta and I still had Montgomery Whelan so... anyway, it turned out once we weren’t seeing each other or having sex, we didn’t miss each other. I was perfectly happy without him.”

“At least you had someone for a while. I’ve never had someone who was like a date or anything. It’s not like I could bring them home to meet the parents or anything like that. I only told Mom two years ago and Dad never knew at all, or if he did he never talked about it. All my life’s been in a closet.” Joe tugged him closer and Sean burrowed deeper against him. “So I go to these clubs, the ones I know and the ones I find out about, and I pick up guys and it never leads to anything but sex. I guess they don’t look at me like the kind of guy they want to take home either.”

“So you’ve only had one night stands?” Sean found that incredibly sad. Joe was exactly the kind of man anyone would want to take home.

“Sounds awful when you say it like that, but yeah.” For a long moment, they listened to the sound of a snow blower somewhere outside. “It’s strange because I can remember all their faces, but I never knew anything about them and they never knew anything about me. We’d talk about things, but never anything that mattered. When I look back, they’re all like ghosts.”

“Joe—” Sean sighed against his chest—“I don’t want to become one of those ghosts.”

“No way. You live and walk around inside my head. You fuck with my business and you met my mother. You’re all real.”

“That’s good. Because I’m not one of those people who goes from man to man. I’m always looking for something more—” *permanent*—“stable.” That worked. As relationship words went, stable sounded pretty open ended.

“Are you telling me you want a second date?”

“Yeah. But first let’s wash up and I’ll put that pizza in the oven.”

Joe’s laugh vibrated through his chest wall. Sean thought it the most wonderful sound in the world.

Chapter Nine

The week after Easter was traditionally a quiet time for the bakery, which meant it was perfect for Mama Jo to make her move to her spiffy new apartment in the luxurious Winchester senior community, which the Dippolito clan called “Winchester Cathedral”. It fit the appellation. Sean, who’d been recruited as family through some kind of invisible network, looked out the window of Freddie’s truck at the complex of buildings outfitted with towers, battlements, dormers, and pennants flying atop turrets. The entrance was built like a gatehouse complete with portcullis. The only thing missing was a moat.

“It’s a freaking castle!” Sean’s exclamation earned him a hearty laugh from Freddie, with whom he had paired for that trip. Joe had stayed behind to deal with cleaning up and figuring out how to move his mother’s television.

Freddie chuckled. “If there’s ever a zombie apocalypse, this will be our last hope. I’m not kidding. I can just see the oldsters kicking zombie ass.”

Freddie took the service road and pulled up to a loading dock. A brace of Dippolito cousins—nineteen year old Katelyn, and her brother, twenty something Tony—jumped to their feet and helped unload. They vied back and forth about how high and heavy to load the Winchester’s platform hand truck.

“If you make it too heavy, then you can’t push it alone. Uncle Freddie, tell him if he hits a wall he’ll have to pay for the damage.” Katelyn tried to lighten the load by removing boxes but her brother would have none of it. For every one she removed he seemed intent on adding two.

“Well, it won’t be me or Sean here paying for any damage, I can tell you that.” Freddie heaved the last of the boxes onto the dock. “And if you ask my mother to pay it, me and your Uncle Joe will have both your asses. *Capiche?*”

“There won’t be any damage!” Tony pushed the fully loaded hand truck forward, blocking his sister from running in front of it at the elevator doors. He shot her triumphant grin.

“We got a couple more things back at the house.” Freddie shouted as he waved a goodbye. “Tell your Aunt Angie, Joe’s working on that television but he’s about to have a stroke.”

“I’ll tell her!” Katelyn shot her brother an evil look and raced for the stairwell.

“Hey!” Tony held out his hands. “Uncle Freddie! This thing’s fucking heavy! She’s supposed to help!”

“Not my problem, big shot. She warned you, so now you get to hear about it the rest of your life. Sean and me got to save Joe from being crushed by a TV. We’re out of here.” Freddie jumped down and Sean was right on his heels. Last thing he wanted was to be pressed into service by the younger Dippolito.

After they’d climbed back into the truck and were on their way, Freddie flashed him a grin. “Bet you never thought you were signing on for this.”

“Not in a million years,” Sean admitted readily. He’d wanted a change of pace from his high-pressure job and disapproving mother, but he hadn’t counted on being pulled into the coils of a big Italian family.

“It’s going to be different for Joey, having the place to himself.”

Sean bit back a smile. This was Freddie’s latest attempt to fish. Might as well do a little of that himself. “Has he ever lived on his own?”

“Nah, never. Not that that’s unusual. Italian mothers make it easy. They want their boys home until another woman can take over the responsibilities. I lived at home ’til I married and Joey never had a reason to leave. Angie, though, soon as she got out of school and started drawing a paycheck, she got herself an apartment. Not that Mom would’ve kicked her out. She didn’t like Angie moving out like that but I’ll be honest, it was a good thing for both of them.”

Sean looked out the side window at the yards of the subdivision lining the road. Though snow covered the lawns from the late-season storm, the sun had returned. Pretty soon forsythia bushes as large as garden sheds would overflow with yellow flowers. His mind was on other things. Would Joe take well to living on his own? His own move into solitude had been more gradual, involving college dorms followed by off-campus housing. He’d moved into his own apartment when Dan and Jenn married, and from there into his own house. Society’s safe, step-by-step road map to an independent and productive adulthood. He’d lived most of his life by the book, except for being gay. And even that...

It was painful to realize how, until now, he’d been so completely conventional. He’d dedicated himself to the pursuit of high grades, hot boys, an Ivy League education, an artsy career in a field that accepted his sexual orientation, a house in a gentrified neighborhood. He’d even kept his parents’ disapproval at bay by moving out of state, ensuring no one in his family had to

confront his homosexuality head on. And he'd made Jill Montgomery a lot of money. He'd made a lot of money for himself. But what did he have to show for it? His house, he supposed. His grandfather had been right about real estate being a sound place to park money. But what else did he have? He had a Brandie sitting on his shelf, but the marketing campaign for which he had won it was already obsolete and the company's stock was plunging because, however glitzy, their product had been shit.

Nothing in his life bore any resemblance to what Joe had in Dippolito's, or the way the man was trying to fit being gay into a life that included so many other people. Sean couldn't say at all if any of the other workers at the bakery knew about their boss's sexual preference. If they did, they were silent and if they didn't, Joe liked it that way. And while Freddie and Angie knew about Joe, they most likely didn't know for certain about Sean. Joe was way too private to ever share something that personal. Sean decided it was time to take another one of his creative chances and looked back at Joe's pudgy brother.

"I'm gay, you know."

Freddie didn't swerve in traffic. He never even blinked. His hands on the wheel remained steady as rocks. "Yeah, Angie and I figured that when you were all into decorating cakes. No straight guy we know gives a crap about making flowers out of icing. But then a few nights ago Mom came downstairs and she heard you and Joey going at it in the break room. The next morning she told me about it and said, 'I think Sean's gay.' And I said to her, 'Well, yeah. And he slept in my old bed last night, but how is that a problem?'"

"That makes no sense."

"Hang on there. It makes perfect sense. I don't need that old bed so what does it matter who sleeps in it, and Mom needs to realize Joey doesn't need her—" Freddie glanced over for just a moment—"I don't mean that in a bad way. I mean maybe hearing the two of you together made her realize Joey's fully cooked and kissing guys, and she can't do nothing to change that. I'm not sure it was one hundred percent real to her before." Freddie stopped talking as he drove around a pickup truck making an eventual right. "It's not been easy for any of us to wrap our heads around this gay thing. The way we grew up... it's a big change, huge, like changing religions, only we didn't—except where Joey's concerned. He didn't tell us for a long time, probably because our old man would have killed him, so we've had to adjust. And Mom's been beating herself up, trying to find a way to put Joey back in the oven."

After another pause during which Sean thought it best to say nothing, Freddie continued. "A mother's love is the most powerful force on Earth, Sean, its right up there with the angels. A mother doesn't ever give up as long as she thinks her boy is going to suffer. It took her a while to realize Joey'd be okay. He's got a good heart and a good head, and he's not stupid about the sex stuff. I think maybe it woke her up a little to find out the guy he fancies isn't degenerate or crazy. He's a guy who went to Wharton and for some dumbass reason comes to our shop every day to decorate cakes, work his ass off, and make Joey happy."

It was a lot to digest. Nothing about Joe's family resembled the one Sean had grown up in. His mother and father's disapproval was less open, an icy dismissal of their relationship. "I'm just glad they're talking again."

"Oh yeah. It was pretty bad. But they'll be okay now."

"She showed me family pictures."

"Holy fuck! You're all but adopted." Freddie cast him another sidelong, concerned glance. "She tell you anything else?"

Sean relaxed into the seat and propped his arm on the window. "My lips are sealed."

"Fuck. Okay, brace yourself. It might take both of us to keep Joey from killing his mother if he's having trouble with that TV. I don't know why the hell she won't just let us dump it and buy herself a nice flat screen!"

Joe was waiting for them wearing gray sweatpants, an Eagles sweatshirt, and a layer of sweat and dust. His hair stuck out all around his head. The TV sat on the upstairs landing, looking well hated. Mama Jo was adamant about wanting the television to make the move with her. As she'd explained it, where else was she going to put all the framed photos of her family?

It took an hour for the three of them to wrestle the ancient console down to the loading dock where the truck waited. Sean found himself wishing he had gotten a degree in geometry and physics. Better yet would have been the body of a professional weightlifter. The television weighed a ton and its size necessitated the invention of winches and levers on the spot. It took borrowed rope, knots learned to earn Boy Scout badges, and the strength of guys who'd hauled stone blocks up the sides of the Pyramids to get the damn thing down the stairs. By the time they'd managed to heave it up into the truck, they were sweaty, frayed, and exhausted.

Sean looked at Joe, who looked at Freddie, who said, "Screw Mom. Angie's got her unpacking china. Let's grab a pizza at Calzone's and cool off. It's fucking rush hour."

They closed up the truck and walked to the small pizzeria two blocks over. The place had plenty of customers but most gathered at the takeout window. As they wound their way to the tables at the back, the rotund man making pizzas looked up and gave a shout.

"Hey, Joey Dipp! Freddie Sneakers!"

Joe raised his hand. "Flipper!"

"Flipper?" Sean asked.

"He flips pizzas. He's really good. Should watch him sometime." Joe pointed to an open table along the wall.

They'd no sooner taken a seat than Flipper strolled over. He was as wide as two of his tables. "How about all that snow? Bets on how long it takes to melt?"

"Four days," said Sean. When all three men stared at him, he added, "That's how long it takes. Here."

"He's from Wisconsin," Joe explained.

Something clattered in the kitchen, and Flipper looked around to see what it was. Apparently it was nothing important because he resumed the conversation. "So Renard tells me your mother's moving out. You staying in the upper, Joe?"

"That's the plan."

Flipper gesticulated to his staff and told them to bring the table a pizza. "That's good, 'cuz if you moved I'd miss seeing you guys around. Renard's moving too, I hear, soon as he finds someone to buy his store. Probably no one will want a bookstore, but the property's in a good location. Did he tell you he plans to follow your mom out to Chester County?"

Freddie chipped in. "He's been sweet on her for years. After his wife died at that nursing home, he started coming over for dinner two nights a week. He probably wants to keep up the regular meals."

"Well, he certainly won't be making up the difference here for much longer. Told me something else, though. Is it true Dippolito's is going to be in the Philly Cannoli Festival this year?" Flipper's round face peered down like a greasy moon.

Sean watched the brief passage of resignation across Joe's tired face. Freddie, on the other hand, looked amused.

"Yeah," Joe admitted. "We're in this year. It's a great opportunity." He was being gracious. Sean wished he really believed it. To his surprise, Joe pointed his way. "Hey, this here is my personal marketing assistant, Sean. You should get to know him. Before long he'll be buying you T-shirts and signing you up for festivals."

A great laugh rolled out of Flipper. "Dippolito's T-shirts? I would buy one and wear it with pride! I support all the locals. Hell, I give Calzone's shirts to my staff. Advertise!"

"You interested in a street festival in Manayunk?" Sean asked. It was worth a shot and he liked Flipper.

"Manayunk? No. But if you hear of one in this area, I'm all ears. And if there's any way I can help out for your festival, Joe, let me know. Here's your pie, guys. Enjoy." Flipper cheerfully went back to his kitchen.

Sean grabbed a triangle of pie and lifted it to his mouth. Pizza was a savory tradition he understood. Cheese, pepperoni, and mushrooms—chewy, spicy and hot from the oven, pizza was the perfect food. He grinned across the table. "Joey Dipp, eh?"

"You don't get to call me that." Joe cast a sour glance in the direction of Freddie's chuckle. "Come on. It sounds dumb. I can't stop people like Flipper from saying it, but I can stop the both of you."

"I think it's great. And Fred here is Sneakers."

"Because I'm sneaky. I stole Flipper's younger brother's girl, but he got over it after she dumped me for some loser in Jersey." Freddie looked unrepentant. "Just water," he said to the kid who had just gotten around to asking for their drinks.

They all said water. A day of moving had left them thirstier than camels. After a few minutes of silence, but for the happy sounds of chewing and grunts of pleasure at the food, Sean had an idea.

"I think we should come up with a flyer."

Joe stiffened and his gaze shot to Sean's with a warning, but he had his mouth filled with pizza. Freddie seized the opening.

"What kind of flyer?"

“For the festival—” Sean darted into the explanation—“to let people in the area know we’re taking part. Maybe some will show up. It helps to have fans in attendance and it would be nice to see some friendly faces besides our own, right?”

Fred grabbed another slice of the pie. “He’s got a point, Joe. A flyer might be a good idea.”

Sean wanted Joe to think so. He watched for his reaction. Joe sighed. “When I said I wanted you to tell me things first, I didn’t mean in front of other people. You don’t need allies. And it is a good idea. Can you design one? Something simple that won’t cost too much? If possible I’d like to fit it into our advertising budget.”

“Yes.” Finally! Joe was giving him the green light on something he could sink his teeth into. He had updated graphics software on his computer at home. And there was an online printer who could do the job cheaply—

“And, Whelan?”

Sean crashed back to earth. Joe was still talking.

“Check with Gina—that’s Freddie here’s wife—to see who we use for printing. I think it’s Babcock, right?” Freddie nodded to Joe’s question. “I like to keep work local.”

“I can get it cheaper on the internet.”

“Yeah. I know.” Joe appeared to be watching Flipper, who was at that moment tossing a huge disk of pizza dough in the air to the applause of admiring customers. “And my customers can buy bread cheaper at the Giant. I think it’s important to support smaller businesses and local guys. Price is important but it’s not the only consideration. I like the personal touch. Knowing the guy I’m doing business with makes the community richer and stronger, and me only a little poorer.”

“You got it.” Though Sean had known all along Joe was his boss, at that moment he felt it. It had been easy for him to dabble at working in a bakery. Menial work was a good way to avoid really allowing someone else to be in charge of him. He could always leave the job.

Except now he knew he couldn’t. He wanted to ace this job more than he’d ever wanted anything, and he wanted to do it for his boss.

After finishing the pizza, they walked back to the bakery. Dusk had settled over the town, changing its complexion. Restaurant signs blossomed along the

street, and the passage of a trolley, its interior lit to show a few passengers occupying the mostly empty seats, was surreal. The bakery lights were off and Jordana had just locked up. Joe intercepted her and had a short conversation at a waiting minivan with her mother, probably thanking them both, before sending them on. He came back to join Sean and Freddie, but stopped Sean from walking to the front of the truck.

“Dropping this stuff off will take half the night. There’ll be plenty of help at Winchester Cathedral and, well, I think at least one of us should get a good night’s sleep.”

They didn’t want him to tag along. “Sure,” Sean said.

“Hey, Sean.” The wide back end of the truck shielded them from Freddie’s view. Joe braced one arm on the truck and raised the other to touch Sean’s face. The gentle pressure of Joe’s fingers made Sean hold his breath and not move. “I would rather spend another night with you.”

“Really?”

“You have no idea.” Joe leaned in and their lips met. Hot and stolen, the kiss warmed Sean to his bones. When they broke, they smiled into each other’s eyes. “Climb in,” Joe said. “We’ll give you a lift.”

They dropped him off on the street in front of his house. “Nice house,” said Freddie, sounding surprised. And then the truck drove on to the bottom of the street and turned, leaving Sean to walk to his driveway and a house with two windows lit by timers. Another night alone, which felt more wrong than it used to. But at least now, for the first time in months, he had work to do. He would spend some time laying out the new flyer and try not to think about how he would rather be with the crazy Dippolitos, unpacking boxes, trading jibes and laughing their heads off. It was ridiculous for him to feel excluded when he wasn’t part of the family.

It was the *business* he loved, the potential to bring something truly special and meaningful into his life. He just had to be careful about it. This wasn’t about a man with whom he had a professional relationship that, just a few days ago, had become complicated—in all the best ways—by sex.

On his way into the door, Sean picked up his mail and tossed it onto the kitchen counter. He looked at it after he’d divested himself of his coat and boots. The usual. A few bills and ads... and a hand addressed envelope from Jill Montgomery. He tore it open to find a check inside.

\$100,000.00

The number required looking at twice. Sean grabbed a root beer from the refrigerator and plopped down on his sofa to make the call. Jill answered on the second ring.

“You told me not to call you, so I’ve been waiting.”

“I just opened my mail. I think you sent me someone else’s check.”

Even through the cell phone, Jill’s laugh sounded bright, though cold as icicles falling on glass. “Oh, Sean, you really don’t know the first thing about the money end, do you?”

“No. I hired someone to make sure I didn’t get cheated on the buyout.”

“I was hurt when you did that. I may be all about me, but I’m not about hurting friends. I never thought of you as anything else. That check is your ten percent of a marketing deal you’re going to be hearing about in a few days. The little company I told you about? Well, because of a few ideas I cooked up with your help, their app caught the eye of a bigger fish. Bigger Fish bought them and loved the ideas so much they wanted to continue the marketing relationship. Just call me Jaws.”

Sharks didn’t come any more opportunistic than Jill Montgomery. “So Jaws, how’s that penthouse office coming?”

“Any day now.”

Sean sank back into the cushions and laughed. “You’re a bitch, but I’m happy you made it.”

The silence on the line made him stop smiling. The gloating was missing when Jill spoke again. “You earned that money. Don’t undervalue yourself, Sean. You always undervalue yourself.”

“Is that why you partnered with me?”

“I knew you’d let me shine. It’s what you do best. Gotta go. Stay in touch.”

Chapter Ten

Joe dragged in the next day looking exhausted. He blamed it on his family and the move. As Joe explained, it had been nearly midnight before they'd managed to find just the right arrangement for Mama Jo's furniture, including the God-awful television which they'd hooked up to cable only with great difficulty and two trips to Radio Shack.

"So you know what she said?" Though Joe had pounded the dough into submission, he looked like he wanted to go another round. "She said 'The picture's off. Maybe I should get one of those flat TVs.'" Joe noticed when Sean couldn't keep down a chuckle. "You knew that was coming."

"Yeah, I kind of did."

"See, that's why it was best you weren't there. Freddie and I were saying some very unkind things about our mother on the way home last night. We needed to vent." Joe shot him a hopeful look. "Would you like to come by my place later? Maybe after six? We can order hoagies and watch the Phils. You like baseball, right?"

Was Joe asking him to hang out? He'd never done it before. Of course not, with his mother living in the same flat. But now... Joe had the flat to himself. And he wanted to spend time with Sean. Kind of like a date, or at least as close to one as Joe was likely to do until he got used to being with another man in public.

"Sure! I can bring something. Root beer? I have a stash of Sprecher's. It's the best."

"Just bring yourself. I'll have Flipper deliver."

After that, for the rest of the work day, Sean didn't need anything more. He wore a big smile on his face and charmed the customers into smiling too with his happy cake decorations. It was Del's birthday and he went to extra effort on a surprise cake just for her, embellishing Roxanne's blue delphiniums with airy little butterflies that delighted Del so completely she planted a big kiss on his cheek. When he left the bakery at two, Sean headed up the alley instead of to the street. After skirting snow piles half the size they'd been that morning, he turned the corner and made his way to State Street, then walked down the block of buildings toward Dippolito's again until he came to The Book Stop. After pausing at the cracked wooden door with grimy glass and quaint lettering half-worn off, he went in.

The store smelled like wood oil, as if someone had been cleaning something other than the worn hardwood floors or the ancient bookshelves peeling paint and holding a disorder of books. The scent of stories locked away and perhaps never to be read hung in the air. The light would have been better if the big window at the front was not obscured by a half-pulled security fence and at least a decade's worth of dirt. A few beat up tables near the front looked more forlorn than inviting. Not a single customer graced the place, giving it an air of resigned neglect.

Renard looked up from his place behind the front counter. He wore a pinstriped blue shirt and dapper dark gray vest. His thin face split with a smile. "Might I hope you represent a new bakery delivery service?"

"No, Mr. Renard." Sean returned the smile. He looked around. "You'll have to come next door like everyone else."

"I'm sure I will. It's not the same without Josephine, but I can't go long without *pignoli* for my coffee."

"Are you selling all these books along with the shop?"

"If the buyer wants them. But there are no valuable books in this lot. I sold any that were worth anything to a collector. And another guy came through and bought boxes for resale on the internet. These books you see—" he regarded his store and its half-empty shelves sadly—"are just old and unwanted. But old books are still worth reading, if only people would give them a chance."

Sean thought so, too. People might balk at handing over money for battered books... but there might be other ways to make them useful. The shop had good bones, he thought, though his first step would be to get a building inspector in to make sure the structure was sound. He knew Dippolito's was rock solid, and the little boutique next door looked to be in good shape.

"What are you asking for this place?" He watched Renard's face register surprise.

"You mean what I'm selling it for?"

"Yes. I... well, I think I might know someone."

Renard fished in his vest pocket and pulled out a dog eared card. "Here's my realtor. You should know I'm in the position to wait for a buyer. I cannot, however, finance one."

Of course not. It would be foolish to tie up his money in a loan when he needed it to move out to Chester County to be near Mama Jo and enjoy what

was left of his golden years. If he hoped to end up in the Winchester, Renard would need a solvent buyer. Sean had worked out last night what he could afford, and a little research into recent sales on this street left him optimistic. He just needed some figures and to talk with his bank and his grandpa. He owed the old man a call anyway.

He paid a dollar for an old science fiction paperback that promised some bondage and other fun stuff, then left with a smile on his face.

Sean used his time at his house well. Fantasy baseball for one thing. The Bingles pitching needed a little of his time to make a couple of trade proposals. After that he showered and did what he could about his appearance. His hair was a bit on the shaggy side but it was too late now to go for a haircut. The best he could manage was a change of clothes—old soft jeans, a black Michael Gant Henley, his favorite beat up most comfortable boots in the world—and to stuff his laptop and a few other things in his back pack. Deciding it was time to give his car a run, he drove his much loved Toyota and parked it under the carport next to the single car garage behind the bakery. It looked almost at home. He then mounted the stairs and knocked.

Joe answered, and once more Sean was struck by how different he looked in jeans and, this time, a long-sleeved red and gray Phillies T-shirt. “Come in.”

The flat didn't look much changed from the night before when they'd hauled out the TV. Joe had mopped the kitchen floor, maybe, or vacuumed. There was a decent-sized flat screen probably moved from Joe's bedroom, now sitting on top of a cabinet Mama Jo had not taken with her. Otherwise the living room was pretty much empty. Fairly hideous mauve drapes covered the windows looking out over State Street. Some pillows and cushions lay in a heap near the center. A few large and heavy rugs—Turkish, Sean thought, at least the one on top—covered the carpet in front of the TV and looked like the spot from which they'd be watching the game.

“I'm not putting any furniture in here until I get rid of the wallpaper, get some fresh paint, and change the carpet. I'll pick something out this weekend.” Joe sat down first and pulled a pillow from the pile. “Make yourself comfortable.” He reached his arms around Sean, in a surprisingly artful move, pushed him backward and rolled him over onto the pillow. Sean looked up into Joe's grinning face. “I've been waiting all day to get you like this.”

This was promising. Sean locked his legs around Joe's hips and placed his hands on Joe's broad shoulders, doing nothing at all to stop the other man from

swooping down for a kiss. He was already getting hard from thinking about what the night might have in store. Fucking like rabbits still sounded like a plan. He could tell Joe was getting hard too when he bumped his groin up for a little friction.

“Hey, tiger—” Joe grunted against Sean’s neck—“don’t you think we should eat first?”

“You serious? Who thinks of food at a time like this?” He worked Joe’s T-shirt up to expose his chest and flat, dusky nipples. He propped his arms on the floor and pushed his face up into Joe’s soft chest hair, searching with his tongue until he found a tempting jut of nipple and proceeded to latch onto it, licking and sucking.

“Oh, is that the way you want to play it?” That was all the warning Joe gave before he undid Sean’s jeans and yanked them and his briefs down to his knees, something Sean facilitated by lifting his ass off the floor. What surprised him was to have Joe rock back, kick off his own jeans and briefs and then straddle Sean’s shoulders, pinning his arms between his knees. Right above Sean’s face hung the most delicious looking erect cock and firm furry balls.

Sean strove with everything in him to lick and mouth Joe’s tempting flesh. Joe definitely had the advantage, though, and was both fisting Sean’s hard dick and sucking at the tip. Apparently a lifestyle of furtive one-night stands had taught the man how to be devious. By twisting his torso, Sean was finally able to work Joe’s knees back, not only freeing his arms so he could put his hands on Joe’s tight, hard-muscled ass but also giving him a better angle on that meaty cock. Opening his mouth, he took Joe inside, his tongue lavishly stroking. Oh yeah... this was where he wanted to be. Under a hot man, feeling that other body moving with his, filling his mouth. And his own body was starting to gallop to the finish, driving hard, balls lifting and aching and... holy saints preserve him! Sean tried to focus instead on the cock in his mouth. Beautiful. Thick. Slippery with pre-cum and Sean’s saliva. He tipped back his head, taking Joe deeper, and clamped his hands hard on Joe’s thrusting buttocks while he sucked for all he was worth.

He came before Joe, but only by moments. As he swallowed and sucked and hummed with happy fulfilment, he only then wondered if sex had been the right move. Sure, both of them wanted it, and needed it, but... maybe they needed other things more. Like trust. Or doing things together outside of work. This was their chance for that, and it slapped Sean upside the head to realize Joe had proposed this evening as a way for them to do that, not hop in the sack.

Joe changed position and stretched out on the rug at Sean's side. He ran a hand over Sean's hair and looked down at him with an expression both puzzled and adoring. "You look like a kid. It's like sex takes ten years right off you. I can see how you must have looked in high school."

"It's the genes. My father looks younger sometimes, in the right light."

"Whatever you got, it must be some kind of magic. I can't seem to keep my hands off you."

He did a good job of keeping his hands off Sean in the bakery. Joe definitely had inherited some kind of discipline super power. Sean ran a hand down Joe's arm, admiring the flow of hard muscles under the other man's warm skin and body hair. "I love your body. That's why I watch you at work. I love seeing all this. And your eyes. When you look at me, I start thinking of all the things I can't do with you."

"The good news is we're not in the bakery. Maybe now for once we can both think straight."

With a laugh, Sean buried his face against Joe's chest and the soft fabric of the Phillies T-shirt. "That's what I was doing, taking the edge off our appetites."

"Oh, I don't know about that. My stomach is saying it wants more."

"Mine too." Sean sat up and pondered cleaning up before pulling his briefs and jeans back on. He looked around the room. "Do you know if there are hardwood floors under this carpet?" One of the first things Sean had done with his house was tear out all the carpet and refurbish the floors.

"Oh, there are." Joe got up and walked into the kitchen. He returned with some moist wipes. He handed one to Sean. "I think I'll just carpet the place. This room is right above the bakery. If anyone walks around up here, it might bother the customers."

That made sense, though it was shame, really, to waste the decorating potential. Sean wiped off his dick before tugging his jeans back over his hips. Before long he and Joe resumed sitting on the floor, poring over the Calzone's menu and ordering hoagies and cheese fries. Sean hauled his laptop out of his backpack and flipped it open.

"Let me show you my baseball team. The mighty Drexel Hill Bingles. You can help me keep track of my fantasy scores for the night."

“What’s a bingle?”

“A single, when the player gets safely to first base. In Australia, though, it’s a minor car crash. Either definition works for this team.”

“Seriously, you put a lot of time into this stuff?” Joe settled next to him.

“Not just time. Money. If Dan and I win the league, we split a thousand bucks.”

“A *thousand* dollars? How much does it cost you to play?”

“Three hundred upfront. We use the money to draft our players. There’s a commissioner’s fee too. But Dan and I split the cost, so I only paid one hundred fifty.” Sean couldn’t help but grin at Joe’s disbelieving expression that anyone would pay so much for a fantasy game. “Hey, it’s less than I pay for the gym I never go to anymore.”

“Freddie does a football league, some sort of thing on Yahoo. He keeps trying to get me to play but I never have enough time.”

“It doesn’t take much time. See—” Sean showed Joe all his spreadsheets and the software the league used to track categories. Before they knew it, the doorbell rang to signal the arrival of their food.

Joe came back upstairs carrying a bag. They tore it open and spent the next hour watching the Phillies take on the Brewers. During commercials and the more mind-numbing parts of what was proving to be yet another boring Phillies loss, they looked over Sean’s designs for the flyer that would tell the world—or at least the neighborhood—about Dippolito’s taking part in the Philly Cannoli Festival.

“I still can’t believe I let you talk me into that contest.”

“I wasn’t actually the one who—”

“No, you were.”

Joe had a way of calling Sean on his bullshit that was actually quite wonderful. Mama Jo may have set the matter in cement, but she would never have chosen this course on her own. Now that she’d put the family behind the contest, though, there was no getting out. Sean flagged the flyer they’d both agreed on and made a note in his calendar to take the design to Babcock’s the next morning for printing.

Joe turned off the game in the seventh inning. Once the Brewers were in the Phillies bullpen, the game was over anyway. As nighttime quiet settled over the

apartment, broken only by the muffled sounds of light traffic or the occasional slam of a car door coming through the walls, Sean remained snuggled against Joe's body and waited. He didn't want to come across as pushy even though, all too often, he was.

"You want to sleep in my bed?" The question sounded hopeful. "You can be my first."

"First?"

"First guy I ever had in my own bed."

Sean would have done it anyway, but he was thrilled at the chance to leave his indelible mark on the history of Joe's bedroom. He followed Joe down the hall and this time didn't veer off to Freddie's old room. Joe left the light off, and they stripped by the glow of street lights and just a sliver of moon. Joe finished first and took a moment to run both hands over Sean's shoulders and down to the dip of his waist, where he continued to hold him.

"You're so damn hot, Sean. I can't believe I'm touching you." Stubble rasped Sean's ear as Joe murmured against his cheek and the combination produced a shiver that went straight to his groin.

"Then don't stop. Take everything you want." *Tonight. Every night.*

Joe turned him around, Sean's back to his front, and Sean softly groaned at the push of Joe's erection against his ass. He knew how big that beautiful cock was, and he wanted all of it. "Fuck this, Joe. Let's cut to the chase. I want you, all of you. I want you to fuck me."

"You sure?"

"Do you need my cat in heat impression? Yes, I'm sure."

"Yeah, and I want to give you a pounding to remember, but I want to do it right. You're too horny to think straight and I'm not sure where I hid the damn lube." Joe started opening drawers in the nightstand.

Sean smothered his frustration by bending over the bed and howling into a pillow. A moment later, though, when Joe's thick cock slid between his thighs and against his balls to tap at the base of his shaft, he uttered an "Oh yes!" of pure pleasure. "You find it?" He pushed his ass back harder, butting Joe for more as he looked back over his shoulder.

"Damn, you *are* like a cat in heat! Yes, I found it. And condoms too. We're good." Joe dumped a handful of foil packs on top of the nightstand, where they glinted like fitful jewels. Only a couple looked like they might be condoms.

“What are those?”

“Lube. Sample sizes. The kind you can carry in your pocket.”

Of course. Perfect for one night stands and easy to hide from snooping mothers. Sean made an effort not to laugh and was helped when Joe tore open a packet of lube and began to apply it with indelicate precision to his asshole.

“Doing all right?” Joe asked.

“Oh yeah.” More than all right. The simple act of being touched in a place so private made Sean yearn to be opened, possessed.

“I got what you want right here, babe.” Joe proved his case by smearing more of the slippery fluid between Sean’s buttocks before pushing his fingertip intimately inside. Sean relaxed and gave himself over to the finger sliding more easily into him with every circling movement, opening and teasing his tight, aching hole. “Damn, just... you look so fucking hot. I’ve been wanting to do this again since that day at your house when my finger sent you through the roof.” Joe ripped open another packet of lube, probably using his teeth, and Sean felt more cool slippery fluid enter him with each increasingly deeper thrust of Joe’s finger.

There, right there. Oh yeah. Joe had located his prostate and was massaging it with every penetration. Sean’s cock had softened for a bit from the initial burn but now it hung stiff and aching, begging for attention. To his surprise, Joe pulled out his finger and gave him a slap on the ass.

“Turn over on your back. I want to watch your face as I fuck you.”

The next thing Sean heard was the familiar sound of a condom being opened.

Sean wanted that too. Wanted it so much his cock stood at attention as he rolled onto his back and lifted his legs to hook over Joe’s arms, both of them positioning his ass at the edge of the mattress. Looking up, he saw Joe’s broad body backlit by the dim lights from the street, and Sean’s cock thickened to full girth. The man looking down at him wore an expression he’d never seen before, neither tenderly playful nor a player’s slightly superior smirk. Joe was about to deliver a serious fucking.

As Joe leaned over him, pushing his knees toward his chest and opening him further, Sean managed a gasp of “Oh God!” when he felt Joe’s cock, sheathed and ready, at his entrance.

“Want this, do you?”

“Please, Joe!” If Sean could have pushed himself onto that cock, he would have. Joe held him down, pinned and spread.

Joe entered him slowly, a long push into the core of Sean's body. The burn was endless and wonderful, the pressure full and hot and deep. Sean kept his eyes on Joe's face, watching the way his smile of pleasure bordered on a grimace, followed by Joe saying, “God, you're tight. So fucking hot.”

Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. And then Joe did, ramming the mass of his muscular body into each thrust, driving Sean down into the mattress. Sean grappled with Joe's bulging arms and gasped as his legs pushed back until he could barely breathe, but he didn't need to breathe... Joe's cock in his ass was the only thing that mattered, taking them both someplace they needed to go. Hard, so damn hard, and Sean's cock was hard too, stabbing between their colliding bodies.

“Come for me, Sean.” Joe grabbed Sean's cock and fisted it hard, and he was so near the edge he came with a cry of “Yes, yes... fuck yes!” He was flying out of his mind. Hot cum landed on his chest and more on his belly. Joe let go then and reared up, hips thrusting deep and then again before he bent forward with a groan that would have sounded agonized except for the fact he'd just screwed Sean off the edge of the earth.

Joe managed another thrust, then a halfhearted fourth, before he collapsed forward onto his arms and planted a kiss on Sean's gasping mouth. For a moment, they shared the downward slide. Moving up for the kiss only hastened the departure of Joe's softening cock from Sean's now well-filled ass. Even after Joe withdrew and tossed the condom, he felt wonderful, creamy inside and out.

“Look at you, all spread out and happy. I didn't think it possible for a man to look that well-fucked.”

Sean grinned up impishly. “Think much of yourself, Giuseppe?”

“Damn it.” Joe looked down at him with a frown. “Use that name again and we aren't going to be doing this anymore. You realize that's the name my mother calls me when she's unhappy, don't you? Nothing kills an erection faster than a guy who sounds like my mother.”

“I will never knowingly kill an erection. It's against my religion.” Sean rubbed his hands again down Joe's tightly corded arms. “I promise not to call you that if there's an erection in the room.”

“You better not call me that at all, if you know what’s good for you.” With a contented sigh, Joe helped move Sean’s legs over, then heaved himself down on the bed beside him. “Did I hurt you?”

“Not even a little.” Sean knew he’d be enjoying a sore ass for a while, but it would just remind him of the mind-blowing sex.

“I can probably improve my technique.”

“You’re already perfect. Don’t change a thing.” Sean nuzzled Joe’s chest, enjoying the tickle of hair on his nose.

“You’re perfect, too. I look at you and I get hard. Why do you think I make a point of standing behind that damn counter so much?”

They both laughed, though Sean found himself wondering if that were true. Did Joe find him sexy? Not just a gay guy who provided friendship with benefits? The possibility they might actually stumble into something more than that had occurred to him, but only in the same way he started every season hoping the Fighting Phils would win the pennant. In the realm of possibility, but fraught with problems.

Joe stirred, rolling away and leaving Sean craving his body heat. “Let’s clean up. You want to spend the night? I can set the alarm so you have time to run home to change.”

It was an opening he’d hoped for. “I came prepared. I have a change of clothes in my backpack. If you can give me a hanger, I might be able to get most of the wrinkles out of my white pants.”

Joe popped his head around the corner from the hall. “If you were a woman, I’d call you a minx.” He disappeared for a moment and then came back into the bedroom.

“I prefer to think of myself as hopeful.” Sean took his cue and headed to the bathroom to clean up. One look in the mirror made him take a wet washcloth to his chest. Five of his seven chest hairs were glued down by cum. After that, he tended to what was happening down below. When he walked back into the bedroom, he saw Joe holding up the covers.

“Get in here, you.”

Was he doing the right thing? How much professional distance could he maintain if he and Joe became bedmates? In so many ways, sleeping with a man—actually sleeping with him—was far more intimate than having fun with his cock.

They arranged their bodies beneath a blanket and quilt, and their heads on old-fashioned down pillows, spooning until their combined heat created a cocoon of warmth. Sleep came on softly, just like Joe's breath on the nape of Sean's neck.

Two days later a Saturday crowd filled the bakery. Donna Mae, Del, and both Penny and Jordana bustled around each other to serve customers. Sean had just finished restocking the cases with fresh pastries, trading out Freddie's delivered goods for dozens of emptied trays, and was locking up the cupboards in the back room when the door banged open so Angie could rush in. She carried a shallow white bakery box in her hands.

"Joey. Sean. Come here, you gotta taste these. I spent the morning driving all over Southeastern Pennsylvania." She put the box on the table in the kitchen area and popped up the lid. Nestled inside were eight cannoli, each sporting a little toothpick with a masking tape label. "I thought I'd track down the competition. None of them are winning any beauty contests."

Joe surveyed the rival cannoli and their tags. "Stopped by Peretti's, did you?"

"Let me tell you about Peretti's." Angie whipped off her winter coat and threw it on the sofa in the break room. "It's a nice shop, though good luck finding a place to park. Gotta love South Philly. Anyway, I took a number and started looking around. This guy behind the counter asks if he can help me. I say I got a number." She held up the imaginary number so both Joe and Sean could see it. "He says, I'll help you. I said I'll wait. Because I wanted to look around. So when my number came up this guy pushes aside the poor little white-haired clerk and starts hitting on me." She rolled her eyes. "I say I want a cannoli. He says 'For you, anything. I'll give you a Peretti special.' So I said 'The nice lady can get me a Peretti special.' He says 'Not like me.' So this *goombah* laughs, and he picks up a cannoli and sticks a piece of paper in it, and hands it to me free of charge. I get to the car and pick it out and it's his fricking phone number! He put his phone number in my cannoli! Am I expected to eat that? How do I know where those fingers have been? I'm not eating any cannoli made by a guy with penis hands."

"Penis hands?" Sean had never heard the term, although the possibilities sounded interesting.

Joe shot him a look. "You had to ask."

“He needs to know.” Angie was not about to be shut down by her older brother. She turned to Sean. “You know how most men touch their dicks when they—”

Sean nodded, which was Joe’s cue to say, “Yeah, Angie. Sean and I know what men do.”

“This guy wasn’t wearing gloves and do *I* know if he washed his hands? Penis hands. I’m not taking chances.” She pointed at the offending cannoli. “You guys eat that one.”

They each picked up a different cannoli. Sean noticed the Peretti one was being shunned. He broke off a piece of his and put it in his mouth. A bit more sugary than a Dippolito’s cannoli but... it was good. Really good. Joe and Angie had done the same and they were having similar reactions.

“I still like ours better,” Angie said. “But these aren’t half bad.”

“Looks like stiff competition,” Sean agreed.

“I’ll say.” While Angie poked through the box selecting her next cannoli, Sean teased Joe by licking some creamy filling onto his lip, then quickly licked it off again. “That Peretti guy was pushy, but he was cute. Name was Noel. Can you believe it? Noel Peretti. Like some kind of Christmas carol. What kind of mother names her child Noel?”

“Seriously? You can ask that question?” Joe sampled another cannoli. “I’m afraid to go over the speed limit in case I have to show my driver’s license to the cops.”

“Live with it.”

“Does cute negate penis hands?” Sean asked. This seemed important to know.

“No. And I won’t give a chance to anyone related to the asshat that took out Pop Pop’s knee. Right now I want to pop a bullet in Noel’s knee and see how he likes it.”

From what Sean could see, Noel Peretti would do best to not hit on Angie Dippolito twice.

“Flipper said he’d help with the booth.” Apparently Joe agreed things were getting intense. “He has one he uses at some of the park festivals. He’ll let us use his generator and a fridge, too. It’s really nice of him to come through.”

“Flipper loves us.” Angie licked cannoli cream off her fingers. “I’ll be making the cannoli shells at Brooke Street anyway, so I’ll bring those. You just need to bring the cream. Sean here got the flyers, right?”

Sean dashed into the office and came back with a stack for Angie. After looking one over, she flashed a big smile.

“These are great! I’ll get some bodies out to spread them around.”

He’d already put a stack out front and was just thinking he should check them when Donna Mae looked in. “Hey, Sean, someone to see you.”

He walked out to see Dan standing near the cookies, wearing a Packer green parka and with Jenn waving at his side. “Hey, guys!” That his friends had stopped in made an already good day that much better. “Do you have a few minutes? Yes? Come on back!”

Donna Mae let them through the swinging door leading behind the counter and Sean walked Dan and Jenn around to the back. They arrived to see Angie shrugging into her coat and still arguing with Joe about someone having to take a damn bite of the Peretti cannoli.

“How about Sean?” she asked.

He held up his hands. “Hey! I already ate one two weeks ago for test purposes!”

“Fine, I’ll get Freddie to do it.” She wrapped the cannoli in wax paper and shoved it into her coat pocket.

“Dan, Jenn,” Sean intoned. “Meet Angie Dippolito. This is her brother, Joe. Dan Wisniewski and his wife Jenn Sommers.”

“You kept your own name? That’s perfect.” Angie nodded approval. Her eyes drifted down to Jenn’s just slightly protruding belly, wrapped in a pretty lilac wool coat that practically screamed mother-to-be. “Are congratulations in order? Oh my God! When are you due?”

Dan’s shoulders fell, and Sean led him and Joe away from the effusive women to a spot near the big mixer. “Dan, it’s so great you stopped by. See—” he gestured at the ovens, and the racks holding breads and pastries—“this is where I work.” Joe watched him the way he might a poodle who’d slipped the leash.

Dan nodded with what looked like appreciation. “Well, Jenn and I were in the area and I thought I should check out this place. You talk it up so damn much. Sorry we got sidetracked, Mr. Dippolito.”

“Joe.”

“Joe.” Dan bestowed a practiced Wisconsin smile that told Sean he thought Joe was probably okay. Like most Midwesterners, it took Dan a while to really open up. “Sean and I don’t get many chances to see each other since college.”

“The Bingles, right? Your baseball team.”

“Yeah.” The smile grew wider. “It’s what keeps our friendship alive and kicking.”

“Well, your team’s looking like a car crash at the moment, but I think things will pick up when you get Paulson back into your lineup.”

They talked baseball a few more minutes before Joe excused himself to go back out front. Jordana had rushed in to say they were low on cannoli.

Dan cocked an eyebrow at Sean. “He’s a nice guy. I expected him to be older. You’re not working here just for a change of pace anymore, are you?”

“I have to stay at least through the cannoli festival.” But Sean knew Dan had nailed him.

“Right. About that—” Dan looked around and saw Jenn was saying goodbye to Angie—“Jenn and I have decided to come to that, help out if you need it. It sounds like lots of fun and she has a cousin just across the bridge in Jersey. So if you need an extra set of hands, count on ours.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“Hey, free cannoli.”

And that was the gist of it. The big draw of the festival. And the part Dippolito’s intended to ace.

Chapter Eleven

“Here?” Sean looked around, taking in both sides of narrow Passyunk Avenue and trying to decide if their assigned location was a good one. It was early and half of the participating vendor spaces stood empty. The snow banks of the previous month had vanished weeks ago and pansies now smiled from window boxes and planters. A cluster of cannoli stands had been fully erected just north of their spot in what Sean considered prime exposure near a municipal parking lot and the alley where two TV stations had parked their production trucks. The Peretti booth was particularly obnoxious. Foam turrets stood at each corner and red, green and white pennants flapped in the breeze.

“It’s a good spot.” Once committed to the festival, Joe had taken most of the planning upon his broad shoulders. Among other things, he’d coordinated things with Flipper, who had supplied an amazingly quiet portable generator and a roomy mobile refrigerator for the cannoli cream. Three giant vats of cream made freshly that morning and needing only to be prepped sat cooling inside.

Sean wasn’t convinced by the spot, but if Joe was happy that was half the battle. At the family gathering that morning, they’d appointed Joe as General Cannoli. Freddie was Captain Obvious. Mama Jo was Queen Bee. And as much as Angie hated it, she’d been deemed Sergeant Unnecessary. Sean was Private Everything Else. Which was appropriate, because no one else was interested in the things he intended to do.

They’d arrived two hours early and that proved to be a good thing. Already entrants and sightseers strolled along the street but as of yet they didn’t constitute a crowd. The Dippolito team—sans Angie, who had yet to arrive with the shells and the sibling cousins, Katelyn and Tony—had erected the booth and used cheery Italian stripe skirting to cover Flipper’s tables. They’d even hauled in an old cannoli station from the original bakery furnishings, which had been stored in the shop’s basement, for Joe to use. The massive block of olive wood, with depressions in it for bowls of cannoli cream and shells, sat to one side of the stand with the rustic elegance of Italian royalty. Sean ran his hand across the surface, feeling scars worn to a glossy smoothness by use.

“I’ve never been in the basement.” Sean hadn’t even known the place had one. “What else is down there?”

“You think I keep an inventory? Old stuff. Trust me, most of it’s junk. Cake tops for *guido* weddings and that sort of thing.”

Mama Jo touched her fingers lightly to the wood. “It belongs here, in this neighborhood. It belonged to my father’s father, and our shop was just a few blocks from here. When Pop went back to Sicily, I kept it and Nick and I used it until we remodeled the shop. I’m just glad we kept the bowls.” The big, banged up stainless steel bowls sat freshly scrubbed and waiting for use.

“It’s a nice touch, Mom.”

“Nice? It’s perfect. I hope that rat-faced Sal Peretti sees it. See this spot here?” She pointed to a good sized gouge in one of the table legs. “Took Peretti two shots to hit my father’s knee. The first one ricocheted off the bread machine into this table.”

Seeing her somehow made being there seem less like an outing and more like a mission. Even the white Dippolito’s T-shirt with the bakery name and logo boldly plastered on the front that Mama Jo and all the Dippolito team save Joe—who wore his professional chef whites—sporting gave them the look of a small but determined army.

“I like the shirts, Sean.” Mama Jo spread her arms to show off how hers looked. “I told Sal to look for us. Oh yeah. I cornered him in the dining room while he was having his dessert, and I told him, ‘My family’s going to win this year at the cannoli festival.’”

Joe shook his head. “Mom—”

“Not now. I’m telling Sean something important.” Other members of the Dippolito team crowded near. “And Peretti said ‘Oh yeah?’ And I just walked out. Because I wanted him to ask questions. And he did. He knew my name before he finished his carrot cake.”

“Good for you!” said Delphine. She and Donna Mae stood by, wearing aprons over their T-shirts.

Joe rolled his eyes to Sean, as much as blaming him for this fiasco. Sean spread his hands. Was he really expected to know how anything would turn out with this family?

“Don’t we have to meet the judges or something?” Joe asked.

“Yeah.” Sean checked his watch. “Let’s go.” While Joe was doing the pre-festival meet and greet at the end of the block, Sean was going to see if he

could rustle up some press coverage. Jill had been the point person for Montgomery Whelan's media connections, but he hadn't been completely unknown. A few phone calls had turned up Melanie Rawson as one of the television reporters at the event. And strangely enough one of the guys in his fantasy baseball league was head programmer for a radio station and had agreed to try to scare up some air time.

A staccato of running footsteps preceded Angie bursting on the scene. "They blocked the road! I can't drive up with the van. I need help bringing over the shells. I got a million tubs of the things!"

At least there were plenty of willing hands on the scene. A stampede of Dippolitos and other help raced to Angie's aid.

Things were coming together.

"Watch the stand, Uncle Dom," Joe said to the elderly man, who nodded and waved his cane. As Sean fell in at his side, Joe growled to Sean, "You so owe me. And I can't wait to collect."

"A cute family bakery? In the suburbs? I need more than that." Melanie held up her hand to signal she needed silence and listened through her earpiece to something her director in the van was saying. "Okay, Jorell. I'm good for sound." Turning back to Sean, the brunette with soft gray eyes gave him a look of pure pity. "I want to help you, Sean, but the features director wants something with mass appeal. If your friends win, I'll see what I can do to play it up enough for some air time."

Air time for her, she meant. If her story didn't make the cut, she might as well be invisible—and in television visibility was everything.

"How about a family feud?" At least she laughed. He had her attention. "I'm serious. Back in the fifties, when Sal Peretti was just a gangster with ambition, he drove a baker named Angelo Gennaro out of business using corrupt city officials. The final straw was when Sal shot Angelo in the knees."

"Peretti himself?" A glimmer of interest glinted in her eye.

"According to Gennaro's daughter, who saw the whole thing. She's now the Dippolito matriarch."

"Was the shooting ever reported to police?"

"I don't think so."

Melanie marched toward her van. "Give me something I can use. This happened ages ago. Driving a guy out of town isn't illegal."

"Shooting him is."

"True. But there's no record of the crime. Sean, listen," Melanie paused in front of the production truck with its big blue letters, "I'm not an investigative reporter. I'm stuck down here in the asshole called features. I need something visual. Something viewers will stop and say, 'Oh, I want to watch this.' Nobody cares about feuding Italian families." Her cool gaze flicked back to his. "You still good with Jill?"

"Peachy. She's in New York."

"Tell her I said 'Hi'." With a smile as bright as stage lights, she stepped her small tight body up into the truck and closed the door.

Yet another ambitious woman doing her bit of networking. If he got anything for her, she'd help him in a heartbeat. Sean pulled up his contacts and put in a call to Bill. "You're my last hope, Obi-Wan."

"Tell your guy if he wins, I can get him on Chucky's morning show. But I'm doing you better. Chucky's talking up the festival as we speak. I slipped him a voucher for a weekend at the Borgata to make sure your bakery's name comes up strategically often."

"I owe you."

"Yeah, you owe me five hundred dollars—and I don't see the Bingles winning the league this year."

Sean laughed. At least he was getting some coverage out of this. Sports radio was working class gold, and whether or not any of Chucky's listeners checked out the festival, any of them who cared about good cannoli would find out about Dippolito's. He told Bill the check was in the mail and said thanks.

The organizational meeting must have broken up because he saw a herd of men wearing white coats fanning out toward him. Joe was easy to pick out. No matter where he went, no matter what he did, he looked like he belonged. Like now. As he walked with a fellow baker, he listened attentively, his dark head bent slightly toward the animated, gesticulating man, his face thoughtful and handsome and completely at home on a street lined with tiny shops and trendy restaurants, most with Italian names. Someone should take a picture, Sean thought. He wanted that picture. And then Joe noticed Sean standing there and

his face broke into a big smile. He stopped to say something to the other man, who shook his hand before they parted ways.

“It was a very informative meeting,” Joe said. They walked back along the street toward Dippolito’s stand, about which the family—including a few newcomers like Dan and Jenn—looked to be gathered in force. “I found out people know more about us than I thought.”

“Us?”

“The bakery. They don’t know about *us*, as in you and me.” His warm gaze almost made Sean blush. “I would like to keep it that way a little longer.”

Sean stopped walking. This wasn’t even the time, or the right place, for the question, but he asked it anyway. “*Is there an ‘us’?*”

“Of course there is. Unless you don’t want that.”

“No! I mean... I do. I’m just not sure where we’re at.”

“Well, neither am I. But I like it so far. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have exposed you to my family to this extent. Only someone important deserves that much grief.”

“I like your family.”

“And I love them, but they’re a handful. Kind of like you.” When Sean laughed, Joe laid an arm over his shoulder, and they resumed making their way along the lightly populated street back to the stand. “As far as they’re concerned, we’re as good as married. It’s too soon for that, but we kind of rushed the introduction. How long have I known you? Three months? It took Freddie longer to marry Gina, and they had a way better reason to tie the knot in a hurry than any two gay men will ever have.”

More stands lined the street now, being set up by yet more people making more noise. Several shops had opened their doors to welcome early comers for breakfast or coffee. As they neared the end of the block, Sean picked out the bright colors of the Dippolito’s stand. People wearing T-shirts with those same colors milled around it. Someone saw them and immediately yelled. Katelyn raced toward them, long hair flying. “Uncle Joe! We’ve been robbed!”

“Hold on there!” Joe caught his young cousin by the arms to assist her stop. “What kind of robbery are you talking about?”

Sean was wondering the same thing. They were handing out samples today, not dealing in cash. But they did have some equipment on site.

“Someone took the cannoli cream! All of it!” Katelyn grabbed a handful of Joe’s sleeve and tugged him over to the stand, where confusion reigned.

When Sean caught sight of Uncle Dom looking shaken and sitting in Mama Jo’s bright blue all-weather chair, he knew where to start. He walked over to the old man. “What happened?”

Dom wrung his hands and shook his head. “I was just talking to some old friends from the neighborhood. A few old friends. How could I have missed it?”

“Missed what?”

“The rat bastards who took the cannoli cream right out of the refrigerator behind my back. I should’ve been watching—”

Sean clapped Dom on the shoulder and told him it would be all right. He wasn’t sure of that, though. When he turned back to find Joe, he saw General Cannoli running a hand through his hair and looking at the refrigerator in disbelief.

“Who would want that much cannoli cream?”

Mama Jo stepped forward, jabbing her finger down the street. Tears glinted her eyes. “It was Sal Peretti! It’s exactly the sort of thing he would do. Who else could it have been?”

Would it be too obvious to mention they were at a cannoli festival? A dozen other vendors might have use for it—or a reason to deprive them of their product. Angie looked hurt and disgusted, Freddie like he wanted to take someone apart. But Joe just nodded, and Sean could tell he was juggling a hundred things in his head as he looked first from the open, empty refrigerator and then at the wooden cannoli station with its big stainless steel bowls.

“It doesn’t matter right now who did it.” Everyone except Mama Jo fell silent as soon as Joe spoke, and to her he held up his hand and spoke louder. “I don’t care about Peretti! I don’t care who did it. It doesn’t matter! Right now what matters is that we can make some damn cannoli! We have the shells, right, Angie?” She nodded and pointed to the several stacked containers holding hundreds of cannoli shells. “So all I need are some ingredients and I can make up the cream. How long do we have until this thing starts, Sean?”

“An hour, but people will show up early.”

“Then I’ll give them a show. The first batch won’t have a chance to rest, so I’ll have to be creative. Where’s that pad of paper? Here’s what we do.” He

began scribbling, sheet after small sheet, tearing each off and handing it to one of his team. “Freddie, you get over to Calabrese’s quick and buy the ricotta and impastata, and this much mascarpone. You know who to talk to there. Angie, hand him the company credit card. Don’t argue.” He singled out someone else. “You, Katelyn and Tony, there’s a kitchen supply store on Christian street, corner of 12th, get these things, exactly like I wrote them. Tony, you got a card, right?”

In twos and threes, Dippolito relations began racing everywhere. Jean Renard—newly arrived and looking years younger in his T-shirt than he did in a vest—hustled off with Mama Jo, clutching a piece of paper in hand. An entire gang led by Gina in her wheelchair took off for the Italian Market. Even Dan and Jenn got a list of items to procure from the Acme supermarket a few blocks over. Only Dom, Flipper, and Sean remained.

“What do I do?” Sean was as ready to run as the others.

“Everything else. I’m making this up as I go.” If Joe was feeling any desperation, Sean couldn’t see it. All he saw was passion and the cunning of a practiced general mapping out a complicated battle plan. “I have the recipes of a hundred old Italians in my head, so I have an idea for the first batch. It’s going to be a little different, but very Italian and completely delicious. By the time of the judging, I’ll have made up more of our original cream. You—” he pointed to Sean—“be a marketer. Pull out all your stops. I don’t care what you do. Get me some foot traffic over here. Can you do that?”

“Just call me Private Everything Else.”

Sean jogged toward an alley in search of a quiet place from which to make a couple of phone calls. Whatever Joe was up to, he didn’t have ingredients yet. Sean had time to work a little magic. He drew a deep breath and pulled out his cell. His first call was to Bill, asking for a push and the direct call-in line for Chucky’s show. The theft of cannoli cream, while hardly a big deal, was just funny enough to play well on talk radio. Sean could talk that up for fifteen minutes. He followed up that call with one to Jill. If she considered him a friend, let her prove it. Besides, she ate up being one of Melanie Rawson’s rock stars.

“Leave it to me,” Jill said. “I’m dating a network executive for NBC.”

Three minutes later, Melanie called Sean.

“I can get you a camera crew. What do you have for me?”

“Dippolito’s had their cannoli cream stolen. At this moment they’re running all over South Philly on a scavenger hunt for ingredients and are going to be making new cream from scratch. Not to mention there’s a good chance someone will be kneecapped if they figure out who stole it.”

“Stolen cannoli cream? Lord give me strength—”

“It’ll play and it’ll be feature worthy. Trust me. The guy making the cream is hot.”

“Gay hot? Or for me hot?”

“Is there a difference? Viewer hot.”

He was doing it again, making wild pitches. Sure, he thought Joe hot enough to scramble the brain of any human with an active libido, but was it right to sell a man’s sex appeal instead of his talent at his job? Besides, Joe did have audience appeal. He had it in spades. People from all over Delaware County loved the man.

Melanie sighed into the phone. “I better see a kneecapping.”

After hanging up, Sean walked back over to Dom, who looked up at him wanly. Joe was talking earnestly with Flipper while the two men moved the heavy olive wood cannoli table to the center instead of the side of the stand. “Hey Dom,” Sean said. He squatted down beside the older man. “Do you know of any old friends or people living near here who might want to come over and wear a T-shirt? I have a dozen more in the box over there.”

“Sure. I know a few. My aunt Sarah lives just a block that way.”

“Great. Get in touch with her and see how many people you two can get to show up. What about Italian music? You know, the stuff you grew up with.”

“Don’t do it, kid.” Dom shook his head. “You seriously want to play ‘That’s Amore’ near my nephew? He hates it when I sing those songs. He’ll shut it off.”

“No, he won’t.” Sean brought up his favorite music site and opened the search function. “Give me some good ones.” Inside of ten minutes he had a playlist of old favorites sure to warm the hearts of Italian American grandmothers and bring smiles to the faces of tourists. Joe could kill him later. A few other stands were playing music, including Peretti’s, and so would they. He thanked Dom and did a quick phone search for the nearest place he might buy a cheap set of speakers for his phone. Ten blocks. Perfect.

Thank God he'd kept up with his running. He was going to be doing a lot of it.

It turned out Dom's aunt Sarah was a hundred years old. Literally. Though she was too frail to attend the festival herself, she had a sharp mind, a lively tongue, and an address book thicker than a New York phone directory. Sean had picked up colored markers and a stack of big labels, and he stuck one with the words "I Want a Dipp! Dippolito's Cannoli" on every one of Aunt Sarah's many volunteers. Their only job was to walk around the festival looking happy to be there.

The real reason people wandered over to the Dippolito's stand, though, was to interact with Joe as he mixed up cannoli cream on the spot and allowed people, especially kids, to fill their own cannoli. Along with Donna Mae and Del, Flipper helped out and was surprisingly good at engaging children and handling a pastry bag. But it was Joe who shone. He bantered with the bystanders, let them suggest an ingredient to add to their own bag of cannoli cream, adding and mixing and letting them share their results with other patrons. The crowd was steady and happy, laughing and talking and vying for room at the front.

"This is good stuff. Really good," Joe said after tasting the latest variation. He never held back an opinion. "I can tell your grandmother was a great cook."

The lady wearing red gingham beamed. "Oh my God, her ravioli were like pillows—"

As a lively version of "Quando, Quando, Quando" swelled from newly purchased office supply store speakers, Sean made his way over to Melanie, whose camera crew was positioned to catch different angles of the action. "What did I tell you?"

"He's good. The verdict isn't in yet on the cannolis." But she was smiling. "I'm interviewing him in a few. But I love the way he connects with everyone he talks to."

Hadn't that always been the magic at Dippolito's? Personal attention. Homemade products. Being able to talk to the owner.

"It's a great bakery," Sean said. He didn't offer up that he really loved his client. Joe might be focused on the festival right now, on making custom cannoli creams until his own recipe could sit and rest and come to room

temperature under the covered table at the back, but later after all this was done... Sean had plans for how they might unwind.

He saw Angie leave from behind the stand and watched as she snuck around behind the camera crew. Where the heck was she going? Sean left Melanie plotting her interview and skirted the crew until he saw Angie again, engaged in lively argument with a tall brown-haired man wearing a red and white checked T-shirt and black pants. Oh fuck. Those were the uniforms the Peretti bakers wore.

“—then prove it!” Angie was more than in the man’s grill. She looked ready to eat his face.

“I can’t prove I *didn’t* steal something!”

Sean ran up to Angie. “Maybe now isn’t a good time for this.” He gestured to the news crew.

“It’s perfect. Christmas Face here and I are just having a little talk.” The expression on Angie’s face warned Sean his life was now in danger too.

“Who’s this?” Noel put a slight growl behind the question.

“Just Sean. He’s part of the family, so bug off. My beef is with you and your grandfather, who shot my Pop Pop in the knee and stole our cannoli cream!”

“Oh come on! Nobody got shot! And I don’t know who stole your cream but it wasn’t us! My grandfather’s wearing a cheesy crown and conducting audience down the street. He’s eighty years old.”

“Go away or I won’t be responsible for what I do to you next—”

It was a fair warning. When Noel gave Sean an exasperated look, Sean waved him to leave. But when they both turned around, they found Melanie Rawson standing there with a microphone, a cameraperson, and a million-dollar smile.

“So,” said Melanie brightly. “What’s this I hear about stolen cannoli cream?”

Chapter Twelve

Dippolito's made the news. That was the *second* best part of the Philly Cannoli Festival. The best part was when the judges handed a smiling Mama Jo a giant gold-plated cannoli on a stand with a plaque that pronounced Dippolito's as having Philly's Best Cannoli. Despite the odds, Joe's on-the-fly recreation of the family's cannoli cream recipe had won the day. The stolen cream—if anyone had used it—had lacked the secret ingredient Joe always added at the last stirring. He'd had it with him in his pocket flask. The picture of Mama Jo and her family with their trophy in the *Inquirer* was priceless. And suitable for framing.

Being on television was even more fun because Flipper's wife taped it and the family could haul it out for laughs. Or recollection. The segment about the festival was fun and showed the bakery in a great light, but Joe's interview had gone better than even Sean could have dreamed. He hadn't anticipated Melanie Rawson would go for the heart or that she'd find Joe's while talking about investing in community, delivering top quality, and making strong connections with other people. The segment got picked up for replay and led to a feature on community-focused small business in *Forbes* magazine. But it wasn't Joe who went truly global.

Video cameras and cell phones had captured Angie and Noel laying out Sal Peretti's dirty laundry, a spectacle helped immensely when Sal himself barreled in, fist raised, and called Angie a liar—only to be called out personally by Mama Jo, telling her story and revealing herself as Josephine Gennaro. This was followed by Noel shouting at his grandfather, “You *shot* him? You told us you released a basket of rats into his bakery!” So the story came out. It even made the rounds for a week as a color feature on news networks with the headline “Cannoli King Dethroned by Own Crime.”

Jill pronounced Sean a genius (“I had nothing to do with that.” “Take the credit.”). And the story got enough play Sean's family heard about it in Oshkosh.

“Is that the bakery you were talking about?” His mother called the same night she heard.

“Peretti's was the rival bakery. I work for Dippolito's, the one with the guy who got shot.”

“What kind of people are you hanging out with?”

“Good ones. I’ll send you the interview with Joe. I think you’ll like him.”

“I was hoping you’d find another job. A real one. You have so much talent, Sean. I hate seeing you waste it. Kathy and I were talking about you just the other day and saying how much we think you should come back home.” It was the same thing she said in almost every communication.

“I like it here.” He more than liked it. He had no intention of ever going anywhere else. “I’m starting a business. My own business.”

“Another marketing firm? You always were creative. Just quiet.”

“I’m still quiet, but I’ve learned a lot about what’s important and what I like to do. I’m starting a coffee shop.”

Between his buyout from Montgomery Whelan and his check from Jill, Sean had been able to purchase Jean Renard’s bookstore and still have money for renovations. He just wouldn’t have much of a savings account anymore. His mom no more understood why Sean would start a coffee shop than why he would want to work in an Italian bakery. Neither business made any sense to her. She told him being gay didn’t mean he had to throw away his money and his life, and that she thought he was being foolish with both.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Joe asked. It was late afternoon, and they’d finished Sean’s last day of official employment.

There was no place in the world Sean would rather be than nestled against Joe’s body. Especially Joe’s body in bed after sex. The man was as solid as granite. No matter how long their day, Joe always smelled clean, like bread in the oven and toasted pine nuts mingled with just a hint of spicy deodorant that was simply perfect. It helped that the new-carpet smell had faded from the flat.

“Opening the coffee shop? Or selling my house?” Sean spent less and less time at his house and was considering selling it.

“I meant the coffee shop. I wasn’t aware you were selling the house.”

“Just thinking. Angie asked me about it. Did you know she’s seeing Noel Peretti?”

Joe groaned. “Oh fuck. She’s trying to kill her mother, isn’t she?”

“Probably.” Sean had a good grip on Dippolito family politics. “I think it’s a good thing to get stuff like this all out in the open. Everyone can move on.”

“You mean like you leaving me and moving on to run a coffee shop?”

That was Sean's cue to turn up the playful. “No. I'm not leaving you. I'm leaving my *part-time* job with your bakery and taking up a *full-time* position next door as owner of the new Library Café. I figure you won't get bored with me as fast—because we'll no longer be spending all our time together, including in bed.”

“I'm going to miss your help in the morning.”

“Well, I can still help in the morning if you like. Then I'll go over and work in the coffee shop until we close. That'll give you time to look over your spreadsheets.” The more he thought about it, the more he liked his plan. He'd already hired Katelyn for the summer, along with a full time barista already trained on the equipment he'd bought. “We'll see even more of each other once we've opened up the wall between our shops. Customers might like walking over for some coffee, or a cannoli.”

Joe nudged closer and pressed his mouth to Sean's ear. “I'm just waiting on Mike for that job, because it has to be done right. He got the permits and will do it next week. I like the idea. That way if you become more popular than the bakery I can cash in on the overflow.”

Just the thought was enough to make Sean laugh. With the recent publicity, the bakery was doing better than it ever had. Sightings of Dippolito's T-shirts—sold in the bakery—were becoming a daily event. Sean had already put his artist in Chicago on designing something quirky and fun for the Library Café. When the shop opened in two weeks it was going to be an event.

For one thing, he loved the concept. He'd kept many of the old bookcases, had them sanded and painted with fun colors, and planned to stock them with all the bookstore's left behind, unloved books. Café patrons could read books at leisure, even borrow them to take home. Or keep them for that matter. They would also be welcome to bring books they no longer wanted, and Sean would put them out on the shelves for other people to enjoy. Tucked between the book stacks would be sofas, chairs and tables so his customers could be comfortable while they enjoyed a cup of coffee and something to eat from his counter. And for those customers who wanted a quick bite or to watch for their trolley, there was a long counter at the front with seating and barista service. He'd already arranged with Joe to provide the baked goods, including Sean's signature unicorn horns.

Books, coffee, and cannoli. Sean believed he'd found the perfect recipe. And the perfect man.

“You did it right.” His and Joe’s body warmth was enveloping them both in a delicious, post-coital haze. Sean’s thoughts were a bit fuzzy, but the idea seemed important. “You stood your ground. With your bakery. With your family, about being gay—you made them look at you and accept you the way you are.”

“You’re overthinking it. I didn’t do that.” Joe’s sleepy voice betrayed how near he, too, was to dreamland.

“You did. I didn’t. I left home. I made it easy for them. I left Wisconsin altogether. Maybe I call home a couple times a month. To them I’m just out there somewhere, someone they don’t have to think about too much. It’s easy for them to never think about my being gay.”

“Do you think about them being straight?”

“No.”

“Then you’re overthinking it.” Joe wrapped his arms around Sean and pulled him in for a kiss that softly told him just how much he wanted them to be together.

Sean overthought a lot of things. “So... us? I spend so much time over here I thought maybe—”

“You want to move in?”

Had he actually heard Joe ask that question? “Ah... yes, that is where this was headed.”

“I’d like that. Half your stuff is already here taking up Freddie’s old room anyway. Hell, you can have his room for your office.” Joe sounded more excited now than sleepy. “I would have asked sooner but I didn’t want to be the guy who pushed you to move out of a perfectly fine house.”

“Really?” Talk about overthinking things. Sean decided not to retort. He’d just gotten what he wanted.

“You’re my first relationship of any duration. I don’t know what the rules are for that sort of thing. I only know I don’t want to be the one who chases you away when all I’m trying to do is make you stay.”

“Do you realize you’re telling me what you don’t want? I’d really like to hear what you do want.”

Those chocolate-brown eyes looked into him. “I thought you knew. I want a partner. The kind of guy who makes me feel like a million bucks every day and

can put up with the crazy hours and the family, and everything that comes with me. I want you, Sean.”

“You haven’t even met *my* family yet.”

“Yeah, well, maybe that’s a good thing.”

Joe’s teasing smile made him laugh. Sean looped his arm over Joe’s neck and tugged the other man on top of him. “Then it’s your lucky day, boss, because that’s exactly the kind of position I’m looking for. I want the job. Not only am I moving in, I’m staying forever.”

The End

Author Bio

Tali Spencer fell in love with writing at an early age and never stopped. Thanks to a restless father, she grew up as a bit of a nomad and still loves to travel whenever she can. Her longest stint in one place was Milwaukee where she went to college, enjoyed a series of interesting careers, and raised three surprisingly well-adjusted sons. She later married her true love and put down new roots in Philadelphia, where she lives in an ongoing Italian American family sitcom. At least she's learned how make good pasta. When not writing, Tali reads everything from sweet goofy romances to exotic cookbooks, manages her fantasy football team—go Gekkos!—and takes long walks with her loving, if slightly neurotic, poodle.

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THE LAWS OF PHYSICS

By Claire Davis

Photo Description

There are two men in a playroom. The first man—Master—sits naked and erect with his legs spread. He is a vision of physical perfection and male beauty. He holds a riding crop and nonchalantly watches his pet. The other man—Puppy—is on all fours wearing a leash, muzzle, and chains. He has a tail butt plug and is facing Master, with his head down in a submissive pose.

On the floor around them are many mouse traps which have been positioned in a game. Puppy must get past them safely, without making them snap, in order to get to his Master's bone.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

A Master sits with his back against the wall with a waiting "bone" for his pet. However his pet must make his way across the floor covered in mouse traps without getting caught in order to get his bone. They've been here for hours playing this game. It's been a slow go and the Master's pet has been unsuccessful in his first two attempts. What lead up to this wicked game? Is the third time the charm? Does puppy get his bone and a reward at the end? Please say yes! He's tried to be a good boy.

Sincerely,

JenM

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: sex industry, fetish/toys, hurt/comfort, humorous, age gap, first time, geeks, social anxiety, water sports, off-page assault

Word Count: 19,933

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Dedication

“The owl and the pussy cat went to sea in a beautiful pea green boat...” Edward Lear

This story is dedicated to my elegant fowl, for twenty years of floating on that ocean...

A special thank you to V.W. Singer for creating such a perfect front cover.

THE LAWS OF PHYSICS

By Claire Davis

He can't move. He forces himself to be still and concentrate, but all he can hear is his frantic heartbeat and sobbing, ragged breathing. He tentatively moves his head to see a little. It's still dark, but at least the hood's been removed. He peers into the gloom, willing his eyes to see through the inky depths. A dull throb, and he is suddenly aware of his ankles... they rub and hurt... he tries to shift them, but they're held too tightly to the chair. Once he starts stirring, he aches all over. He wiggles his fingers about, trying to slip through the restraints, but just can't get a grip. He can't move. His wrists are held firmly behind him, leaving him exposed and open. He can't move! The panic starts to build again, a galloping thunderous rush through his veins.

“Wolf! WOLF? Can you hear me? I, I don't think this can be right—you've made a mistake. Please, please Mr Wolf, please? Can you just let me go now?”

“Wolf.” He can't work out what happened—can't process it. He can smell bleach. He tries to grasp at one thing. A vision appears—the scarf, yellow swirls and silk. “Is this a joke to get me back for the scarf? I'm sorry, okay? I'll never steal anything ever again—Jesus!” He notices a camera on the wall—aimed right at him? “Are you filming this? Sick bastard!” He wonders how he could have been such a naive idiot. *Stupid!*

His eyes flit round the room again rapidly but can see no obvious means of escape. It's just a small room—like a cell. He can't see a door or a window and thinks of a coffin. He mutters, and swears, and shifts uncomfortably. He's not in pain, but he's naked for God's sake—in front of a camera! He looks imploringly at it. “Hey! Hey you! Can you hear me? Call the police! I've been kidnapped!” There's no response.

As his initial shock fades, the terror, upset, and outrage explode from him. “You fucking monsters—let me out now, or I'll get the police! My friend knows I'm here. He'll call them when I don't text! You'll be done for assault, kidnap, and abuse. Wolf? WOLF! You big, fucking, brainless idiot. LET ME OUT!” But there's a part of him that knows it's his own fault. That he came here more than willingly and signed all the papers. He yanks angrily at the

restraints, hoping to cause himself damage. *Fucking. Stupid. Bastard. What. Did. You. Think. You. Were. DOING?* The anger and spit erupt from his mouth, and for a minute, he mindlessly shakes and wrenches his arms and legs.

The pain in his wrists forces him to calm down. He shuts his eyes so he can concentrate and focus. He must be missing something! What did the paperwork say? *Think! Think! Idiot!* He can't remember—didn't bother to read it, just signed it with a flourish and posted it. *What did they say at the interview?* He doesn't know—too many thoughts and fears all crowding his brain. The stress seizes his brain—his thoughts and senses run together, and it's a noisy riot in there. His only clear thought is that he smells terrible—sharp like vinegar. He whimpers.

Behind him a door crashes open, making him jerk and jump like he's woken suddenly from a nightmare. "Finally!" He tries to turn, but there's a screen, so he can't see. "Oh, thank God! Please, please help me, my legs and arms are tied down, and I can't get free. Can you help me? It really hurts, and I need the toilet." Then, quieter, "Hello?"

"You'll speak when asked and only then. You'll serve us in any way we want. You're a nobody. A thing. From now on, you are the *It*. What are you?" In the silence of the cell, the voice echoes. Freddy says nothing. He screws his eyes up really tightly so he sees stars, feeling the tears slipping down his cheeks.

"Shy? Aw, don't worry—you soon won't be! Can't wait to find out what those lovely lush lips can do!" The man jumps round the screen, grabs Freddy's head in both hands and kisses him. He pouts into the camera and licks his lips. "See you soon, pretty boy!" Then disappears back through the door with "boy" whispering into nothing.

Freddy is completely shocked.

He is literally unable to move. The ringing in his ears turns to roaring, rushing water, and he's aware of the sticky residue of the kiss on his lips—moist and fruity lip balm. His breathing and pulse explode into action, and he screams and screams. It sounds like car tyres, kettles shrieking, and nuclear war. He shakes the chair hysterically, rocking it forward. In his haste, it topples over, and he bangs his head on the floor as he goes down. The door opens behind him, and he feels the wet warmth of urine running down his leg.

One Month Before

Freddy was bored and restless. He undressed sulkily in front of his hall mirror and scrutinised himself. He was pale and slim with dark wavy hair and lots of freckles all over his face and arms. His mum always said he looked like a pixie from down the garden, with his heart-shaped face and dimples, but this just wasn't the sexy look he yearned for! He was completely smooth where he'd shaved last night except for a small bush around his cock, but he might get rid of that later. He looked younger than his twenty-two years and slightly awkward and gangly. He thought about how he could make himself look more desirable—then wondered if anyone else would ever get to see him naked, anyway.

To cheer himself up, he slid on his black leather driving gloves and hefty walking boots. He posed for the mirror—pouting, hand on hip, shaking his arse. *Idiot!* The contrast between velvety-black leather and his white porcelain body was striking though, and he ran his hands over his sides, chest, and nipples. The leather felt much more sensual than his hands—cool, smooth and arousing.

Curiously, he stroked his gloved hands over his thighs and balls. That was very nice! He imagined it was someone else's hands, someone strong and powerful and, yes—definitely male. Freddy got down on his knees and looked back at himself in the mirror. He couldn't stop staring at his arse, twinkling back at him almost cheekily! Freddy sucked on his gloved fingers then tickled his hole teasingly, nudged his thumb in, and cupped his balls with the other. It felt dirty and a bit deranged—so good! He grunted and moaned a bit as he watched his reflection and thought of his favourite porn star. He was flushed and glazed, with his lips parted, his hips slowly rocking. “Oh, yeah, bitch, Daddy wants to hear it,” he murmured. Unable to wait any longer, he fisted his cock fast until he shouted and came all over his hall floor. He sat there for a bit, leaning against the wall with his knees up, staring in the mirror, wishing there was some sultry guy staring back at him.

He pondered again if real men existed, like on the porn sites. Collars, plugs and being bound were his obsessions. He'd always wondered what it would be like to go with a man. More than wondered! He fantasised constantly about being fucked by a man, owned, possessed, perhaps held down while being sworn and spat at. Freddy got through an embarrassing number of books about humiliation and slaves then looked for relevant bits on the Internet. He spent hours every day dreaming about kissing—rubbing his face against bristle and running his tongue over teeth and lips. The men in his fantasies were strong and

surly with big powerful hands. Men in charge, who gave orders and demanded subservience... Masters and Daddies.

He was driving home from work yesterday and saw two men urgently kissing at a bus stop, hands in hair and on hips and cupped round muscular necks. It was this vision that sent him spiralling into such a boil of lust and rage. They looked so hot and so beautiful—desperate and oblivious to anything else—he couldn't drag his eyes away. *Oh, why can't that be me? Why not?* He slammed his foot down straight through a red light and almost crashed. *Stupid!* He'd probably get points on his licence for that. *Idiot!*

His doctor told him he probably had social anxiety disorder. All Freddy knew was that he just didn't click with people and never had. When he was younger, he was convinced (as were the other kids) that he was from another planet. His mum always said his brain was just wired differently—that was all. He yearned, ached to connect with people (men), but all he did was irritate them. He recently overheard a colleague describe him as quirky! He went to work with his head down, came back and read books about the universe, physics, and sexual attraction. He was currently reading about the mating habits of peacocks, and wondered if he could apply this learning to his own search for a boyfriend... and that was about the paltry sum of his life. He sighed morosely, thoroughly sick of himself, and thought that the trouble with him was that he was just so mediocre. No distinguishing features. Run-of-the-bloody-mill Freddy.

So he went "shopping". He did this maybe three times a month, more if he felt particularly empty. This week, Freddy had been twice already! He was usually furtive and cautious, but the last few times he felt frantic, even desperate. Truthfully, he hadn't even enjoyed himself. Today, he set off determined to stop this deep nagging ache from taking root and festering forever.

His favourite shops were the ones with expensive luxury items. There seemed very little point bothering with cheap rubbish which only made him feel worse. "I deserve the very best the shops have to offer!" He was accosted by a very interesting-looking DVD about rock formation, a sparkly watch just hanging there begging for it, and finally—his best find of the month—figure-hugging, silk underwear. "Lovely! My boys will feel very special nestled in those. Come to papa!" he trilled. For the few moments where he made his decisions and choices, he was almost woodenly fulfilled. Sometimes, he even pretended he was choosing things for a loving boyfriend, waiting for him at home.

He left the precinct both nauseous and exhilarated, wondering if anyone would stop him. But no, as always, he got to the car with his “purchases”. He usually felt euphoric for at least a few hours but not this day. He got home, stared at the bags for a minute and noticed how quiet the flat was—just the hum of the fridge for company. No one to talk to except himself. He felt flat, and blank, and stretched out. He could see that, tonight, silky underwear would really not be enough.

Two bottles of wine later, Freddy was smashed, wasted, trashed. He strutted to all his favourite songs in his new underwear and felt fantastic, for a little while. At some stage, he went through his work numbers and sent a few messages, adding kisses and silly faces. “Ha! You’ll like this one, Tom!” He forgot that, except for conversations about targets and deadlines, he’d never actually spoken to any of his colleagues—he was far too shy. Eventually though, he ended up on the Internet, gazing at porn with wonder and admiration. There were so many lovely men! He saw the advert almost straight away. “*Huge Brother* Launch! Cast members still needed! Give it a try—what have you got to lose?” What indeed! He didn’t read it fully but filled in his details and pressed *Send*.

After vomiting spectacularly, he staggered off to bed and practised kissing his own arm a bit and humping the mattress. He pretended it was his hunky master with the leather gloves, but he was too drunk—his heart just wasn’t in it. He cried a bit, and then finally floated off to sleep, murmuring to himself that this just could not fucking go on.

The next day at work, Freddy was in shit. Deep shit. He was shouted in to the director’s office at nine-thirty to explain the drunken texts of the night before. Amongst others, the words “Big Hairy Cock” and “Ride me hard” had been sent to five members of staff, all male. Freddy felt all his energy drain away and could not think of an excuse or an explanation. “Sorry,” he threw in lamely, and felt his eyes welling up and his hands beginning to shake. He couldn’t even find the strength to lie or plead stress, but there must have been something in his face because the director sent him home and told him not to come back for a week. He wasn’t exactly kind, but he peered from under his brows and said to sort himself out—this just wasn’t like him! Freddy agreed, with a shrug and pained smile.

Freddy went shopping on the way home, knowing he was building up to a crisis. The lights seemed too bright, and he was sure everyone was looking at him. He stumbled about in a daze and wondered if perhaps he should have just

gone home. He wandered round in circles for a while, unable to decide or escape. Finally, he desultorily chose a bright, floaty thing and was making his way to the doors when a firm hand on his shoulder stopped him. "Excuse me, sir. Come with us." As he was led off by two huge security guards, he couldn't help thinking in a bleary, horrified sort of way that this was the stuff of his fantasies.

They took Freddy to their office and showed him the recording—shoving that scarf into his pocket and heading for the doors. He tried very hard not to actually cry, and he knew his hands were shaking. They glared at him, asked for details of work and finally why he did it. They said they might contact his work, and he felt the icy sliding of shame rolling down his back. He didn't even know what to say to their questions. There were no sane answers—only that stealing from shops somehow got him through the month. No way could he tell them that! He was looked up on a system—no previous convictions—given a warning and sent off. As he left, one of the guards stared at him with piercing blue eyes and said, "You're a disgrace, sir"—then winked! Freddy hung his head and felt his face burning. He slunk off to his car as desperate and low as he had ever been. He drove home without noticing the route he took, or the world going on around him.

When he got home, he cried. Not the pretty crying of films and books, but horrible gasping sobs and snot and red eyes, with his knees drawn up and his hands clutching his hair. His face felt puffy, and his eyes hurt from the explosion. He went round his flat, bleakly collecting up all the ridiculous items he had stolen, put them in black bags and left them outside with the bins. He was shocked to fill six bags. "Six!" He wondered what the fuck his mother would say if she knew. The pure awfulness of it all overwhelmed him as he replayed it again and again. "Why did you do it, sir?"

"Because I'm a pathetic weird loser who collects china dogs and likes to sticks things up his arse," he said. The thought of actually saying this to his mum or those security guards set him off, and he laughed hysterically. He finally blew his nose, sat curled up for a while on his sofa staring into space, then checked his e-mail. There was the usual crap, but one he didn't recognise. It was an invitation from The Black Matrix for an interview. "Who the fuck's The Black Matrix? Interview?" He looked them up on the Internet and found them immediately. "Holy shit!" Beautiful men wearing various bits of leather glowered across the sofa at him, and he stared back, mesmerised. His eyes feasted on arses and cocks, swaying balls and nipple rings. "Interview for what?" he said feverishly, but it didn't specify.

He had a nebulous memory of a form online from when he was pissed. He thought that he may have signed up for a web cam, or to be a member. God, just the thought of being around all those muscles and hairy thighs pretty much sounded like a trip to heaven. Freddy didn't know anything about porn studios, but he decided that whatever the interview was for—signing up, making the tea, cleaning the jocks (with his tongue!)—"Fuck it!"—He'd do it. He was off work anyway—perhaps this was fate giving direction—taking charge of his destiny and giving him the kick up the arse he needed.

Next morning, Freddy was up at four a.m. He'd gone for it and shaved his bush—and every other errant hair he came across. He was enchanted by the result and spent the rest of the night stroking his cock and thinking about *The Black Matrix*. He was completely exhausted but hyperaware (too much coffee). He wasn't quite himself, but maybe that was a good thing—after all, himself was someone he was heartily sick of. He went through his wardrobe and finally decided on black T-shirt and jeans. On a last minute whim, he went commando!

He arrived at the place but felt cheated that it all seemed so tasteful, and most of the people were women in pastel-coloured jumpers. Eventually, the receptionist announced grandly that Wolf would see him now. "Wolf?" He sniggered nervously as he went in but stopped dead at the man sprawled in the opposite chair. Big, blond and scowling. His nerves faded as he was engulfed by pure animal lust. This man was simply gorgeous, a vision of perfection. Freddy knew he was staring. The guy's hands were behind his head and his legs—oh, those thighs!—were stretched out in front of him, relaxed and shapely. Freddy's gaze finally slid up past the moulded jeans to that tantalising peep of taut stomach, and he was just physically unable to look away. His T-shirt was tight, as if painted on over those defined graceful muscles and insolent jutting nipples. The man made an impatient growl and Freddy blinked, tore his eyes away, and looked up. He was met by icy blue eyes and a handsome face with velvet pink lips, and the kind of stare that could either start or finish a war.

He was also the security guard who'd called him a disgrace, and he did not look impressed or pleased to see Freddy. Not at all. He raised one eyebrow and pointed at the empty chair. Freddy thought wildly that he could command whole armies from that sweeping eyebrow. Perhaps Mr Wolf wouldn't remember him; after all, he must see so many shoplifters and muggers—there was nothing special about him!

"Well if it isn't our scarf stealer. Danny wasn't it?"

Freddy closed his eyes momentarily at his voice. He sounded like an actor from an old black and white film—a heady mix of American and English. He could listen to it all day! It had some quality that made him ache to obey and to please.

“Er, um, no, it’s Freddy, how do you do? Look, that was all a mistake! Do you think we can just forget it and start again? I don’t usually do that sort of thing. It was a sort of mix up actually and...”

“Sure, Johnny, sure. Tell me a bit about yourself then. It says here you’re interested in our week experience venture or working on *Huge Brother*? Hmm?”

“Weak experiences?” Freddy had a vision of himself being too weak to move, and Wolf tying him up and taking charge of his body. He had a vivid hallucination of himself naked at Wolf’s feet, being fed by hand, and drinking from a bowl on the floor. He imagined himself with everything stripped away—a personal slave with no rights or opinions. He would exist simply to serve. Freddy drew breath, licked his lips, and stared at the man in front of him. He was aware that he made a small noise at the back of his throat.

He guessed that The Black Matrix must be a “pay for kinky gay” type service. He’d seen that kind of thing on Internet porn sites—men dressed in nappies being spanked, slaves, daddies, and even college boyfriends. Truthfully, he didn’t even care if it was legal. He was completely bewitched by the very idea of being around men such as this. Surely, he’d get the chance here to explore his hidden urges, and maybe make a few friends—men who wanted the same things he did...? He shifted, adjusted his jeans, and realised that Wolf had stopped talking and was glaring at him with raised eyebrows.

“Sorry Mr Wolf, pardon?”

“Just Wolf. So, here’s the paperwork—lots of signatures required, health and safety, that sort of thing. Why don’t you have a read through it and get back to me?”

The lovely Mr Wolf started pushing paper at Freddy and moving as if it was over. Over? “Yeah, that’s fine. I’ll just sign now shall I? Can we start today? Now?” Wolf stared at him as if he wanted to eviscerate him. His eyes narrowed, and he made a grimace, and drew in a deep breath which lifted his shoulders, but even that was unbelievably handsome and only served to make Freddy’s trousers even more uncomfortable.

“No! You have to read the stuff and think carefully about whether or not this is for you. I’m assuming you went through it all on our website when you

filled in the form. If you're successful, once you sign, it's legally binding. I have to be certain, though, that you understand it all, because it's my job to. I also have to make sure I get the right guy. Now tell me about yourself like I asked."

So Freddy did. He wasn't usually one for deep confessions—but he found himself gabbling on about his sorry life. He told Wolf about the shoplifting and his mother, even his father's suicide. Looking deep into Wolf's striking eyes, he heard himself owning up to being unfulfilled and lonely, never having had a proper relationship and his yearnings towards men, particularly strong and bossy men. His eyes filled up a bit when he confessed to feeling an outsider—just that bit different from everyone else. He thought that he saw understanding and sympathy in those deep blue eyes, and felt that this would be the start of something special. Wolf would take charge and personalise a service just for him! He was all but ready to climb into that amazing-looking lap, "Yeah. I actually meant your work experience. Which studios have you worked at—I don't recognise you? You have done this before haven't you?"

Freddy was mortified beyond words. "I, yes, I have indeed, oh yes, I'm experienced, and willing, and I've worked all over and done everything and everyone." He winced, grabbed the papers and fled back to reception without looking back. He knew he'd fucked that one up! *Idiot!*

The woman there looked at him, startled, and said, "How did you get on with White Fang?" and handed him a cup of tea and a pen.

When the kid first walked in, Wolf nearly told him to fuck off right back out the door—cheeky little bastard! He was pretty sure this was a wind-up by Mitch—his mate from the security firm. Mitch knew all about The Black Matrix and Wolf's new role, so it wasn't inconceivable that he'd somehow bribed this wanker to come here and piss Wolf off.

"Hmm." He didn't throw him out, though, because Freddy just didn't look like some arse-wipe here to cause trouble. When Wolf had interviewed Freddy yesterday about the shoplifting, he nearly snorted at that bloody scarf—all arty swirls and stupid tassels. Only Mitch's presence stopped him. Wolf had not missed the way that Freddy stared at his chest and legs, even while he was being interviewed. If he'd been on his own, he would have let Freddy go with a smack to that pert little arse and his phone number in his pocket.

Wolf knew people the way that some men knew cars, and he was very rarely wrong. Once Freddy had started gabbling on about his father topping

himself and his need for guidance, he knew that this was his man. Freddy was slightly over the top, obviously—no one was that daft—but that would work on screen.

He had now interviewed over a hundred young guys for the launch but hadn't yet cast the kidnap victim. The first thing he'd thought when he saw Freddy shoplifting yesterday, was how striking and unusual he looked, a sort of other-worldly elf with sex appeal. He was cute and graceful, almost furtive. When he'd seen him flitting through the aisles, it made him think of a deer in a forest. Very different from his other porn star cast members. He knew his viewers would love him.

He gave Freddy ten minutes, then called through to Gail to send him back in. He suppressed a smile when he noticed that Freddy had just about bitten through his lip and had stuck the pen behind his ear. His eyebrows were raised, and his dark, shy eyes peered out from that cheeky face. He was adorable!

“Okay, so have you had a flick through everything? Hmm? Okay, I'm going to take a chance and offer you a contract! Obviously this is all new, and you'll be in it from the beginning so you can shape things to some extent, though a lot depends on the viewers. Do you want to go home and think about it, or are you happy to sign now? I wouldn't usually take you on so quick, but to be honest we're ready to start with *Huge Brother*. If you don't work out, nothing's lost, is it?” The kid stared at him a bit with those huge dark eyes like he was confused or struggling with the language, and Wolf paused a minute. People had told him before, many times, that his stare is terrifying. Some of the younger guys called him “Mother-fucking Alpha”, but not to his face. He took a breath and tried again. He smiled his best porn star dazzler, went through the contract all again—pointing out the small print and details. “Is that clear? D'you need me to go through anything else? No? Okay, so I'll get Gail to send you a copy with details of a start date. Bring enough stuff for a couple of weeks.” And Wolf held out his hand for the kid to shake. The kid grasped it with both hands and just held on like he was being rescued from the ocean.

Wolf patted his hands, raised his brows and drew back. “Hmm.” He gave the boy his warmest smile again and tried a different approach. “What you into Fred—you like football?” Freddy shook his head. “No. Xbox?” Freddy looked completely lost. “No.” Wolf could write on a postage stamp what he knew about young guys this age. “Cars? No. Hmm. Well, don't worry! We get lots of types here; you'll fit in just fine! Give me a call if there's anything you need clearing up. See you next month!” He put a hand on the kid's shoulder,

squeezed it, and led him back out to Gail. As he walked away, the kid looked back at him with a look he couldn't really define. There was something about Freddy that confused him, but he wasn't sure what it was. He decided to do a bit of research, see what he could find out.

The Present

Almost a month, and a shitload of work later, the day arrives for the launch of *Huge Brother!* Wolf feels brutal and raw and scowls and snarls at everyone. His new Swedish furniture hasn't turned up, and the "living space" looks sparse and uninviting. Not good for the viewers—they want cool and stylish to reassure them that The Black Matrix's porn equivalent to *Big Brother* is elegant and sexy. He wants fun, yet moving, not seedy and cheap. He stresses, worrying that it will be a disaster, and he'll have let Tyler down. Wolf never accepts less than perfect from himself or anyone else. He knows he can be moody, but today he is just too anxious to care. So when Freddy arrives, he barely glances at him—too busy issuing curt commands down the phone, and sending out light sabre glares to anyone stupid enough to get too near him.

He'd done a bit of research, and his suspicions were confirmed—Freddy's not known at any of the well-known porn studios. He doesn't mind someone new to the industry—but there's something about Freddy that doesn't add up, and he's learnt over many years of porn and life experiences to rely on his instincts. He's a stickler for rules and regulations, and he doesn't take chances. He meant to have a quick word with Freddy when he arrives, make sure he's clear on everything, but his mind is on other things, and it gets overlooked. Gail dutifully sent out all the legal documents and even a little letter inviting Freddy to call with any concerns or questions. Freddy's signatures came back but nothing else. Interesting though, Wolf noticed that at the bottom of the last legal documents Freddy had written a line asking for the bill! The bill?

He perches in the recording room where he can see all the rooms with cameras. "Come on! Come on!" He's eager to stick to the announced launch time, and he hopes Tim's prepared the cast. He notices Freddy waiting patiently and hopes Tim looks after him a bit. Freddy looks cute sitting there naked except for the towel with his hands clasped in front of him—oh yes, no doubt he'll be a huge hit with the viewers. Their highest ratings are always for the young, sweet lookers with big puppy-dog eyes.

He's terrified about *Huge Brother*. His boss and best friend, Tyler, talked him into it, and they both came up with the money to fund it—all Wolf's

savings. They even got superstar, Jake Bass, over for the launch! If it's a flop, then he'll have to go back in front of the cameras himself. He hasn't made anything new for two years—got so sick of having to play the bad old daddy forcing the young flesh into sex and debauchery. Twenty years being the gay porn badass is enough for him. He's left his security guard job, so he can manage this project full time. It's a huge gamble. He watches everyone assemble and feels sick with nerves.

The cast wait for the signal to begin. The red light flashes, and Wolf holds his breath, waiting for the first scene...

Freddy follows his instructions and gets back in the shower. Wolf watches as the other cast members approach, shouting, and holding pretend guns. They fling a hood over his head and restrain him to carry him off. They take him to the cell and attach him to a chair, naked. Freddy does exactly as Wolf hoped—shouts and screams, thrashes his perfect body about and looks completely realistic, also extremely hot. Tyler is blown away by the whole scene and congratulates everyone. "Brilliant, guys! Outstanding start! Keep it up!" The cameras move around the "house" introducing the cast, then return to Freddy and the cell.

"Bloody hell, he's good!" Wolf murmurs to his crew, noting the way that Freddy reacts when Jake goes back in and kisses him. "Amazing! A complete natural! All that begging and crying—how's he do that?" Wolf's no good at pretending or lying—what you see is what you get—but he's full of admiration for this young unknown and wonders again if he's been to acting class. His crew reports that viewing figures are absolutely through the roof! They all cheer and shake hands. It's only when Freddy pisses and knocks the chair over that he wonders if everything is okay—pretty hard core for a newbie—so he asks Tim to contact Freddy via the microphone he's wearing.

"What microphone? You never said put a microphone on him!" and Wolf stomps down himself to check. The crew turn the cameras elsewhere while he goes into the cell they put Freddy in.

"You were bloody fantastic Freddy—spot on! You okay?" and Wolf is horrified by the noise that comes from Freddy—a long wail of anguish and fear. "Hang on mate, hang on, let's get you out of these. It's okay, it's okay. Calm down. You're all right. You claustrophobic?" Freddy is completely white and looks awful, wrung out and pinched. He's unable to talk coherently, and as Wolf takes off the restraints, he slips about on the floor in his own piss.

"They, they dragged me!" he sobs, waving madly with his hands.

“Oh, fucking hell, come here. It’s all right, oh you poor, poor guy,” and Wolf gets straight down there with him in the piss and pulls him into his arms. Some instinct takes over, as he strokes his hair and talks softly, as if to a frightened animal—telling Freddy that it was all just acting, setting up the first scene for *Huge Brother*.

“Didn’t you read that stuff I sent you? It explained all this—your part is to play a kidnapped victim brought into the house to serve the others. Everyone knows it’s just acting, but the viewers love a bit of resistance. Like straight men pretending to shag for money. You seen them sites?” and Freddy nods weakly, listening now that he was back with Wolf. “Well, it’s the same sort of thing—a reality porn show house where we’ve put in some pretend bits that the viewers voted for. I thought you knew! You’ve got four parts—the kidnap victim, boy slave, and naked gardener scenes and one they haven’t voted on yet. In between, you get to hang about and earn a fortune. What did you think the job was for?” Freddy shakes his head; he looks terrible and is shivering. “Come on, let’s get you out of here into some clothes,” and Wolf takes off his jumper and wraps Freddy up in it then helps him up. He carries him back to his room and wraps him up in bed.

“Bloody hell—what did you think we were going to do?”

“I, I don’t know. I thought you were thugs or rapists, I don’t know. Just so fucking scared,” and he looks up with big, tragic eyes full of tears, and Wolf sees just how much he’s fucked up. He and Tyler have seen their fair share of devastation in this business—lost friends to drugs and drink, AIDS and even anorexia—but he’s never seen anyone so utterly terrified.

“Oh, bollocks, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry! I should have caught you this morning before we started. I’m such a stupid, big bastard sometimes. I was so stressed, trying to get it all started on time.” He stares at Freddy’s white face. Freddy just leans his head on Wolf’s chest, and Wolf hugs him, full of remorse.

“Do you want me to take you home?” he whispers some time later, into Freddy’s hair. “I’ll compensate you for this, obviously; we’re not really a bunch of amateurs, though it must look that way to you. You okay?” Wolf peers into Freddy’s eyes. “What did you think the job was for?” And Freddy tells him. Wolf can’t help but laugh a bit, though he’s appalled that this has happened—that he allowed it to happen in this studio. “Tyler will kill me!” he murmurs. Over the years, Wolf’s done numerous campaigns for the porn industry to have proper health and safety regulations. Thanks to him, The Black Matrix has doctors, lawyers, even a dietician visiting. He thinks, with sinking horror, that

he didn't even show this poor kid the fire escapes, never mind give him a welcome pack.

"Personal services, huh? You mean kink? A nappy? Hmm." Wolf has seen a lot of kink, and there isn't much he hasn't done. "That your thing then?"

"Don't know, never done it. Just, when I got your e-mail, I thought, oh why the fuck not? If I was paying, no one would be able to laugh at me."

He's so indignant on Freddy's behalf that he pulls him closer. "Who would laugh at a gorgeous young guy like you? Hmm? No one!" and then, after a bit, "You got no boyfriend, honey?"

"Nah, never had one. I'm not really boyfriend material. Had a girlfriend once, but that didn't work out. Obvious reasons." He snorts.

Wolf lifts his eyebrows at him and nods slowly. "Yeah, wanting to be a sex slave and shit in a nappy will do that to a woman. Not that I'd know!" he says, and they snort together—and he can't help cuddling Freddy closer. The poor kid's calmed down now but clings on and burrows in. This is a new experience for Wolf—touching without sex. He tries unsuccessfully to recall the last time he just held a man. He remembers Freddy telling him his life story at the interview and realises unhappily that it was all true. He rubs his chin softly against Freddy's head and wonders how he can make this right.

"Want me to take you home, sweetheart?" he says, and Freddy's eyes grow larger and shinier. He's not sending him off alone in a taxi—he looks so beat up.

"Yeah, that'd be great. Thanks. What will you do for the slave boy and naked gardener scene? They both sound epic, by the way."

"Ah, don't worry, I'll just go through the list of hopefuls I interviewed before you and pick one. The viewers never really saw your face clearly. Beat over a hundred other candidates, you did."

"Really? Me?" and Wolf is just torn apart all over again by Freddy's disbelief.

"Of course, you did! You've got a lovely body, Fred, and a face to die for." Then Wolf wonders if this is what a man outside the porn industry even wants to hear. He doesn't know and can't remember a time when he wasn't obsessed by body fat and arse tone. "I mean, you can tell you're a really lovely guy. Genuine! Now come on, get dressed, and I'll whiz you home, and you can pretend this was just a bad dream. Hmm? Don't worry, I'll wait for you outside

in case them killer porn stars gang up on you again.” Freddy smiles a bit at this, and Wolf feels tingling warmth slide all over him. Before they go, Wolf insists on taking Freddy round, showing him the set up. He introduces him to the cast, and they all apologise profusely for the horrible mistake. “Shit! No way! Sorry dude.” Freddy is awestruck by Jake Bass, and Wolf has to guide him away by the hand.

Wolf sets off and works hard to get Freddy talking. For some reason, it’s important that Freddy sees how sorry he is. It takes a while, but Freddy does seem to relax a bit.

“So did you kill one then? A wolf?”

He barks out a laugh and squeezes Freddy’s leg.

“Nah, it’s actually short for Wolfgang—my mother was German. Did me no favours when I was a kid, but it works for porn, hmm?” Freddy agrees that it does. Wolf tells him a bit about his life of porn and doesn’t miss how enthralled Freddy is. Freddy also tells him about the set of catastrophes that led up to today and tries to turn it all into a great joke. Shoplifting and suspension from work! Wolf shakes his head at him, appalled, and Freddy stops, hangs his head and goes quiet.

They finally stop, and Freddy seems to crumple, his shoulders hunching inwards. He looks so deflated and sad, that Wolf feels terrible. “Look, I feel truly awful about all this. Honestly, I don’t know how it happened. I’m going to review all our procedures tomorrow and make sure it never happens again.” Freddy just smiles at him sadly and gets out, wrapping his arms around his chest and stamping his feet from the cold. It’s obvious that Freddy’s used to being let down and disappointed. “We’ll pay you, for today and for the week. No, in fact for the entire two weeks, to make up for our mistake. I really cannot say how sorry I am. Is there anything else I can do to put it right? I feel incredibly shitty about it. I really do.”

“Nah, it’s okay, I should have read the bloody paperwork, and let that be a lesson not to go filling in things on the Internet after two bottles of wine. I’m okay now, honestly. You better get back to *Huge Brother*, hadn’t you? Thanks for driving me home.”

It’s this resignation that really gets to Wolf. He’d feel better if Freddy shouted at him and threatened him with court. He knows that he’s very lucky not to have a lawsuit on his hands and doesn’t even want to think about what would have happened if he hadn’t been there—Tim wouldn’t have gone in to

check, dozy bastard. The scandal and cost probably would've finished them off. He can't think of anything to say though, and he really has to get back. He takes Freddy's suitcase out and carries it up. "Well, look, we'll give you a ring tomorrow, and I'll come see you when *Huge Brother* is finished—and Fred? Forget about the nappies—I've done that, and it's crap!" And Wolf claps Freddy on the back, winks at him and is gone. All the way back to The Black Matrix he thinks about Freddy stealing that ridiculous scarf and coming to The Black Matrix to get fucked. He can't believe Freddy doesn't know that he could have any man—with his cute smile, and silky lashes, and lithe body, why would he need to pay for sex? He also thinks, a bit guiltily, about how he felt snuggled up in his arms, with his nose pressed into his neck and the softness of his curls against his cheek...

Freddy struggles to get back to normal after such a shock to his humdrum life. He already booked leave for the next two weeks and can't face telling his mum that he isn't away on holiday after all. How can he possibly explain it? She's got dementia as it is! He goes over and over the kidnap, and reasons that it was all worth it to be alone with Wolf for a bit. There is one day when he just sinks, and he feels so let down, and disappointed, and desperate that he throws food at his walls then sinks to the floor and cries. He recognises the desperation of this and doesn't care. He looks his symptoms up on medical websites but ignores their advice to seek help. He can't face anyone, so he cleans his flat a few dozen times and rearranges everything, seeking order and structure.

He tries (but fails) not to watch *Huge Brother*. He can't tear himself away from *The Slave Boy*. There's a section where you can choose your favourite bit so far, and he notices with shock that the kidnapping has top votes. His biggest achievement! He feels like it's a betrayal but still watches porn with Wolf in it—doesn't look like there's anything recent though. He is utterly captivated by that body, and by Wolf's easy confidence, and the elegance with which he moves. Wolf's mastery is like unbreakable thread reeling him in. He goes to sleep with his arms wrapped round himself and pretends he's in bed with Wolf. He can't stop thinking about those arms holding him together, so strong and capable and warm. He has a miserable couple of weeks hoping desperately that Wolf will come back. He decides to take up running but doesn't dare venture out. The two weeks fly past with him in a daze—as if the earth spins on while he watches, anchored to the moon alone.

Two weeks later, Wolf stands outside Freddy's flat wondering what the fuck he's doing. He hasn't been able to forget Freddy and is drawn here, not just by guilt but something else. Something cracked and left a ragged opening when he comforted Freddy. It's been years since Wolf had any sort of a relationship with a guy. Fucking all day at work messed up his head, and it's easier to go home alone. He's got as many friends and fuck buddies as anyone could ever want, and for years all this has seemed enough. Since the Freddy incident though, he feels strange and anxious. Oh, sure he's been busy with *Huge Brother*—a massive success with viewings way better than anyone dared dream—but he is aware of the uneasiness that lingers. He feels off kilter and out of alignment. He tells himself that he only wants to apologise for the mix-up but he knows this isn't true. He's rung Freddy twice since the incident—once with Tyler—and once alone. Freddy's voice sounded so different from the noises he hears all day at The Black Matrix, earnest and shy and so interested in everything he has to say. Freddy has awoken a dormant longing in him. Like the first time he ever saw the ocean—he realised he'd missed it all his life. He can't wait to see him again...

He glares at the door for a while, chewing his lip. He's not used to feeling out of control and doesn't like it. He's just about decided to fuck off back to The Black Matrix and stop being such a big moron when it flies open, and Freddy stands there dressed for running. They stare at each other in silence for a bit, then Freddy laughs, and it's the best thing he's heard in years. It's a proper belly laugh which transforms Freddy into a breathtaking spectacle of dimples, sparkly eyes, and a sweet nose with freckles. "Wolf! What are you doing here?" Freddy beams at him with surprise and open adoration. There's no pretending or game playing here. Wolf is quite sure no one has ever been that pleased to see him!

"Hey, Fred! Glad to see you again. I was just passing, and thought I'd check that you're okay." He feels a confusing mix of protective, aroused, and terrified. He'd like to crush Freddy to him, but he is scared that, if he starts, he will never be able to stop.

"Come in then." Freddy pulls him in by the hand and treats him like he is royalty—making him tea in a little pot and fussing over him. He laughs nervously at everything and can't stand still. It's exhausting to watch! He natters on about space, and the news, and only stops when Wolf lifts a finger, waits until Freddy stops chattering then pats the cushion next to him. Freddy slithers on like he's boneless and sits with his hands in his lap staring at Wolf, transfixed.

“Ssssh.” Wolf cannot help himself. He draws closer to Freddy and strokes his face—so young and fresh, no sun beds or moisture cream needed here. The instant he touches, Freddy leans into Wolf’s hand, his eyelashes brushing Wolf’s skin like gentle wings. Wolf daren’t move, and for a few moments, he just strokes Freddy’s cheek gently, skirting his eyebrows and forehead with his long fingers. Wolf is used to touching—he’s spent whole years of his life with his mouth round cocks and his hands on bodies, but this feels like a completely new sensory experience. He’s captivated by Freddy’s breathing, his skin and hair, and the slight trembling of his lips.

“I thought about you,” he whispers. “I couldn’t stop. You okay? Hmm?” He can’t bring himself to take his hand away and makes small circles with his little finger on Freddy’s cheekbone. Freddy looks at him like he is James Bond on a rescue, and he wishes that he was.

He takes his hand away and pours tea, and the spell is broken, for a while. Freddy talks a little too loudly and very fast, like he wants to get it out of the way quickly. “Oh yes, I’m fine now, I’m such a stupid bastard though, even by my standards, this was pretty high up there on the idiotometer.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Put yourself down. Don’t ever do that.” And even though Wolf only meant it as a gentle chiding, Freddy looks stricken and hangs his head.

“Sorry,” he mutters. “It was really nice of you to come all the way out here. I watched the rest of *Huge Brother*, and it was fucking fantastic! And, and, you—in those porn films—just bloody holy wow! I couldn’t look away, and the one where you...!” Then he stops abruptly and bites his lip. “Not that I was spying on you or anything.”

Wolf huffs and laughs at that, “Is there anything you don’t worry about, Fred?” He nudges Freddy’s shoulder, raises his blond eyebrows, and then looks down at him mock sternly.

“Hah! Well, no, not a lot, really. I never seem to get it right, Wolf. I think one thing, but then it comes out all wrong.” But he has thawed a little and smiles wryly at himself. Wolf listens to everything Freddy says carefully, assessing him and wondering where to go next with this. This is the first time in years he wants to impress a guy, and he’s as rusty as Freddy. They get through it somehow—some jokes and cheery banter until they both dry up, and Wolf clatters about with the tea things. He thinks that not only is his life a world

away from Freddy's, but that twenty years separate them too. He sees, with resignation, that it will be impossible after all. He's distracted by the horrific china dogs and gets up to have a look. "You like dogs, Fred?"

"Nah, I'm terrified of them. My dad used to collect these, and I just sort of carried it on." Freddy gets up to show his favourite one, stumbles, and crashes into Wolf. They have one of those moments where both people move to get out of the way but end up colliding again in a never-ending cycle. Wolf smirks, grabs Freddy to still him, then runs his hands lightly up and down his arms, making his hairs stand up from the static electricity. Freddy's arms are soft and warm against his hands, and he keeps them there as long as he can.

He leans as near to Freddy as he dares, without frightening him into bolting, then rests against his forehead. "So, Mr Scarf-stealer. Do you want to come out with me?" Then, because Freddy's face is a mass of confusion, "You know, as a guy—come out with me as a guy. Like on a date? We could go for a drink or maybe a meal? Hmm?" Freddy's eyes just melt like fudge chocolate ice cream, and Wolf wants to kiss him so much but he daren't.

"Really?"

"Really!" Wolf nods, and holds his breath and doesn't feel good enough.

"Yes! Sorry—didn't mean to shout. Brilliant! Yes, yes I'd love to Mr, er, Wolf. Fantastic! I'll just get my jacket and change into my jeans—hang on!" He doesn't have the heart to tell Freddy that it's ten a.m. and actually he meant maybe the weekend or one evening. Freddy's excitement is magical, and he feels at least twenty years younger. As they leave the flat, he's very worried he'll fuck this up.

Their first date is a wonderful success. Freddy's like a nervous kitten—all skittish and frantic, but by the end of their meal—a breakfast in bloody McDonald's—he calms down and talks without doing that scary gasping thing he does. Wolf can't look away. He thinks that maybe if he's very cautious and takes his time—and then some—he can ease Freddy out until he can just be himself. He never met anyone so shy and anxious and frantic—the men he knows are usually the opposite way.

There's something almost childlike about Freddy and the way he reacts to things. He squirts the ketchup like it's the best thing ever, doing it over and over, making Wolf laugh. He watches Wolf so intently it makes Wolf realise just how uninterested most folks are. Wolf can't help staring back into those radiant eyes, brimming with intelligence and curiosity. He can see that Freddy

is trying so hard—it's tiring to watch, but he's captivated. It seems to him that Freddy has an untamed quality which makes him feel fierce and giddy. He ruefully tells Freddy that it's about a million years since he had so much fun.

Just about everyone bores Wolf lately, with their phones, and social networking, and need to be the best. He often thinks he needs a holiday from the human race, somewhere he can get back to his roots. He can't stop thinking about looking at the stars at night, mountain walks, making pancakes—that kind of thing. Freddy makes him want all this, so suddenly and so badly. He's just dying to touch Freddy—but if he goes too fast he thinks Freddy might be off like a wild horse. As he leaves, he pulls Freddy close and gives him a quick peck on the cheek and is rewarded by Freddy's pink cheeks and beautiful beam. "I'll see you Friday at seven, Fred." He drives back to The Black Matrix, and somehow, the monotony of life seems less oppressive, like spring is on the way.

Friday night comes around and Freddy's getting ready for their date—their first real date out if you don't count McDonald's. There are a million things he has to think about and get right: "Underwear or not? Is the tie too formal? Breathe, check! More mouthwash. Cologne. Calm, calm." He goes over some social guidelines from a book Mum gave him years ago—"asking questions, not hogging the conversation and not ranting". Do not go on about physics! Do not mention electricity or space! His mother has told him many times that most people find these topics boring. Unfortunately, the book doesn't get on to kissing and sex. He thinks ruefully that geeks probably aren't meant to do either.

It still doesn't seem likely that he's going out with Wolf—as a guy, and he wonders what a man like Wolf could ever see in him. He thinks of all those porn stars and knows that Wolf could have any man he wanted. He's going to try flirting tonight though—maximise his chances—and no way Wolf is getting away without at least a proper kiss! He's frantically read everything there is on the Internet about anal penetration and how to prepare.

He joyfully has a few experiments with his new toys—why didn't he get these years ago? *Idiot!* Freddy is now the proud owner of a dildo, a prostate tickler, a fleshlight, and some anal beads. Surely Wolf fucks on a first date? Freddy's a virgin, but he's not telling Wolf that. He longs to be funny and sophisticated, though he'll settle for normal. He feverishly goes through the guidelines again.

His thoughts and dreams have been full of Wolf undressing and touching him. When Wolf stroked his arms last week, he was so aroused it felt like a million nerves waking up throughout his body. The thought of those long fingers on his nipples, and his hands holding him as he comes makes him close his eyes and moan. He watches hours of porn where Wolf is the top—the way his muscles shift like waves—has become like wallpaper in Freddy's mind—springing to life every time he switches on.

What Freddy would love, is to serve Wolf—to be used by him like the slave boy on *Huge Brother*. His arse clenches, and he wonders if he has time for another wank before Wolf arrives. There's a constant ache around his groin, as if he's fourteen again and can hardly keep his hands out of his jeans. He's read somewhere that the smell of an animal's sperm will attract potential mates, so he mixes cum with hair gel and rubs it all over his hair until it sticks up. He skims the guidelines again.

Freddy looks practically edible when Wolf picks him up! He's spiked his hair a bit and looks young and attractive. He wears a dark grey suit and a tie which Wolf would like to seize to draw Freddy in for a kiss. This time though, it's Freddy who kisses Wolf! He launches himself, puts an arm around his neck and rubs their cheeks together. Wolf murmurs, and Freddy gently drops little kisses all over his face.

He brings up his other hand and runs it through Wolf's hair, then leans back and stares. No one's ever looked at him like that! Wolf's hopelessly lost for all time. He softly runs his hands up Freddy's sides and hips and meets Freddy for their first real kiss. They clash teeth and noses, and Wolf just about has a heart attack, but in the end everything falls into place. They cannot stop, and soon Freddy has both hands in Wolf's hair and his tongue swirling round Wolf's teeth, and Wolf is gripping Freddy's arse. They pant at each other as Freddy rubs his cock against Wolf.

“Whoa!” gasps Wolf, pulling back a little and kissing Freddy's cute little nose, then running his nose along his cheek. “Fred! Hello! Sweetheart, we got all the time in the world. No reason you got to go rushing into it just 'cause I'm such a slut.” He smiles into Freddy's laugh, sharing the warmth of his breath.

“Wolf? You, you want me? Like this I mean?”

And Wolf wonders what on earth has happened to this man who is so sure that he will fail. He wraps his arms around him and kisses his amazing-smelling hair.

“Yes, I want you! Can't you feel how much? Hmm?”

Freddy wriggles as close as he can possibly get—chest to chest so Wolf can feel both their hearts thumping—and grunts something warm and appreciative. Wolf wants this man so much it hurts, like getting into a too-hot bath when your body is freezing.

They have a lovely dinner. Wolf's done a bit of research (with Tyler's help) and takes him to a swanky, cool place where there are other gay men. Freddy stares like he's at the zoo. He notices that Freddy gains in confidence with every smile and touch—like he is taking on nourishment after being on a diet for too long. Freddy asks about porn, and Wolf answers frankly and encourages him. “See, Fred, if you ask me about world affairs, or books, or classical music, I am Mr Stupid—but porn and sex—in my bones, as it were! Ask away...” This is not nearly true—actually he's very far from being stupid and he's starting to think there's a lot about sex he still doesn't know.

They have loads in common—maybe not in interests and hobbies—but in ideas and thoughts. Wolf is very knowledgeable about dementia—his own dad went that way. “Terrible—every day he knew me a little less until I couldn't face going to see him.” And Freddy amazes him by knowing the capital cities of every country he names. Not that Freddy has been to any of them—says he finds travel terrifying and has never left the UK. “I'd love to, Wolf, but heights bring on my asthma.” He knows about space and gets really excited by the laws of physics. “See Wolf, all forces exist in pairs...”

“Hmm,” Wolf mumbles about the truth of this. “Pairs. A mate. Other half. Waking up together on a Sunday, breakfast in bed, walking on the beach. A bath together. Hmm.”

Freddy has a few glasses of wine, becomes flushed, and waves his hands about. It's like watching tennis—back and forth, back and forth. He becomes aware that Wolf has noticed and sits on his hands, smiling a bit, and abruptly shuts up. He has this delicious habit of scrunching up his nose and creating patterns of freckles across his face, which is much more interesting than physics. Wolf watches it for a bit, mesmerised, then leans across and kisses it softly, right on the tip. He takes Freddy's hand and strokes it with his thumb—right there on the table for anyone to see—and Freddy gawks at him.

Wolf works out that the way to stop Freddy from panicking and worrying is to keep him focused. He practises a few times today—giving Freddy a single command, “Stop fidgeting, Fred,” and, “Slowly Fred, I can't keep up!” Freddy

stops everything else and obeys—concentrates solely, with all his attention. Wolf knows that this is a very unusual skill which can take years to perfect—often guys want to question or amend and they are so easily distracted. Not Freddy. He takes Wolf's instruction like he is starving for it.

Wolf is telling him about *Huge Brother*, and Freddy wonders how he can get him to stay the night. He still thinks that maybe this will be the last time he'll see Wolf. He can't believe he went on and on about bloody wind turbines. He wonders if it's too late to ply Wolf with booze so he can't drive. He nervously runs over the evening—had he been really boring? Was he fidgeting? Did he keep butting in? “Fred! Tell me about where you work.” And he gratefully calms his manic thoughts.

“Data input.” He winces at how boring that sounds, especially compared to porn star and Herculean idol! But Wolf seems fascinated and asks him all about his day and his colleagues. Wolf chuckles when Freddy admits he doesn't know the names of many, even though he's worked there for five years. “Well, there's Kate and Tom. Oh, I don't know, Wolf! They're all really clever, and I just feel such a twat next to them.” Freddy knows that he pisses people off. He doesn't mean to, and sometimes he doesn't even know what he's done wrong. He tries to explain all this to Wolf, who already seems to get it and runs his huge hand up and down Freddy's leg.

“You don't piss me off, Fred, not at all.”

As they pull up to Freddy's flat, it just enters Freddy's head of its own volition, and he blurts it out before he can change his mind. “Do, do you want to fuck me, Wolf? I mean—will you?” He can't believe he just said that—“Idiot!” He didn't mean it to come out quite like that!

Wolf smiles and laughs a bit, takes Freddy's hands and brings them up to his face. He kisses them both carefully and wraps them under his chin.

“I do, darlin', and I'm going to, one day. When we're ready and we know each other, and you want it so bad you could burst, then we will. But tonight, this is what we're going to do. You're going to undress for me so I can see you naked, and then I'm going to touch you all over. I'm going to watch your beautiful face, and I'm going to make you come. I really want to see you come. Can you do that for me, Fred?” Wolf palms Freddy's aching cock through his trousers and squeezes teasingly. “Hmm?” Freddy feels his mouth hanging open but he can't seem to close it again.

He leads Wolf through his flat by the hand. Wolf is in charge, and that's how it should be. For the first time in his life, he is ready. As they walk to his

bedroom, he thinks that tonight he is getting that gold medal, winning the lottery, and nailing that dream job. Tonight, he is the best, and there is no one going to stop him. Wolf watches him closely, and Freddy aches to please him. He does everything Wolf asks—takes off all his clothes slowly and puts them on a chair. “That’s it, Fred, just like that.” His eyes hardly leave Wolf’s face—he is making sure he picks up every silent message. “Perfect, Fred.”

His senses seem heightened, as if to cheer him on—he is aware of the air on his nipples and chest and stomach, of his dripping cock, and his feet on the carpet. He can smell the apple shampoo that Wolf uses and his own cologne. He is hyperaware of Wolf’s gaze, blazing trails on his skin. He’s not afraid or nervous—he won’t have to make any decisions or speak unless Wolf tells him to. Finally, he’s naked and stands proudly in the middle of his bedroom as instructed, his legs apart and his hands behind his back. His chin is up, and he meets Wolf’s stare.

“Oh, you are something else, Fred,” Wolf breathes. He steps forward to run his hands down Freddy’s sides, gliding his smooth fingers across his chest and stomach. “Just plain pretty,” he purrs, circling his thumb over the tip of his cock, making him groan and gasp. Wolf’s hands are huge, and he traces them up over Freddy’s neck and all the way down to his legs and thighs. It feels so amazing—tingling shivers throughout his body which all shoot to his cock and arse. Wolf encourages him when he moans and murmurs, “That’s it, darlin’. I want to hear you! I’m going to look at every inch of your lovely body. You’re so hot! You like that?” he whispers, rubbing his thumbs over his nipples, making him cry out and writhe. “Such a good boy.” Wolf moves behind Freddy and caresses his arse until he leans his head back onto Wolf and whimpers.

Wolf slips his hands over the front of Freddy’s thighs and between his legs. He urges Freddy to put his arms back over Wolf’s hips so that Wolf can run his hands up and down over his body slowly, smiling at the noises he’s helpless to stop as Wolf nibbles his neck. Guttural, desperate noises straight from the stomach, heart and cock. When he starts squirming, trying to move his cock into Wolf’s hand, he turns Freddy gently around.

“I want you to undress me now. Oh, that’s it, nice and slow.” He kisses Freddy’s hands as they unbutton and unzip, making soft noises of encouragement. Finally they’re both naked, and Freddy can’t believe he’s allowed to touch. Wolf is perfect—a beautiful sculpture, pulsing with strength and power. He takes his time kissing his nipples and smoothing his ridges and undulations until they are both grunting with desire. He slides his arms round

Wolf's neck, and Wolf takes over. "I got you, darlin'." Wolf takes both their cocks in his huge hand and strokes them slowly. "You feel that Fred? That's us together, you and me. Hmm? That nice?" He looks down at Wolf's huge hand wrapping them together. "You're fucking gorgeous, and soon I'm going to let you come. Hmm?"

He leans his head on Wolf's chest and holds Wolf's shoulders as he rocks. "Please, Wolf. Oh God, Wolf!"

Wolf lifts him onto the bed so he lies flat. He plays with him a while, stroking and kissing and caressing. Freddy is arching his back and writhing and completely gone. His cock throbs with the almost painful need to come, and absolutely nothing else matters. Wolf moves between his legs, leans up on his arms, and smiles down at him. He kisses his way down Freddy's chest, holds both hips, and sucks him down all the way to the root. The warmth and wetness and tightness envelop him, so that he's beyond aroused. He moans and shouts, trying to push up. Wolf swirls his tongue round the head and slips into the slit then takes Freddy deep and bobs up and down, twisting his mouth and growling.

His arousal builds like an environmental force, and he shakes his head from side to side and pants out half-words and pleas. Wolf releases his hips, and Freddy has to thrust and thrust. Wolf rolls his nipples as Freddy screams and comes and comes. The noises that flood out are primal and raw and he's amazed that they come from him. Wolf is gazing at him with hooded eyes, "Oh Fred, Fred! Beautiful, darlin'." When Freddy stops writhing and gasping, Wolf licks his lips and kisses him all the way back up. "That was quite something! Mmm. Think you just came a river. Fucking gorgeous." And Freddy laughs and strokes his face and kisses him.

"What about you, Wolf?" Freddy hopes to God he can get it right, but Wolf sees the nerves, straddles Freddy, and strokes himself slowly, his eyes never leaving Freddy's. Freddy is utterly entranced and runs his hands up Wolf's thighs and... "Shit Wolf, that's so hot!" And Wolf cannot last either. He comes hard all over Freddy's chest and moans when Freddy runs a hand through his cum then licks his fingers with a cheeky grin. Wolf pulls Freddy close to him and kisses his hair again and again. "Fred, you are a revelation! Want me to clean up?" he murmurs, but Freddy snuggles closer. "No! Leave it. I'm going to keep these sheets forever and never wash them again." Wolf laughs and strokes his arse. "This your first time, Fred?"

"Mm."

“Well, it was my first time too—my first time with you. I’m a born-again virgin!” Just as they start to nod off, he murmurs softly but firmly into Freddy’s hair. “And, Fred? Don’t you go worrying about this when I’m asleep.”

Freddy sleeps better than he has in years. Wolf’s final demand goes straight to his brain, and he wakes up with his head on Wolf’s shoulder and his arm across his massive chest. Freddy strokes it and thinks that Wolf’s chest is majestic—like the ripples and curves on sand dunes in the desert—warm and golden and lovely. Wolf is already awake and greets him with a kiss. “Morning, gorgeous.” He shifts Freddy so he is lying on top. He runs his hands up and down Freddy’s back and arse, then smiles at him lazily. Freddy can feel both their cocks, and he loves it. He worries that he’s got morning breath and could he secretly clean his teeth, when Wolf smiles like he knows exactly what he’s thinking and kisses him long and deep. “You got a shower, Fred?” Freddy nods. “Yes, Wolf. I just redecorated, actually.” He draws a breath to tell him, but Wolf shakes his head and holds up a finger. “Show me, Fred.”

Wolf is holding Freddy close and soaping his cock and balls gently. Freddy leans his head back on Wolf’s shoulder and moans loudly. He can feel Wolf’s cock against his arse and lower back and he leans into it, hoping. Wolf chuckles then soaps his crack with a finger. Freddy’s whole body is awake and screaming, and he hears himself begging when the finger encircles his hole. “Oh please, Wolf, oh yes, go on, oh please!” And Wolf pushes his finger in gently and lets Freddy get used to the feeling.

Freddy moves his legs further apart and thinks about how much better that is than the dildo he had up there yesterday. He moves his arse into it as Wolf adds another knowing finger then pushes expertly onto his prostate. Freddy writhes and moans and pants as Wolf kisses his shoulders and neck. Freddy starts thrusting back and making desperate noises until Wolf takes pity on him and moves his hand down to his cock. He strokes him and finger-fucks him, and Freddy cannot think of anything but the pressure and the aching need to come. He explodes with a shout which reverberates around the tiny bathroom. “Freddy, darlin’, you could teach my porn stars a thing or two—you’re a walking sex-on-legs.”

Wolf leans against the wall and watches Freddy as he soaps him firmly. Freddy is still flushed from his own orgasm, and he feels so damn sexy as he works Wolf’s cock. He just goes by instinct, and it seems to work. It doesn’t take very long—Wolf’s head falls back, he jerks his hips, makes delicious husky sounds then comes in Freddy’s hand. Like a beautiful machine. Wolf

pulls him close, kisses him deeply under the shower, then they clean each other up.

Freddy is not prepared for the warmth and affection and fun—he'd only really thought about the sex. The closeness of Wolf is intoxicating—the talking, the laughing, and the connection. He could never get enough of this. He soaps every inch of Wolf's body and kisses most of it, because he just has to. He tells Wolf about how he tiled his bathroom and shows him the bits he's not happy with. As he bends over to illustrate, Wolf kisses his arse, "Oh, yeah I see, Fred—mm"—and he can't stop laughing. Wolf wraps an enormous towel round them both, and Freddy wishes they could stay like that forever. He moves in tandem with Wolf, back to the bedroom, giggling and tickling. Wolf ends up staying the whole weekend, then comes back round almost every night after work.

A month later, Freddy is on his way home to Wolf. He's just in awe of it all. Today, at work, someone asks him what he's thinking about—staring at the wall smiling—and Freddy admits he's in a relationship. His voice is fairly steady as he speaks, but he can't stop the smiles. Kate scoots nearer on her swivel chair and asks him all sorts of questions. He answers, then ends up telling her far too much, but Kate pats his hand and says, "Ah, that's so sweet, what's his name?" So he tells her, and half of the office. Wolf texts him in the afternoon to remind him of their date, and he's overcome with pure glee that this is his.

He feels giddy with arousal and anticipation, like his whole life is about to come to fruition. Tonight will be his first real fuck. Wolf has been so gentle and patient with him, bringing his body to life with his hands and his mouth. He thought this day would never come. His feelings for Wolf are overwhelming. Wolf fills his head every minute of the day, no matter where he is, with his easy joking and his affection. Freddy had no idea that sex could be fun, and silly, and sharing, but it is.

He hurls his clothes in a corner in the bathroom—Wolf would not be pleased—and scrubs himself down. He's just patting himself off when Wolf appears in the doorway. He leans there in his jeans and tight T-shirt, looking like the porn star that he is, all relaxed, and sultry, and smouldering. Like a blond Viking leader, exuding ownership and confidence. Freddy beams at him then gets hard just from Wolf's gaze, raking him up and down, languid and hungry. "Hey gorgeous, come here," and he moves to Wolf and puts his arms

round his neck. Wolf kisses him and strokes his back and arse. "I have thought about you *all day*," Wolf purrs in his ear, and leads him to the bedroom.

They kiss and stroke and caress, and it is warm and beautiful and right. At first, he was so nervous every time they got naked, feeling the weight of his inexperience against Wolf's life of porn, but he has gained confidence, secure in the knowledge that Wolf will take over. And he does. He brings him to the brink with his skill and his own arousal, teasing him with his mouth and tongue, then fingers, until he begs. "*Now, Wolf. I'm ready, now!*" he shouts, and watches as Wolf rolls on the condom with a snap and kisses Freddy's knees.

Wolf pushes his knees up against his chest. He feels so exposed, completely open, vulnerable, but also fierce. This is actually going to happen! He loves the way that Wolf stares into his arsehole, all serious and tender and possessive. It makes him feel dirty and hot and so aroused he's almost panicky. Wolf's massive arms place his legs over those fantastic shoulders, and he lines his cock up, and nudges in. Freddy's already gotten used to the initial discomfort from their dildo experiments; it's more the rushing sensation of wonder that overwhelms him.

He gives in to the physical sensations and the steady rocking and noises coming from Wolf. The delicious pressure builds, and he grips Wolf's straining, bulging arms, pushing back up into him. They get faster, and he hears himself urging and moaning and pleading. Wolf smiles down at him and takes his cock. He strokes it in time with his thrusts, and they both become frantic with desire. They come within seconds of each other, and it is profound and absurd at the same time. Wolf pulls off the condom, then they entwine arms and legs as they catch their breath and kiss and smile. Wolf kisses his forehead and eyelids, his nose and chin. "Was that okay? Are you all right, darlin'?" He nods, stupidly happy, then tells Wolf about the science behind attraction and sex, and giggles as Wolf asks ridiculous questions and nibbles his ear. He knows that already his life is as tangled up with Wolf's as his arms and legs. All that blond and dark hair mixed up together and irretrievably linked.

The next morning, Freddy and Wolf are heading for the old people's home where Fred's mum lives. Freddy's worried and bites his lip ferociously and wonders why he ever agreed to this—she won't understand, and it will only upset her and... "Stop." And Freddy does. Sometimes Wolf doesn't even have to speak—a lift of his landscaped blond eyebrows, and Fred's wayward thoughts are halted. "It'll be okay, darlin'—you ever see a woman oblivious to my charms? Hmm?"

“No, nor a man either.” And they smirk. “You don’t have to tell her what we do together, Fred! But give her a chance. She might know more than you think. She’s your mom, and she’s not well. You might not get much longer to do it—it’s important.” Freddy starts to shake as they get near Mum’s room, and Wolf lifts a warning finger.

She is old and frail now, fine wisps of hair floating outwards like lightning. “Hello, Mum.” Freddy kisses her and sits down. “Mum, this is someone I’d really like you to meet—this is Wolf.” She peers up at him and smiles. “Hello, Wilf dear, sit down, why don’t you?” Wolf sits and chats about gardens, and TV, and what cake she had for tea yesterday. “Are you his boyfriend, then? I always knew he was a queer. I told his father. But if you want to, it don’t matter, does it?” Freddy is so shocked, he drops his tea on the carpet, and it makes a dirty great stain and Mum moans, “Always such a clumsy boy!” She moves on to bad-mouthing one of the other ladies who hogs the TV. Freddy mops up the tea and watches Wolf flirt and agree with Mum that no, it’s not right that she always gets to choose, and yes, they should throw her out on the streets. When they leave, though, Mum puts a hand on either side of Freddy’s face and says, “I’m so glad dear.” She kisses him soundly, and he sees Wolf’s bottom lip wobble.

They leave the residential home hand in hand, and he smiles ruefully at all the years he wasted, worrying and fretting about telling her...

It’s been ages now since the kidnap (Freddy likes to call it the gangbang), and they’ve long since moved on to spectacular and innovative fucking. He wants to do it all day and all night! He loves the way that Wolf answers all his questions and tentative demands. A few weeks ago, he wanted to know about felching, so Wolf showed him. The day after, he sent Wolf an e-mail with a list of everything he wants to try. It was a long list—the culmination of many years watching porn and a creative imagination, but Wolf sent it back with a tick next to every request.

Freddy still has his dark moments where he can’t believe it and wonders when it will end. One day he’s sure that Wolf will get sick of him and his strange ways. He obsesses about all those lovely men, naked around Wolf all day. They’re all so perfect in ways that Freddy knows he can never be, and he wonders why Wolf wouldn’t be tempted. Insults from years ago go round and round in his head. *Ordinary Freddy. Weirdo. Boring Freddy. Stupid!* Wolf always seems to know when his worries spiral out of control though, and he is not pleased.

Once the text simply said—*Get here. W*, and Freddy drives straight there to The Black Matrix, feeling sick and upset to find Wolf waiting outside with his arms crossed and a frown on his handsome face. Wolf says nothing at all but frog-marches Freddy inside and goes round holding his hand introducing him to everyone as his boyfriend. Freddy tries to look sorry, but inside he's just flying—boyfriends! Wolf then pushes him into his office and locks the door. He orders Freddy to strip, then fucks him over his desk. Freddy comes almost immediately, all over the documents and papers, then spends the afternoon on Wolf's lap.

“Now, why would I ever look at anyone else when I've got you? Hmm?” Freddy loves him so much, he wonders if he sends out some sort of psychic pheromone, which is why Wolf can read his mind. Wolf says it's down to his lupine magic.

Freddy eagerly waits for the next text. It comes at exactly five-fifty—*playroom*—Freddy rushes upstairs to see.

In the play room, there's nothing but cargo pants, a chair, and rope. There's a piece of paper stuck on the chair with one word—“Traitor!” Freddy squeals, rips off his clothes and flings them down the stairs, then puts on the cargo pants and waits. Almost immediately, he hears Wolf's key and then the door being slammed shut. He's so excited he almost slips into his nervous laugh but stops himself by biting his lip and breathing fiercely through his nose.

He hears the stamping of heavily booted feet, then the door is flung open, and he is confronted by a huge furious sergeant, perhaps a major. He is naked from the waist down—all gleaming muscles and enemy sensual beauty. His face is ablaze with disgust and hatred. He draws back, and for a moment the soldier thinks the Sarge is preparing to attack. His head jerks back, his mouth contorts, and he spits. A great gob lands on the soldier's face and eyes and mouth. It trickles down his neck and eyes. He hears the Sarge swear and expects torture for his crimes against his country.

“On your knees, you useless piece of shit! Give me twenty! Not fast enough. Get up again.” The soldier scrambles to keep up, but he stares straight ahead as he has been taught. “Oh, don't worry, meathead, I'll get it out of you.” The Sarge moves his face so close to the soldier that he can feel his breath. He spits out the words, his face a nasty sneer, “What. Have. You. Done. With. The. Memory. Stick?” The soldier presses his lips together and shakes his head vigorously.

The Sarge rips open the waist of the soldier's cargos and pushes them down. "Well, pretty boy, maybe this will change your mind. Give me twenty!" he roars, and the soldier scrambles to the floor naked and does push-ups with his arse in the air and his cock nudging the floor. "You got that stick in here, soldier? Maybe I better take a look." The Sarge parts his cheeks and shoves an already lubed finger in. "Keep going. Ten more." The soldier pushes down ten more times, and the finger moves with him. *Slap! Smack!* His arse throbs inside and out from the blows and the finger. He's panting now from the exercise and feels sweat on his back. "Stay on all fours, you scum!" The Sarge moves to get something from a box. Torture devices? The soldier cannot see, and he knows better than to turn his head.

Sarge returns and parts the soldier's cheeks again. "You are one ugly motherfucker, soldier. WHERE IS IT?" But the soldier soldiers on and remains silent. He feels something firm and slippery nudging at his arse, then entering him. His breath quickens, and he feels the vibrations against his prostate. The soldier wants to touch himself, but he daren't. "Oh yeah, I'll shake it out of you, soldier." The soldier's hips are held from behind, and he is rocked back and forth against the vibrating thing up his arse. *Slap!* "You take it up the shitter from *them*, soldier? I'm filming this and sending it to the fucking queen, your momma, and all your fuckin' friends if you don't tell me." *Slap!* The soldier grunts, with the degradation and humiliation and how horrible it feels inside him and... he's going to come. The vibrator is whipped out of his arse, and his cock is gripped until the urge ceases. "You dirty, horrible traitor. You are a fucking disgrace, and I'm going to teach you a lesson." His arse is slapped in earnest as he's pulled over the evil bastard's lap.

Eventually, the soldier is flung on his back, still naked, and his hands are tied above his head. He's completely helpless and must await his fate. He watches out of the corner of his eye as the Sarge undresses. He is one scary son of a bitch. He kneels down by the soldier and runs his hand up his leg, over his balls and straining cock. "You're gonna give me it to me, bitch, one way or another." And he straddles the soldier and moves up until his huge cock is over the soldier's face. "I'm gonna do some push-ups of my own. Let's see if that fuckin' stick is lodged in your throat, shitface." And the Sarge pushes his cock into the soldier's throat and pumps.

The soldier is forced to deepthroat or suffocate. The Sarge starts grunting and making little noises and then pulls out and slaps the soldier over the face with his cock. The soldier, confused, licks and kisses as it goes past his mouth, and the Sarge smirks and holds back a smile. "Oh yeah, you want it bad. Give

me a colour, soldier.” And the soldier shouts as loud as he can, “*Green!*” He is flipped back over onto all fours, his hands untied, and then fucked hard like a dog—chest to back, sweaty and brutal, shoulders gripped by meaty vices—the force of the fucking actually bucking him forward. The Sarge is massive and very good at this, the bastard. The soldier makes a lot of noise and shouts and screams as the Sarge slips an arm around him and strokes his stomach as he fucks him. Then his hand slides down to his cock, and the soldier just cannot hold off. He comes with an enormous shout at this indignity and spasms, pushing back onto his impaler. The Sarge makes strangled, choking sounds then comes, clutching the soldier and kissing his back. They both collapse, laughing.

They lie together for a bit, talking about it. “That vibrator was so good! Can we do that again?”

“Mm, well, I never found the memory stick, did I? Maybe I’ll have to look again... I didn’t slap your arse too hard, did I?” Freddy has to keep telling Wolf that he won’t break—the first few times they played he kept asking if he was okay and slipping out of character. He still does sometimes, and he finds it really hard to swear at Fred, but Freddy loves it—the viler, the better. Freddy even made him a list of words—some underlined in red—he really wants Wolf to use, so Wolf does his best.

He can never make it last as long as Freddy would like. He wants to be tied to the chair and interrogated, but Wolf can’t wait. Freddy is much better than Wolf at this—he can play a role for hours, but they make a good team. They record all their sessions, and Freddy loves to watch them again and again as Wolf calls his name softly and holds him by the waist as they fuck. “You are something else, Fred,” Wolf whispers, holding his head still and rubbing their noses together. “Even if you are a traitor with a memory stick up your arse.”

One morning at work, Wolf calls to tell Freddy that *Huge Brother* is such a success that Tyler has received an offer to do a similar venture in California. Tyler wants Wolf to go with him as his manager. It will mean being away for a few months, but it also means that when it’s over Wolf will definitely never have to fuck, naked, in front of a camera again. Not for money, anyway! He talks it through with Fred and says that he won’t do it if Fred doesn’t want him to—four months is a long time, and California is a long way from England. Freddy feels cold and wretched, but he hears the excitement in Wolf’s voice and feels small and mean. “No, you should do it, Wolf—this is your chance,

and you deserve it. I can manage, Wolf! I could come out for a long weekend in a few weeks. It'll be okay." Freddy grips the edge of the sofa until the stitches strain and it rips.

Freddy can't face seeing him off at the airport, so they say goodbye for now in Fred's flat. Wolf holds him very tightly and strokes his hair. "You know, Fred, if you say it's too much, I won't go. If you text me tomorrow and say it's too much, I'll turn straight back and come home. Any time you ask me, I'll come back." And Freddy cries all over again, despite all his efforts not to. In the end, he pushes Wolf out of the door and tells him it'll be okay, it's not forever. Wolf looks at him like someone has died, and when Freddy goes to bed that night he finds a huge bunch of flowers, a butt plug with a tail, and a lovely, filthy book about a gay werewolf.

Freddy does okay for the first month. He follows Wolf's instructions—he goes to work and the gym, visits Mum, and eats properly. He does *not* go shoplifting! Gail from The Black Matrix comes round with some of the guys to keep him company every week (and, he suspects, to report back to Wolf). He keeps the emptiness at bay but feels like much more than half of him is absent. He misses the sex, but he misses the other things much more. Sunday mornings are the worst, and the pancake mixture ends up in the bin, with him in tears. He calls Wolf every night, but he sounds so far away, and Freddy clams up and can't think what to say.

He now has a few friends at work though, and they persuade him to go out with them for a drink one night. They make him wear a T-shirt that says, "Sorry girls, I suck dick", and he gets drunk and sings karaoke. As he comes out from the underground alone, he is aware that he is being followed by a group of young men. He feels the panic rushing up and tries to rush past but is pushed into an alleyway and surrounded.

Wolf is on a plane for London. He hasn't slept or eaten and is in such a state of nervous anxiety and terror that he's not aware of anything around him. He is helplessly frozen. In his head he begs and begs Freddy to hold on, and he tries to send out mind messages as he passes over the states, the ocean, and, finally, the last mountains and plains, before landing. Short commands, like the ones he uses when Freddy panics. *Hold on, Fred. Hold on... I'm coming, darlin'... I'm on my way... Just breathe and do as they say... Don't you fucking give in, Fred... Master's coming... Master orders you to wait for him... Oh, baby!* Wolf covers over five thousand miles, and all his fear, anguish and love solidifies

into a solid knot in his stomach and head. He throws up twice and feels himself being squeezed from the inside out. Sometimes, Wolf says things out loud, and the other passengers edge away. Wolf couldn't give a shit if they jump out of the fucking window. As they land, Wolf pushes past the other people and runs. He brings no luggage—only a passport, a wallet, and a set of keys. The taxi driver takes one look at his desperate face and makes it to the hospital in record time.

Freddy looks like a squashed plum, black and blue and with tubes everywhere. They tell Wolf that he has a deep concussion, and they won't know more until he comes round. Wolf takes his hand and all but collapses onto the bed. He knows there would be no point to a world without Fred—with all his useless facts, his strange obsessions, and his freckles. He sobs at that poor, distorted nose. If he could make Freddy come round with his will alone, then he would be dancing down the corridor. Wolf prays and promises all sorts of things to God and swears that if Fred survives this then he's never leaving his side again. Wolf cannot think about him being beaten up alone and him halfway across the world to make money. "All for fucking money!" The nurses feel sorry for Wolf and bring him tea and a sandwich. He falls asleep exhausted, half-curved up on Freddy's bed, clutching his hand.

Wolf comes to, all of a sudden. He opens his eyes and sits bolt upright to see Freddy awake and alive, black and blue but smiling, and so gorgeous. The tears finally start, and he cannot stop shaking and heaving. "Jesus fucking Christ, Fred. I thought you were dead, I thought you were dead." And he is unable to say anything else, so he places himself carefully round Freddy and sobs onto his stomach.

Freddy is too battered to do much but croak, "I'm okay, Wolf, I'm okay. Shh, I'm okay now. See? I wouldn't dare die without you telling me to!"

And Wolf remembers his psychic orders sent from the other side of the world and laughs tearfully. The sheer relief wells up through every muscle and pore, and he is the happiest man alive. He gets on the bed behind Fred and wraps both arms carefully round him. He gets as near to him as he possibly can without hurting the bruises.

He tells Freddy just how much he loves him and how precious he is to him and nuzzles into his hair. "Remember that shit you told me, Fred? The laws of physics?" Fred nods, looking a bit confused. "You remember, Fred—all forces exist in pairs? The law of the universe and all that? Well, you were right, darlin'. You and me, we're a pair. Meant to be together. Two forces. I was

fucking miserable without you, baby. One force on its own is nothing, just a miserable lonely bastard.” Freddy says he should explain the theory better sometime, but links their fingers together and doesn’t let go. They both drift in and out of sleep, locked together like a Chinese puzzle until the doctor returns. Wolf later goes with Freddy for the scan and listens carefully to everything the doctors say, and it seems that he’s been incredibly lucky—it is mainly bruising and swelling.

While he’s recovering in hospital, Wolf works his magic. He arranges for all the staff at The Black Matrix to visit him so he’s never alone, and spends hours sitting with Freddy, holding his hand and amusing him with tales from *Huge Brother USA*. He has a steady flow of drop-dead gorgeous men next to his bed and a room full of flowers. His visitors are charming and spoil Freddy—reading him bits from crap magazines, feeding him chocolates, and making him and the nurses laugh.

Gail, the receptionist, tells him, “He’s been so much better now that he’s got you, though. Mad about you, he is.” Freddy has never been so popular (or popular at all!) and feels like a celebrity. He’s so glad when they let him go home, and Wolf gets to pamper him twenty-four hours a day.

He recovers from his physical injuries fairly quickly, but it takes a while for his brain to process all that fear and horror. Some of the darkness comes back, and the first time he goes out alone, he has a panic attack. He texts Wolf, with shaking fingers, and waits in the car with his head wrapped in his arms, his nails digging into his palms. Wolf arrives with Tyler, in a frenzy, and cannot get Fred to open the car door.

“Come on, darlin’—it’s me, Fred. Can you open the door for me? It’s okay. I’m here now, you’re safe. It’s okay.” He eventually opens the door and is shaking so much that Wolf asks if he’s having a fit. Freddy grabs Wolf to him and sobs.

“I couldn’t stop them, Wolf. I couldn’t. What if they’re out here again?”

“It’s okay, darlin’. It’s okay. Nobody here but me and Ty. Look—see? We’ll fucking kill anyone who comes near you.” And Freddy believes him. Wolf sits with him on the back seat, for a bit, just holding him and soothing him, and Tyler tells Freddy how the same thing happened to him once, despite his impressive muscles and strength.

“Nothing you coulda done to stop ’em, Fred, not when there’s a gang like that. Fucking cowards, Fred, pathetic, little men. Not worth your time even

thinking about 'em." And Freddy feels a little better, so Wolf drives him home and treats him like he is made of glass. After this, he follows Wolf round the flat and only feels safe when he curls up on his lap. All kinds of horrible experiences he has pushed away his entire life flood his brain, and he feels out of control and emotional.

Wolf wakes up every night to find Freddy plastered on top of him, with his knees drawn up and his face crammed into Wolf's neck. Freddy hates himself for it—*Stupid idiot!*—and even though Wolf is full of concern for him and gives him all the time he needs, he is sure that Wolf is slipping from him. He feels ugly and weak and waits for Wolf to have enough. *Stupid!*

Wolf watches him, develops acid reflux, and says he feels as if he's swallowed knives, seeing Freddy so traumatised. He goes on the Internet and asks his friends, and finally, he takes him to a therapist who agrees to see them together. The first few times they go, he clutches Wolf's hand and is on major alert panic mode—he gabbles on and cannot sit still. Wolf strokes his hands, but the therapist—an old friend of Tyler's—eventually gets him going out alone and back to work, and things return to normal. He's still a little shaky when he's away from Wolf, especially on the nights when Wolf has to work, and he goes round checking the locks again and again. One night, Wolf comes home early to find him cowering in a corner, convinced that there's someone downstairs. After this, he goes with Wolf to The Black Matrix and has a sleeping bag on his office floor.

A month after the attack, Tyler asks Wolf and Freddy to come to his office to talk business. Wolf hopes he isn't in the shit and thinks about all the time he had off, looking after Fred. Tyler puts an arm round them both, though, and leads them to his old, battered leather sofa. "Guys, I want you to meet my financial advisor. He's got some figures about *Huge Brother USA*."

Wolf smirks. "Financial advisor? Since when?" The guy goes on a bit, Wolf can't really follow—percentages and trends, blah blah blah—but Fred's listening intently, with his hands under his chin.

Everyone stops and looks at Wolf, so he raises his eyebrows at Fred, who takes him to the laptop and points at a figure. Wolf stares at it. Stares some more. "What's it say, darlin'?—I'm no good on dollars!" Fred reads out the figure slowly then converts it into pounds and reads it out again. It's a six-figure number. Wolf can't work out what they're telling him. He listens. He

really does. The finance guy explains how *Huge Brother USA* has made them rich, really fucking, filthy rich. He looks at Tyler for clues. “Rich.” He remembers when he and Ty had three outfits between them and gave blow jobs to pay the rent. “Rich?”

Tyler hugs him, hard. “Wolf, Mr Simpson is here to make you my legal business partner.”

“Business partner? I don’t want that responsibility, Ty.” But Tyler won’t take no for an answer.

“Come on, Wolf, you crusty old bastard—we’ve known each other since the Ice Age! No one knows the business like you. I can’t do it without you!”

“Sure you can—I’ll just be your manager!”

“Wolf. You deserve this as much as me—it was half your money that funded *Huge Brother*. Heck—it was your idea in the first place! You can manage this end from The Black Matrix, and I can do the USA and Australia. What d’ya say, old man?”

“Fuck off. Not old! Let me talk to Fred.”

Freddy makes him listen to Tyler and the finance guy and smiles when he asks the guy to read out the figures again until he can make sense of them. He and Tyler laugh at each other and shake their heads at what they’ve become—the granddaddy tycoons of the reality porn world.

“Holy crap on a cracker!”

“No fucking way!”

That night, as they’re cuddled up together on the sofa, Wolf takes a deep breath and lifts up Freddy’s chin with a finger. “Do you want to move in with me, Fred? Hmm?” And they talk about it. Wolf now has to be on call twenty-four hours at The Black Matrix and intends to renovate a flat above. “A brand new start for us, darlin’—our own place.”

“I’d just drive you mad, Wolf!” But Wolf doesn’t think so. “Well, I dunno Wolf—it’s a big step.” Wolf has a horrible sinking sensation. Maybe he’s shamed Fred—or maybe Fred doesn’t feel the same way he does after all? He feels old and weary and wonders how he can offer Freddy a way out.

“You could help at The Black Matrix, darlin’. It’s all getting a bit much there for Gail—I’d really appreciate that. If, you know, if it didn’t work out for you...” And Freddy throws his arms round his neck and covers him with kisses until he smiles again.

“I’d love to Wolf, of course, I would! I’m just kidding, you big idiot.” And shows him just how much he wants to move in together. Fred starts packing the very next day, with gusto. He throws away the china dogs and nearly everything else and tells his boss that he is off to get married! On their last night in his flat, Wolf tongue-fucks him until he’s shouting nonsense, then very gently fucks him into the carpet.

Freddy loves living at The Black Matrix and soon becomes an integral part of its fabric. It’s always busy and noisy but he makes their flat a haven, spending ages choosing colours and fabrics that will be peaceful for Wolf, after a hard day arranging arms and legs and cocks. He becomes best friends with Gail and sorts out their IT needs and website and all their ancient computers. The Black Matrix now has efficient systems, and he becomes the IT Manager. He loves sitting with Gail when she ogles the guys doing the scenes. They make themselves cry with laughter doing voice-overs in ridiculous accents:

“Get a move on, Colby. I’m starving!”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Jake, wash your feet!”

“Mason! The baby’s coming!”

“Not that hole!”

As his birthday approaches, Freddy knows that he is in for one mighty treat. He doesn’t know what—but Wolf’s been looking things up on the Internet and scribbling away and mysterious parcels keep arriving. This is usually followed by a new game! Each one gets more and more adventurous, and he loves it. Anything with uniforms and costumes and paraphernalia gets his approval. He really gets off on the swearing. He has no idea why this is, or where it comes from, but Wolf says, “Who the fuck cares?” He gets the text at two p.m. *Under bed—1 hr.* There, he finds his dog tail butt plug and a muzzle. Puppy play! Freddy’s favourite...

Pup and Master are having a game.

On the first try, Pup is mischievous! He scampers round the room scattering the mouse traps, pushing at them with his paws, and chasing them.

On purpose.

He runs in circles, trying to catch his own tail, and barks shrilly. Master just stands there—tall, strong, frowning. Pup can see his Master is *Not Pleased*, and

he whines and wags his tail anxiously. Master crosses his arms and whacks the crop on the floor like a Grecian God from ancient times. Master is the universe and the galaxy and he is tall and true and powerful and Pup is *In Trouble!*

He jumps and hangs his head and crawls over to lick Master's toes and feet and tries to jump up on him. "Down, Pup. Bad dog." Pup is taken away to a corner and chains are attached to his ankle straps. Pup is left there on his own in the corner, with only a bowl of water and Master's displeasure. Pup is miserable and desolate! Pup has nothing. Pup is not good enough for Master...

Pup puts up with it for a bit and laps his water, then he tries to get Master's attention—after all, he is only a pup and needs a lot of reassurance. He whines and wriggles and yaps, but no reaction from his silent, glowering Master.

So, naughty Pup barks loudly and wags his pretty tail. At last! Master glares at him, but he does come over and squats down in front of him. He stares at Pup until he lowers his eyes and whines. "Maybe you need to burn off some energy, Pup!" And Master pats his head and tickles him and produces a rubber toy bone! Pup pounces on it and bites it and shakes it until it squeaks. Master takes the other end and pulls, but Pup holds on. They have a squeaky tug of war until Pup gives it up, then tackles Master to the ground. Master is strong though, and Pup works hard, darting in and out. Pup gets very excited and yaps and barks and nips Master's shoulder. "Now Pup, that is enough. Are you ready to try again?" Pup woofs and jumps and licks Master's leg. Kind Master! Master strokes him behind his ear and pats his back and Pup tries to push into Master's hand. Pup is rewarded with a doggy snack, and he chews it down. "There's a good boy! Now Pup, we're going to try again. I'm going to put all these lovely mousetraps out and if you can get past them all, without setting them off, *without* touching, Pup, then you can have this bone!" Master points to his groin. Pup is so excited that he runs in circles and barks.

Then pees.

All over the floor. Master's voice has gone ominously quiet—"Oh, Pup, you disappoint me,"—and Pup goes down on his belly and howls. To show Master that he really is sorry, Pup begins to lick up the pee, and Master rushes over and pushes Pup away. "No! Fucking hell!" And Master nearly loses it and has to clasp his mouth with his hand. Master's shoulders shake silently for a bit, and he makes choked, muffled sounds of laughter, and tears run down his face. Pup sits on his haunches and watches playfully, his tongue hanging out and shifting his lovely tail. His eyes are bright and his nose wet, and Pup is just raring to go. Lovely, Master!

Master cleans up the pee and sits facing Pup. He gives him a tiny kiss on the shoulder like he just can't help it and whispers in Pup's ear, "Colour?" Pup barks out a "Green" and they begin again.

Master unclasps Pup, and he lies on his back with his legs in the air, and Master gives his belly a stroke and scratch just to show that there are no hard feelings. Master's hands are so gentle, and he makes circles and moves up to Pup's nipples and squeezes them lightly. Pup likes this, and he whines and pushes his belly up. Master speaks to Pup, softly, but firmly. "You're a spoiled puppy, yes, you are!" Then he licks all the way down Pup's belly, and alongside his cock, and under Pup's tail and balls until Pup is beside himself and starts to pant. "Such a beautiful, waggy tail." And Master pushes it in a bit further and wiggles it about, until his Pup is making a lot of noise and pushing his doggy arse back at his Master.

"Oh, Pup, what's this? A little puppy penis!" And Master nuzzles his cock and kisses it. "Oh, Pup, that is so sweet. Show Master." Pup gets proudly up on all fours, with his hind legs spread, and parades round the room for his Master to see. Pup can feel his Master's attention and admiration rolling over him like warm sea waves. Nothing else matters. Master is pleased and lies down on the floor so Pup can crawl over his face. Pup loves this attention and ruts the air a bit, whining and moving his tail as he does so. His puppy penis is standing so proudly from Master's care and love that Pup becomes engrossed and ruts quicker and grunts. Master has a huge bone again and Pup wonders if he'll be able to taste it before his task, so he licks all the way up Master's thigh. Pup is allowed to lick the bone once—so delicious—but then Master stands up and pats his head and gives him another doggie snack. "No, Pup, what did Master say? Remember?" And Pup is taken back to his chain and attached while Master carefully puts out the mousetraps again.

So Pup tries again. The second time, Pup concentrates so hard it gives him a headache. He gets past all but one mousetrap but bumps into the last one, and it snaps on his paws then skitters into Master's leg. Pup is so cross—"Oh fuck!"—that he launches himself at Master anyway, thinking that maybe he can just get to the bone, and Master won't notice. But Master does!

Master is up like a shot. Pup is taken back to his chains and water bowl and gets a tap on the nose when he yaps his annoyance. Pup is pissed off and barks madly, then woofs a little swear. He turns his back on Master, lies down, and pretends to sleep. After all, he has not got much patience and needs lots of naps. He whines and moans a bit, then snuggles into the doggie blanket and has a

little pretend nap. Master hasn't told him not to, and his jaw pouts a little. He is bored now and wants his bone!

Pup is "woken up" by Master's mouth on his doggie penis. Master is so good at this! Smart Master! He is patient and knows when to lick and when to suck, and pretty soon, Pup just wants to be mated and bollocks to the mouse traps. "Oh, good Pup! Pretty, pretty puppy. That nice? Hmm?" and Master gives his puppy penis one last lingering kiss, and Pup does a shaky woof. "Come on, Pup, let's have one more try—you nearly got there last time. There's my good boy." And Pup wags his tail and is rewarded with a scratch to his ears, slaps to his doggie arse, and another doggie treat.

Master releases his ankle chains and this time puts on a dog muzzle and a leash. Master leads him round the room, telling him he must keep his head up and focus only on Master's arse. Pup's knees are killing him, but Master is pleased, so it is of no importance. When Master is satisfied that Pup has calmed down and learnt to follow him, he arranges the traps for the third time. Master sits where he is comfortable and picks up the riding crop. Puppy lifts his head up and whines, and Master swishes it through the air to show him. If Pup fails again, maybe he will feel it on his back and arse!

Pup tries really hard. He is cautious and steady. He picks his way past each trap feeling only Master's eyes and approval. He has one wobble—when he notices that Master is slowly and lazily stroking himself. Master is magnificent—the bone is upright, gleaming and oh so tempting. Pup's bone! Pup is indignant and woofs, and Master blows him a kiss and winks. Pup is almost there. He wags his tail, howls a bit, then slinks past the last mousetrap. Pup has done it! Master is so pleased, and he takes off the chain and muzzle and kisses Pup all over his furry face. "Oh good boy! Now you can have your reward." And Pup is allowed to finally suck on his bone, slurping and lapping all over his gorgeous Master until he is panting and bucking his hips and making lovely desperate noises.

Then, Master takes out Pup's tail and fucks him long and slow, until Pup thinks that he will die or explode into space. Master is grunting and moaning himself, losing rhythm and gripping Pup's hips. Master shouts and comes with a death-like yell and Pup follows.

They shake and sigh together, and Wolf takes off Freddy's collars and rubs his wrists and ankles tenderly. "I love you Fred, even if you are a dirty, kinky bastard—can't believe you drank that piss—I nearly fucking died!" And Wolf tickles him. "Happy Birthday, darlin'." And Freddy wraps his arms round

Wolf's neck and licks all round his mouth and nibbles his nose. They snuffle each other for a while, happy and sated. They both have terribly sore knees though, and agree that they will stand up for the next game. "Wolf? About those nappies..."

The End

Author Bio

Claire lives in the North of England with her family, including the ones in her head. She started writing at a young age and is really only ever in the real world a small portion of her time.

She is a passionate advocate of human rights, equal opportunities, and diversity. She likes to write about people who see themselves as not perfect or feel that they have not achieved.

Claire works with people, helping them to achieve their goals and give birth to their creative talents. She is currently working on two other projects and hopes to finalise a further book this year.

Contact & Media Info

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THE LAYOVER

By Megan Erickson

Photo Description

Two sleeping men lie on a mattress on the floor. One man has his arm around the waist of the other, spooning him. The man in front has a colorful tattoo on his shoulder.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I can't think of anything worse after a night of drinking than waking up next to someone and not being able to remember his name, or how you met... or why he's dead.

I'm dying to see where you take it from here. I would love to see something humorous. I would love it even more if you manage to keep the cops out of it.

Sincerely,

Gwynn

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: humor, some mystery, wicked hangovers, dancing in gold lamé shorts, a talking parrot, and what happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas, HFN, adventure, amnesia

Word Count: 17,027

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Author's Note

I had a blast writing this. I saw the photo, read the Dear Author letter, and immediately thought of the movie *The Hangover*. So this story is a little inspired by that but with... you know... guys who like guys.

THE LAYOVER

By Megan Erickson

Chapter One

My roiling stomach woke me first, then my pounding head joined in the greeting. Their friends, dry mouth and liquor sweats, let me know last night had been a real winner.

Those were my only clues, because I sure as fuck didn't remember a thing.

I opened my sandpaper-lined eyelids and blinked until enough moisture coated my eyeballs so I no longer wanted to gouge them out of my skull.

My assessment:

I was lying on a bare mattress with a single sheet draped over me.

I was naked. With morning wood.

I wasn't alone.

I lay on my side, my arm around a slim brunette with a riot of colored ink on his shoulder. I squinted. The tattoo was kinda shitty, with some weird-looking blue monster with horns and fangs. It looked like something out of one of my niece's movies. I think her favorite one, a blue furred one named Sully.

I lifted my arm off of his waist, and peeked under the sheet. He was naked too. Nice ass.

I frowned and wiggled my hips a little because...

"Dude, quit moving," said a voice from behind me.

Behind me?

I turned and shot up to a sitting position, scrambling backward like a crab until I fell off the end of the mattress onto the hardwood floor on my naked ass.

As I grabbed for the sheet, a pair of green-gold eyes peered over the edge of the mattress. Those cat eyes squinted at me. "Who are you?"

I looked at the top of Sully-Tattoo's head. He didn't move. Must be a deep sleeper. I looked back at Cat Eyes. "Who are you?"

His gaze was on Sully. "Who the fuck is that?"

"I don't know."

Cat Eyes looked back at me and then his gaze lowered to peruse my body, slowly, unashamedly, before working back up to my face. He cocked his head

and smirked with a dimple that could stop Chicago traffic on I90 at rush hour. "You're cute, Blondie."

I narrowed my eyes. Yes, he was fucking gorgeous with his ruffled black hair, broad shoulders and model-quality chiseled jaw, but I was in no mood to chit-chat.

I had no idea where I was, who these dudes were, or what time it was. I had a plane that I had to catch tomorrow out of Vegas. Because my sister's wedding in California would wait for no man. Even her favorite brother. Who stretched his layover in Vegas to two nights.

Because *Vegas*.

Oh fuck, I hoped today was the day I thought it was. I glanced at my watch. It was nine a.m. On March fifteenth. Okay. Good.

So, another assessment: Clothes. Verify location. Make sure I still make my flight tomorrow morning.

But first... "Did I fuck you?" I asked Cat Eyes.

He jerked his head back, raised an eyebrow. "Uh, I don't think so. I fuck you?"

"I don't think so either."

We both looked at Sully, who still hadn't moved a muscle.

Cat Eyes reached over and prodded the guy's inked shoulder. "Yo, buddy."

"Yo, buddy?" I asked. "Is that the line you used to get in my pants?"

He glared at me. "You're critiquing my pick-up skills right now?"

I was grouchy and cold and hungry and hungover. "I'm just sayin'."

He opened his mouth, then confusion passed over his face. He licked his lips. "You know, I don't remember." He frowned. "Anything."

I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my palms. "I don't remember anything either."

I replayed my last steps in my head. I'd taken an early vacation from my graphic designing business, and hopped a flight to Vegas, looking to party before dealing with my perfect nuclear family for a whole weekend.

Where the fuck had I gone...

"Yo, buddy," Cat Eyes said again to Sully. "Wake up."

I wracked my brain. I'd been at those fountains, hadn't I? With the water and lights?

"Dude," he said again, sitting up and leaning over Sully. A black swirly tattoo curled over his left hip, and I couldn't look away. Fuck, he was cut with muscle, with lightly furred pecs and abs and holy shit—

"Mother. Fucker," he said, and I snapped my eyes up to his. They were wide, and his previously tanned face now looked drained of color. I swore I saw a rapid pulse beating in his neck and those pecs were rising and falling with fast breaths.

I leaned forward. "What's wrong?"

Those cat eyes remained wide, locked onto mine. I rolled onto my knees and crawled to the end of the mattress. "Hey, man, you okay?"

His eyes darted to Sully and back to me. "He's dead."

I froze. He didn't say what I thought he just did. No way. Or maybe he was a comedian and he was fucking with me. Did I go to a comedy show last night? "Come again?"

"The-the-thing-in the wrists and the neck..."

"The pulse?"

He nodded maniacally. "Yeah, yeah that. He doesn't have one."

We stared at each other a beat as my expression surely morphed into a look of horror matching his own.

And then we moved.

I fell back to my ass, and, in a maneuver I would maybe later revisit because of its smoothness, I hopped onto the balls of my feet and bolted. The flap of a sheet and thud of bare feet let me know Cat Eyes was on my heels.

I didn't know where I was going. I barely registered that I was in some fucking lush Vegas hotel room with over-the-top drapes on huge picture windows and gold statues of lions and shit like that.

I spotted an open door ahead of me, marble sinks and tile floors, and ran inside then dove into the dry whirlpool tub and huddled into a ball.

Cat Eyes slammed the door behind him and climbed in across from me, hugging his knees to his chest.

We huddled across from each other, and it took me a minute or two, sitting in silence with a stranger, to realize we were both still naked. My hip bones dug into the sides of the marble tub.

I grabbed a plush brown towel off the ledge beside the tub and wrapped it around my waist. Then I handed another to Cat Eyes, and he did the same.

I didn't want to talk about the... whatever that was in the other room. I figured the next important task was to figure out who the hell I sat in a tub with.

"What's your name?" My words echoed off the walls of the expansive bathroom.

He squinted at me. "You don't beat around the bush do you?"

I shrugged. Because no, I didn't, but this guy didn't need to know me. No matter how hot he was. Or how much I wanted to see those eyes glaze over with lust. Or how much I wanted to touch his cock. The glimpse I'd gotten earlier...

"Beck."

I blinked. "What?"

His jaw muscled flexed. "Beck. My name."

"Your name is Beck?"

His lip twitched in amusement. "My last name is Becket. I go by Beck."

He looked like a Beck. Kind of a rich guy with an edge. I bet he looked fucking orgasmic in a tux. "What's your first name?"

"Aaron."

"You don't look like an Aaron."

A bigger smile. Those dimples. Gah. "Agreed." Pause. "What's your name?"

"Nate."

"Nate what?" I liked hearing his voice say my name.

"Callahan."

He pressed his lips together and shot a glance at the closed door of the bathroom. "So, Nate Callahan. We have ourselves a situation."

I looked down at my towel-covered lap. "I don't even know where my clothes are. Or my phone. I guess we need to call the cops."

Limbs thumped against marble as Beck rose onto his knees in a jerky motion and held his hands toward me, palms out. His eyes were wide, and he was breathing rapidly again. "No cops."

Oh for fuck's sake. "Are you shitting me right now?"

He shook his head. "No cops, Nate. Please."

Dammit, he used my name. "Why not?"

His eyes skittered away. "I just... fuck, I can't deal with cops. I can't be associated with this..."

"So you're gonna bail on me so I have to deal with the dead guy by myself?"

"No, but—"

"Was that even your real name?"

He rolled his lips between his teeth. "Maybe. Maybe not."

I threw up my hands and slapped them down beside the tub. "This is so fucked up."

"I swear to God, I had nothing to do with what's going on here. I'm just as confused as you are. But I can't get involved with cops right now. I'm trying to... move on... and..." His voice trailed off, but he stayed on his knees, widening those cat eyes at me imploringly.

"What'd you do?" I asked

He bit his lip.

I pointed a finger at him. "Oh God, did you kill a man in Reno just to watch him die?"

Those scared eyes froze for a second before they crinkled, and he chuckled. Then, I snorted. And then, we both collapsed into a fit of laughter.

I swore I'd gone crazy, but if I called up my best friend and told him I was naked in a bathtub in Vegas with a dead guy on a mattress in the next room, he wouldn't be that surprised.

I think my danger gene was defective.

"Ok, so just to clarify," I said, wiping my eyes, "you're not a murderer, right? Because that would be awkward."

He shook his head. "I swear, it's nothing that bad, but I... I can't get the cops involved in this, okay?"

I took a deep breath. I should say fuck no, we're calling the cops. But the guy was gorgeous and polite, and, dammit, he was naked in a tub with me, those eyes fixed on mine, that tattoo tempting my tongue to trace it.

Stupid never-ending hormones.

"Okay," I said, hoping that didn't seal some sort of fate. A bad one.

He relaxed back into the tub but didn't take his eyes off of me. "So what's the first step?"

"I'd like some clothes," I said.

"Me too."

I tapped my finger on my lips. "And then... we have to figure out who Sully is."

"Sully?"

"Yeah, he's got that horrible tattoo on his shoulder. Looks like that monster from that kids' movie."

He wrinkled his nose. "It is a crappy tattoo, isn't it? He didn't do a great job vetting the artist."

I nodded, and it wasn't lost on me that our minds seemed to work alike. "Ok, so we need to find out who Sully is. Hopefully he's got some ID on him."

He looked thoughtful. "We need to find out who the hell paid for this room. I mean, if I did, then I'm broke as shit. Since I was already broke." I nodded in agreement as he kept talking. "Because we can't just leave this guy here if our names are on the room."

I sighed and tugged on my hair. "On the count of three, we get up and walk out. Okay?"

"Okay."

"One... two... three."

Neither of us moved.

"I said three!" I cried.

"You didn't move!" he cried back.

I growled. "Okay, I'm going to count again."

"Fine."

“One... two... three.”

This time we both climbed out of the tub together, opened the bathroom door and made our way back into the living room. I peered around the corner, hoping Sully had magically come back to life and would be waving to us while he made coffee.

No such luck, because his prone form was still on the mattress. And I didn't smell coffee.

We stood side by side staring at him, towels wrapped around our waists.

“Can't we just say what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas and—”

“TRANCE!” The inhuman screech pierced my ears, and I didn't know who moved first, whether Beck grabbed me or I grabbed him, but within seconds we had turned the sofa so it faced the far wall and were clutched in an embrace on the plush cushions. Our defense was the back of the couch on one side of us and the wall on the other.

Our legs were tangled, and Beck had his thick arms wrapped around my shoulders, one hand clutching my head to his chest. I was slightly smaller than him, and his instinct to protect me from whatever the hell that thing was warmed me.

A little.

Because I was pretty freaked out.

His heart beat a mile a minute under my ear.

“What the fuck is that?” I whispered.

“No fucking—”

“TRANCE!” The screech came again, and his body shuddered under mine.

“It sounds like a woman,” he said.

“Or a robot?”

“A robot? What is this, a Will Smith movie?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Fuck.” He took a deep breath. “Okay, I'm going to look over the back of the couch. If there's someone here, then why didn't they say something this morning?”

“Is that question rhetorical?”

He sighed, and I knew there was an eye roll. Despite the clusterfuck of the situation, his exasperation made me smile.

He eased me off of his chest and motioned for me to stay put. Like I was going to move. Yeah, right.

He gripped the top of the couch and slowly raised his head, kind of like a human meerkat. I waited, able to see the corner of his eyes from the angle at which I hid.

His eyes widened and he froze, clearly focused on something.

“What is it?” I whispered.

“TRANCE!”

“It’s a fucking bird,” he said in awe.

“A bird?”

“Yeah, like a parrot or some shit.”

I did my own meerkat impression beside him. There, perched on the black mantle of the tacky as hell gold fireplace, was a green parrot with a yellow head. A couple red feathers capped the folded edges of his wings.

“What.The.Hell.HappenedLastNight!” Beck screamed at the bird, his frustration clearly evident at finding another surprise in his little hotel room o’ horrors.

“TRANCE!” The bird screeched again. “Mac!”

“Did he just—”

“I think he said ‘Mac’,” I said.

Beck sat back on his calves and looked at me. “Okay, so he has said ‘Trance’ and ‘Mac’.”

“Good detective skills.”

He shoved me gently. “Shut up.”

“I have no idea why he’s yelling Trance, but I’m going to guess his name is Mac?”

We both turned our heads to look at him. He stared at us with black beady eyes and clicked his black beak. “Mac!”

Beck winced. “Does he come with a volume button, I mean what the hell—”

“TRANCE!”

I held up my hands. “Whoa dude, ease up on the bird insults. Mac is not pleased.”

“Sorry, Mac,” Beck muttered. How adorable was this guy apologizing to a parrot?

Mac flapped his wings and then strutted back and forth along the mantle, casting glances at us every once in a while.

“Think he’s dangerous?” Beck said.

I shrugged. “He could have dive-bombed us and pecked our eyes out by now.” I folded my arms on the back of the couch. “We better make nice, though, because I think that bird’s holding a couple of answers about what the fuck happened last night.”

Chapter Two

While Mac glared at us from his mantle perch, Beck and I searched the room for our clothes. We dressed quickly, and I mourned the loss of Beck's perfect ass now hidden beneath his well-worn jeans.

Bummer.

"Nate?"

"Yeah?" I looked up from buttoning my shirt.

He rooted in his pockets. "Do you have your wallet?"

"My wallet?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Ya know, ID, credit cards, money, *basically our whole lives in pieces of leather!*"

He ended the sentence on a shout and then fisted his hands in his hair. In the search for my clothes, I'd neglected to start thinking about my luggage and my ID. My stomach dropped into my toes. "Where's my shit?"

"Where's *my* shit?" Beck hollered.

"TRANCE!"

"Fuck you, bird!" I yelled and then ducked with my arms over my head in case Mac decided to descend on my face and claw my eyes out.

I peeked through my arms. The bird completely ignored me.

"Who's paying for this room, then?" Beck muttered. "I sure as hell wouldn't have sprung for this room, no matter what I was on."

"Okay, I don't think that's a valid assumption since we are discussing this over a dead guy and a talking bird."

Beck paused, then bobbed his head. "Fair enough."

I patted the pockets of my jeans and shirt one more time, but no money clip. No luggage.

Nothing.

How the hell was I going to get to this wedding on time?

And most importantly, what did we do about this dead guy in the room?

“We need to figure out what the hell happened last night and who *that* dude is,” Beck said, pointing toward the mattress. “All preferably with no cops involved or, you know, us getting dead ourselves.”

“Gee, you make it sound so easy,” I quipped.

Beck shot me a glare.

I bit my lip and eyed the phone on a table by the couch we’d pushed back into place. I walked over, picked up the receiver and hit the button labeled “front desk.”

“What are you doing?” Beck asked. And I put my fingers to my lips to shush him. He scowled.

“Il Albergo front desk,” came a polite female voice over the line.

“I-I’m in room... uh—”

“Five twenty-two.”

I jerked my head back. “What?”

“You’re in room five twenty-two. The room displays when you call, sir.”

Oh, right. “Yes, of course.” I cleared my throat and tried to deepen my voice. Beck rolled his eyes at me.

“I seem to have misplaced my credit card and—”

“The room has already been paid for.”

This lady really loved to interrupt. Damn. “Paid for?”

“Yes, sir.”

I cringed, bracing myself for her answer. “And who paid for this room?”

There was a pause. “Kane.”

One name. A dude with fucking one name paid for our room. This didn’t sound good at all.

Beck stepped closer and leaned forward, nestling his head beside mine so he could hear the woman on the other end.

“Kane paid for our room.”

“Yes, sir. And since it’s already past checkout, Kane has been charged for another night.”

“Wait—”

“Look Rudi,” her voice was now a whispered hiss. “I’m not sure what game you’re playing, but my manager will be back soon. Now quit it and get your ass back to work!” The phone clicked in my ear.

We both turned our heads to the still form on the mattress.

“I’m going to assume that’s Rudi,” Beck said.

I hung up the phone and made the sign of the cross on my chest, even though I wasn’t Catholic. It just seemed appropriate. “We never even knew ya.” I looked at Beck. “So, *Kane*, whoever that is, paid for this room. I mean, does he know we’re here? If he has our IDs and we just leave, they’re going to be able to find us, right?”

Beck groaned. “This is so fucked up. Who the hell is Kane?”

“TRANCE!” Mac yelled.

Beck pointed at him. “Why does that thing keep yelling that damn word?”

I tapped my fingers against my thigh. There had to be a reason the bird kept shouting that word. I picked up the phone and called the front desk again. A different person answered. “Il Albergo front desk.”

“Weird question for you, but if I say the word *Trance*, does anything come to mind?”

A pause, then the man cleared his throat. “Yes.”

I nudged Beck with my elbow, who had leaned down to listen to my call. “And what is it?”

Another pause. “A nightclub, sir.”

After the front desk attendant gave me directions to Trance, which I scribbled on a hotel notepad, I hung up.

I tore off the paper and waved it in Beck’s face. “You wanna go and check out Trance?”

Beck shrugged. “What other lead do we have? Other than walking around and asking if anyone knows some guy named Kane.”

“TRANCE!” yelled Mac and in a green blur, he swooped down and landed on the phone.

Beck backed away with his hands up. “I am not taking the bird.”

Mac eyed him and in another flap of wings, he rose from the table and perched himself on Beck’s shoulder.

“Oh my God.” I clapped my hand over my mouth to stop the laughter.

Beck stood frozen, his arms clamped to his sides, hands in white-knuckled fists. Mac looked perfectly content, rolling his weird, black tongue in his beak. Beck spoke out of the side of his mouth. “What the fuck is he doing?”

I reached a hand toward the bird, who eyed me and said, “Don’t touch me!”

I jerked my hand back. “Holy shit!”

“Did that bird just—”

“He yelled at me!”

Beck laughed and cautiously raised his hand. He touched the tip of Mac’s wing. Mac didn’t react.

“I think he likes you,” I said, a giggle escaping.

“This isn’t funny.”

“Beck and Mac sitting in a tree,” I sing-songed and before I could finish, Mac did. “K-I-S-S-I-N-G!” he screeched in Beck’s ear, and I couldn’t hold it in anymore. I bent over and roared with laughter.

But when I looked up, Beck was hesitantly petting Mac’s chest with the back of his fingers.

“I’m glad you made a friend in Vegas,” I snickered.

“You’re just jealous,” Beck shot back, and I collapsed on the couch laughing.

We were starving but had no money. And although the thought of eating near a body wasn’t appealing, the only option we had was room service so we could charge it to the room, courtesy of the unknown, Madonna-like, singular-named, *Kane*.

The hotel room had two bedrooms, so we sequestered ourselves in the bedroom not stripped of its mattress, away from Rudi (may he rest in peace). I took a shower while Beck ordered, and I accepted the delivery while he showered. I set the silver trays on the garish bedspread. They needed to ease up on the gold theme in this hotel.

I sat cross-legged on the bed, checking to make sure they delivered my burger sans onions like I asked, when Beck sauntered out of the bathroom, hair a wet blue-black and dripping on his broad shoulders. The drops drizzled down between his pecs and abs, then disappeared onto the towel knotted at his waist.

Here's the deal. I'd seen him naked this morning, but I was in panic mode then. Now, I was in hungry mode. But not for that damn burger.

He held another towel in his hand and ran it over his hair, ruffling it, and I could smell the *clean*.

Clean male. My favorite.

He stopped and eyed me. "What?"

I threw up my hands. "Don't walk out of that bathroom all wet and half-naked and then ask me what. Are you kidding? I mean, you have looked in a mirror, right?"

He cocked his head and then grinned, bringing out the dimple in his left cheek. He nodded to me. "You do know you're sitting there in just a pair of briefs, right, Blondie?"

I did. They were my favorite. At least I'd done something right and worn my good pair of black Andrew Christians.

But I wasn't as cut as Beck. I mean, I ran a little and stuff but working out wasn't really my thing.

Apparently he didn't care because he eyed me like I had been eyeing my burger.

God, under any other circumstances, *any other* circumstances where there wasn't a dead guy in the next room, I would have slithered off the bed onto my knees and unknotted that towel while he fisted my blond hair and...

"I'm thinking you need to stop staring at my towel like you want to incinerate it with your eyes, eh, Nate?"

I snapped my eyes up to his face and didn't bother to act like I hadn't been wishing I had X-ray powers. Because Beck's face was flushed. He'd been thinking the same thing.

"I mean, any other time, with you... and me..." He struggled for words and then waved a hand at the door leading to the living room. "But we have that and..."

I held up a hand. "Beck, for real. I get it. I mean, trust me, if there was no dead guy, I would have you over the bed already but—"

"Who says *I'll* be bent over?" He took a step toward me. That grin was back.

I narrowed my eyes. "Who says *I'll* be?"

He pulled on his boxers under his towel. "Well, good thing we're not going to do this, or we'd have a battle on our hands."

I pointed at his tray. "Just sit and eat so we can get the hell out of here."

He sat cross-legged across from me. "So Nate gets cranky when he's hungry and horny. Good to know."

"I'm not horny," I grumbled.

He bit into his tuna sandwich. "Riiiiight."

That damn dimple.

"Eat," I snapped.

"Eating," he said around a mouthful of sandwich.

I took a bite and swallowed my growl.

"So, what are you doing in Vegas?" he asked.

I popped a fry in my mouth. "I'm traveling from Chicago to my sister's wedding in California. I decided to have a little fun and take a layover in Vegas."

"So that kind of backfired?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, I'm sure whatever I did, I had a good time. Just wish I could remember it."

He blew out a breath. "I've been in some weird situations in my life, but this is by far the weirdest."

"Me too. But if I don't get to that wedding on time, I'm the one who's gonna be dead. I have to find my ID. I have to make my flight."

Beck glanced at the closed door. "So the hotel room isn't in our name, but this Kane guy could know who we are, right? I mean, just bailing and leaving him here isn't a good idea. We're probably on security cameras and our fingerprints are all over this place..." His voice trailed off, and he dropped his head into his hands. "We're fucked."

No cops, Beck had said, and even though I just met him, he seemed like a good guy. I didn't want to get him thrown in jail. Or *back* in jail. Or whatever.

And ultimately, I was curious. I wanted to know what the hell happened. Why we had a bird and dead guy in our hotel room. And I wasn't fond of jail myself.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” I said, wiping my hands on a napkin. “We’ll go to this Trance place with that bird out there. We’ll find out who Kane is and find out who Rudi is. But that nightclub is our only solid lead at this point.”

Beck bit his lip. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

Chapter Three

Our clothes were wrinkled and I had an unknown stain on the bottom of my shirt, but at least our bodies were clean.

Thank God it wasn't Vegas in the summer or we'd have been roasting walking the sidewalk on The Strip.

When we left the room, we'd hung the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door hoping housekeeping honored it and didn't walk in to find our deceased friend. We'd also pumped up the air conditioning before we left to... well... counteract any stench.

We'd found some cheap aviator sunglasses in the hotel store and charged them to our room. So we kind of looked like matching government agents, with our dark jeans, boots and button-downs.

Except for the large green parrot on Beck's shoulder. That was definitely not working with the look.

"I feel like I need an ear piece," I said as we walked down the strip.

"What?" Beck asked distractedly, looking up and down the street and muttering about Mac's claws making holes in his shirt.

I pressed my middle finger against my ear and said in a robotic voice, "We have a visual on a man with a parrot. I repeat, we have a visual on a man with a parrot. Over."

Beck looked at me, and then slowly raised his mirrored sunglasses so I got a look at those gold-green eyes. "You're an odd guy."

"Thanks!" I said cheerily.

He sighed and went back to fussing with the bird. His bird. Rudi's bird? Kane's bird? I didn't know.

As we walked, I again tried to replay the previous night's events in my head. Trance didn't even sound familiar.

"What's the last thing you remember?" I asked.

Beck turned away from Mac. "I was drinking in the bar of Il Albergo. I had my duffel at my feet. I hadn't decided if I was going to stay in town or head out and..." He shrugged. "That's all I remember."

I looked back in the direction we walked from. "Wait, what bar?"

He pointed with his finger. "The one in the back. It had a Greek theme with—"

"—Grape leaves and statues of David," I finished for him.

He frowned. "Wait, you remember?"

Some of my memory was in shadows, so I only got half a picture. I turned to Beck and lifted up his sunglasses, looking into those cat eyes surrounded by thick lashes. And my mind flashed back to another time, those eyes crinkled in the corners, the sound of ice tinkling a glass, the murmurs of other bar patrons.

"Shit, I must have met you there. I kinda remember you now."

We'd stopped on the pavement now and faced each other, tourists swirling around us. He reached out slowly and raised my glasses. "I remember you too."

"Do you remember anything else?"

He bit his lip and shook his head. And just like that, the whole memory plunged back into the shadows for me.

"Dammit," I muttered.

We dropped our arms at the same time and kept walking. I swore our steps were heavier.

"Where'd you plan to go after this?" I asked.

Beck squinted at the sun. "I wasn't sure."

The directions scrawled on the hotel paper led us to a large black building nestled among some clubs.

Trance was scrolled across the top of the building in glowing neon green script. It was mid-afternoon, so I didn't know if the place was even open.

I looked at Beck as he peered up at the sign. "So, should we knock or—"

The front door banged open and a mountain of a man—his skin almost as black as his T-shirt—stared down at us. The sun shone off his shiny bald head, and he crossed his arms over his chest, seriously testing the elasticity of his shirt material.

He also wore sunglasses.

"Do you wear those inside?" I asked, pointing at the frames covering his eyes.

He scowled at me. Well, I thought he scowled. I couldn't really be sure because I thought that expression was permanent.

“Rudi said you two would be here at two and it's almost four and Kane is pissed! And why the fuck are you standing at the front door with your thumbs in your asses?”

I held up my hands, palms out. “I want it on the record that none of my thumbs are in my ass or his ass—”

“Where is Rudi?” Baldy said, his eyes scanning the street behind us.

“Uh,” I stammered. “He's coming later.”

Baldy squinted at us and then growled, “Just get the fuck inside!” And turned to walk back through the door.

Beck elbowed me. “Did you have to piss off the huge guy already?”

“I don't like people talking about me sticking my own body parts in my own body,” I said, as we followed Baldy through the door.

“How often is that something you need to dispute?” he said.

“I don't know—”

It wasn't until the door slammed shut behind us that it hit me we had no idea what we were doing. At least we'd found Kane.

“Wait what are we?—Oh my God.” Beck stopped dead in the entrance. I stopped with him directly under a black light. That's when I caught the reason for Beck's expletive. Because if I looked anything like him, I had a huge, green, glowing parrot head stamped on my neck.

“What the fuck?” He pointed at my neck.

“Is there a parrot head on my neck?”

His eyes widened as he clamped his hand on his own neck. “Me too?”

I nodded and looked around. “I'm going to guess this isn't the first time we've been here.”

The entire place was painted black—from the floor, to the walls, to the ceiling, and to the stairs. But all the tables and chairs and bar were a bright green, like the sign out front. A DJ booth was in an alcove on the second level, and a huge metal parrot looked like it was going to take flight out of the wall above it, green wings outstretched, yellow head gleaming, black beak open.

I looked at Mac. “TRANCE!” he screeched.

“Yeah, I think we got it now, Mac,” I said.

The lights were dimmed, and the place was deserted, except for a couple of employees—dressed all in black of course—with a parrot head design stitched on their breast pockets.

“So I guess we got these,” Beck pointed to his neck, “last night?”

“Well, I don’t know how else we would have gotten ’em. And Baldy said Rudi told him we’d be here. For what?”

And then, Baldy appeared in front of us in the dim light. He looked us up and down, sizing us up or something, and I tried to stand straighter. He nodded to Mac perched on Beck’s shoulder, and Mac shook his feathered head.

“Come with me,” Baldy said, and walked into the bowels of Trance.

We followed him, and I nearly tripped over a table while gawking at the opulence that was this nightclub.

Beck stared at the bar area, which was raised on a green platform. The bar itself was black and curved and from what I could make out, looked to be hooked like a bird’s beak. Bottles behind the bar sat on shelves that followed the curve, backlit with a green glow. The dance floor spread out from one end, shaped like a parrot head.

“They’re really committed to the theme here, aren’t they?” I whispered to Beck.

He snort-laughed, and Baldy turned and glared at us.

Beck leaned in and spoke in a low voice. “Okay, so what exactly is going on here? We’re just following this guy? To do what?”

“Look,” I whispered back. “Baldy acted like we’re supposed to be here. Go along with it and quit looking so clueless.”

“I’m not clueless. I’m confused, Nate—”

I ignored him. “We need to feel out this Kane guy to make sure that if we tell him about Rudi, he’s not going to tie cement blocks to our feet and feed us to the fishes.”

Beck watched me for a minute, and something slid shut behind his eyes. He straightened and shot me a cool smile. “Go along with it? I’ll show you just how well I can play a part, Blondie.”

My spine tingled. I wanted to tackle him and kiss that smirk off his face. I thought I'd created a monster. I tugged at the hem of my shirt. "You're on, Cat Eyes."

Baldy led us through a maze of hallways until we came to a set of double doors. THE GOLD ROOM was spelled out along the top, and Baldy used a set of keys to open the doors.

My palms began to sweat a little, and I glanced at Beck out of the corner of my eye. He was a cool customer. Jerk.

Baldy opened the doors and ushered us inside, then shut them behind us. The click of the lock was like ice down my spine.

The room was... well... gold. There were gold leather couches and black tables on gold pedestals. The flooring was a black carpet which grossed me out because I didn't want to know what fluids or diseases were nestled in the fibers.

Behind the small bar stood a shirtless Hispanic man, gorgeous with long wavy hair and muscles to all get out, wiping down a gold bar top. He looked up and spotted us, blinked a couple of times and cocked his head. He gave us a small smile, and I waved.

A couple of male patrons sat in a corner booth, drinking something in low ball glasses and talking quietly.

"Kane!" Baldy called. "Rudi's boys are here!"

Being called one of "Rudi's boys" did not give me a good feeling. I glanced nervously again at Beck, but his eyes were on Antonio Banderas behind the bar. Antonio Banderas circa 1995.

"Hey, stud, can we focus here?" I said.

Beck turned to me and glared.

"My pet," a deep voice said, and in a flutter of wings, Mac left his perch on Beck to land on the shoulder of a tall man striding out of another set of double doors. He stood at least six-five and might have been the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen. He looked Greek, with full lips and high cheekbones and gorgeous golden skin.

But there was also an air of power that rolled off of him in waves so strong I swore it would knock me over. Mac preened on his shoulder as the Greek God drew closer, his long strides reaching us in no time.

He stopped in front of where Beck and I stood side by side. He reached up, and I tried not to flinch as he ran his hands through my hair. It actually felt good, and I would have purred like a cat if I wasn't about to throw up from anxiety.

Then he reached over and ran the pad of his thumb along Beck's bottom lip. Beck didn't move, but I did catch a barely perceptible twitch of his jaw. I got the feeling Beck didn't like to be touched without permission.

This man, who I assumed to be Kane, glanced from Beck back to me. "I only got a glimpse of you two last night in the security cameras, but Rudi assured me you were perfect." He hummed under his breath, and the sound traveled down my spine and settled into my balls. "My dark," he pointed to Beck, "and my light," he pointed at me.

And that's when Beck's veneer cracked, and he sucked in a breath.

Chapter Four

Beck paced the dressing room. Back and forth. Back and forth.

I sat on the couch, hands clasped in my lap, following his movements, searching for something to say to make him feel better.

But I didn't know what to say because ultimately I didn't know what was wrong.

My eyes trailed to the double set of gold lace-up boots and gold lamé shorts that we were, at that moment, supposed to be changing into.

Beck fisted his hair and faced me. "What are we even doing?"

After Kane proclaimed us to be his "light" and "dark", we'd tried to explain/lie that we'd come to get our bags, hoping Kane knew where they were. But he'd been evasive, said we'd talk after "our shift" and then whisked us back to this dressing room before we could share anything about Rudi's fate.

I sighed. "He said we're working the VIP room. I don't know what that means, but let's just go along with it because maybe we'll get our stuff. I'm going to try to talk to the other staff members and see who Rudi is. And if we do this for Kane, maybe he won't kill us when we tell him about Dead Rudi."

Beck groaned and collapsed onto the couch beside me. He put his head in his hands and when he spoke his voice was muffled by his palms. "What does 'working the VIP room' mean?"

There was a tone to his voice, an uncertain vulnerability that had me reaching out to rub his back.

He leaned into my touch. "I don't know. I assume..." I bit my lip, "serving drinks?"

Beck dropped his hands between his knees and looked into the mirror in front of us, then he turned to me and that door behind his eyes was open. He looked scared and pained. "I didn't like him touching me. I don't want anyone out there touching me."

There was something there, something between his words, but I couldn't pull them apart wide enough to see in the gaps. "I don't... you think we're going to have to... let customers touch us?"

Beck twisted his lips, like he was chewing the inside of his cheek. "I can't do that again, Nate," he whispered.

I bent my knee on the couch and twisted my body so I faced him. Then, I gently gripped the sides of his head.

He blinked slowly. "Long story but my parents were paying for college and cut me off."

I'd heard this story too many times. "Because they found out you were gay?"

He laughed sadly. "No. They didn't care who I dated, girls or boys. But I was dating the *wrong* boy... a boy who wasn't good for me. They gave me an ultimatum, and I picked him." Beck shook his head. "Big mistake, but I was nineteen. I needed money to get through school. He got me a job at his club. I thought... I thought I'd be a waiter, or at worse a go-go boy. It was a place like this but... where clients... could touch you. Place got raided. And I got arrested. Needless to say, I'm no longer with that boy. I'm on probation now. And it's not even about getting caught again. I just... can't go back to doing that." He locked eyes with me. "I can't, Nate."

He was gorgeous with his gold-green eyes. I could imagine he'd been really popular, although I wondered if any of those clients got to see him as truthfully as I saw him now. "We'll figure something out. I swear. No one will touch us."

He didn't let go of my gaze, and his was so full of trust, all I could do was vow in my heart that I'd claw, bite, scratch and maim to keep my promise to him.

His eyes fluttered, his long lashes brushing the tops of his cheeks and then I leaned in, or maybe he leaned, or maybe we both did, but then his mouth was on mine and mine on his. At first it was just a brush of skin with skin, but my lips felt every ridge of his. Then his tongue licked at the seam of my lips and I opened to him, drinking him in, promising wordlessly that we'd make it through this.

He tasted so good, like the coffee with creamer he had earlier and something else that was inherently Beck. I fingered his cheekbones and the corner of his lips as he moved his against mine and then trailed my fingers back, under his ear, feeling a shudder run down his body. I carded my fingers through his hair, gripped and angled his head so I could kiss him deeper. And then his hands were on my waist, tugging me into his lap so my knees straddled his hips.

I could feel his arousal through our jeans, and I wanted closer, closer, and more friction, oh much more friction. I ground my hips into his, and a moan in his throat vibrated my other hand at his neck...

“FIVE MINUTES!” Baldy shouted along with two knocks that rattled the door on its hinges.

We startled out of the kiss and stared at each other, each breathing hard as we became aware of where we were and what we had to do.

I brought my fingers to my mouth and touched my wet, swollen lips. “Holy shit.”

Beck’s pupils were blown wide, so I could barely see those beautiful irises. “Yeah.”

I’d kissed a lot of guys. I liked to go to bars and clubs. Hell, I kissed most of my friends. But I’d never, in my whole twenty-five years, had a kiss like that.

Why, oh why, did I have explosive chemistry with a guy while I was stuck in this crazy situation? Figures. Just my luck.

I eased out of Beck’s lap and stood before him. His hands were fisted on his thighs, and he looked at me with glazed eyes.

All I could think about was how the hell we were going to stuff our hard bulges in those fucking shorts without it being obscene. Although, they were skintight gold lamé shorts. They were meant to be obscene.

I cleared my throat. “We gotta—”

“Yeah, I know.”

I nodded and walked over to our meager clothing for the evening, handing him the boots in his size. We dressed silently, each stealing glances at each other. It was painful, literally and figuratively, to be so aroused and not have the time to do anything about it. To see Beck as he squeezed his toned ass into those shorts, his back muscles flexing.

And then the worst part was we had to cover ourselves in lotion that gave our skin a golden sheen. I had to lotion Beck’s back—lotion his back!—all the while my dick strained toward his ass like an arrow and I had to tell it silently that I agreed but there was nothing I could do about it right now.

And when we were dressed, well, as dressed as we were supposed to be which was the least dressed I’d ever been in public (except for that time I streaked across campus during homecoming freshman year), we stood at the door. Like gladiators waiting to enter the coliseum.

Really gay gladiators.

I reached over and grabbed Beck's hand, giving it a squeeze. "We can do this."

He clenched his jaw before he met my eyes. Then, he nodded. "All right."

Chapter Five

My idea to talk to other employees did not prove to be successful. Despite it being only early evening on a Saturday in Vegas, there were a good amount of patrons. Mostly men, but a couple of women, dressed in expensive clothes and dripping with jewels and I wanted to gag. We weren't working the VIP room, or THE GOLD ROOM, yet. Apparently that was for "later".

I'd been a waiter before, so carrying trays of drinks was no big deal. Beck looked experienced at it as well. I had my ass grabbed a couple of times, a finger trailed along my hip, and, while it set my teeth on edge, I could mostly ignore it. I kept my eye on Beck though, and his reaction to the touches was different. He'd tense and move away without drawing attention to his discomfort, and I wondered how the hell we were going to get through this.

I delivered a gin and tonic—which I always thought smelled like a Christmas tree—to two gentlemen who eyed my package, and so I hightailed it away from their table and back to the bar.

Beck leaned on the wall, looking like he wanted to blend in.

I stood next to him. "Hey."

"Hey."

"You doin' okay?"

He shrugged. But it was jerky and stiff and I didn't think he really meant it.

"It's just delivering drinks. No biggie."

Beck didn't look at me. "Then what was his light and dark thing about?"

I ran my hands over my hair. "I don't know. He likes variety?"

Beck eyed me, and I smiled a big cheesy grin. He rolled his eyes and chuckled.

"I guess we should go back in there—"

"Hey," a voice said quietly beside us, and I turned to see the Antonio Banderas bartender motioning to us.

We took a couple of steps closer.

He glanced around and then took two full shot glasses from below the bar. He slid them toward us and leaned in, speaking in a hushed voice. "You boys'll want these."

I eyed the shots. “Uh, I think when I signed... my, uh, job thingy... it said we weren't supposed to drink on the job.”

Antonio Banderas eyed me. “You seriously going to act like you know what the fuck is going on?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Well, if you know what's going on then feel free to enlighten us.”

He only shook his head and nudged the shot glasses closer. “Take the shots, boys. You need to loosen up.”

Beck held up his hand. “Look, we had a bad night last night, and now I swore off drinking anything that isn't sealed in plastic wrap, which I realize limits me to cough medicine, but—”

“Just drink, Beck,” I said and downed the shot in one gulp. It burned like fire and I sputtered.

“Tequila? You couldn't give us some top shelf vodka or something?”

Beck took his shot and swallowed it with barely a wince.

“Seriously?” I said.

“What?” He looked confused.

“Could you at least pretend that shot seared your esophagus?”

He smiled, the same one he'd given me back at the hotel when he was only in his towel. He gripped my hip and leaned in so I could smell the tequila on his breath. “You're cute.”

Okay, so, tequila was a good look on Beck. Noted.

And now I was getting hard again in these fucking shorts. Dammit.

The evening went by in a blur of working the floor and sneaking shots from Antonio Banderas, or Luis, as we later found out. He was still Desperado to me.

He slipped us a couple of sandwiches when he could tell our energy was running low, and we both inhaled them. They didn't do much to dull the tequila buzz, which was probably a good thing.

Around midnight, Baldy—who we learned was Carl—took our trays and led us into THE GOLD ROOM. He instructed us to stand at attention along the wall. He cleared the room of the current clients, and that's when Beck shifted closer to me, the back of his hand brushing my own.

“Think we’re off duty now?” he asked.

But the way Carl looked at us from his military-like position beside the door I thought our official duty had only just begun.

“Rudi,” Carl spat the name and shook his head.

My head snapped to him. “What?”

He shook his head and muttered, “Not sure why Kane puts up with him.”

“I’m sorry.” My mind whirled. “What about Rudi?”

Carl’s dark eyes pierced my skull, and I hoped he wasn’t a human lie detector.

But he didn’t answer, because deep voices carried in from the bar outside. A minute later, Kane walked into THE GOLD ROOM, a man beside him who I could only describe as powerful and dark.

I had thought Kane had an intimidating presence, but that was nothing compared to Dark Man. He was the same height as Kane but broader. His face was unique, which kept me guessing on his ethnicity as I studied his black hair, his wide-set eyes, his full lips and his tan skin.

He was attractive.

And his eyes were on us.

Kane wore a scowl and conversed quietly with Carl.

Dark Man didn’t turn from us, and his eyes scanned our bodies. I resisted placing my hands in front of me to cover what the gold shorts couldn’t.

Beck was a statue beside me. I didn’t even see his chest rising and falling. I hoped his heart hadn’t stopped beating. I drew the line at two dead guys in one day.

Kane cleared his throat as Luis whisked in with a tray of drinks and then walked back out, shooting us a look of sympathy as he closed the doors behind him.

Dread settled into my toes.

Kane and Dark Man sat in a booth and began to talk. I didn’t know how much time passed while Beck and I stood motionless against the wall. I was tired and hungry and drunk, and I reminded myself not to lock my knees for fear I’d pass out. Dark Man shot us looks every once in a while over the rim of his glass, each tinkle of ice like a stab in my spinal cord.

After a while, Kane reached for a remote resting along the top of the booth and the lights dimmed. A thudding bass over club music replaced the previous soft tunes and the beat battered my temples.

Kane motioned to us to stand closer. I took the first step and Beck followed until we were five feet from the table, our shoulders brushing.

“While we wait for the exchange, as promised,” Kane said, “we have found entertainment.” He gestured to us, like we were roast beef on a buffet. “They look perfect together, don’t they? Light and dark.”

Dark Man took a sip of his drink, slowly, then lowered his glass, setting it precisely on a gold-edged napkin in front of him. He licked his lips, his pink tongue swiping his lower lip.

“Hmmm,” he hummed and I started to sweat, hoping it wasn’t a bad hum, until he said, “Perfect.”

But as soon as that word was out of his mouth, I realized I would have rather him found us lacking.

“Which would you rather have first?” Kane asked, and Beck trembled beside me.

I didn’t really think. I just blurted words, anything to save Beck. “If we may, sir. I... we... prepared something. For you.” I cleared my throat and clamped my hand on Beck’s wrist, willing him to keep up the facade just a little longer. We had to distract them, do something that would satisfy whatever they wanted before we could figure out what the hell Rudi had to do with all of this.

And most importantly, get us the hell out of this without being arrested for homicide.

Kane frowned and opened his mouth, surely to protest but Dark Man held up his hand. Then he lowered it and leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his suited chest. “Please.”

Kane’s long finger tapped something on the remote and the music changed. A heavy beat still carried the melody but there was a sensuality to it, not unlike something in a dance club or a... a strip club.

That was it.

We could do this.

I closed my eyes, giving in to the tequila buzz I’d been fighting. I pretended Beck and I were alone. I pretended there was no parrot or dead guy or gold

lamé shorts. I pictured us in my apartment back in Chicago, after a fantastic date where we dipped lobster in butter and spooned crème brûlée out of a dish.

I took a step in front of Beck so my back was to the table. And then I moved. I rotated my hips and rolled my shoulders and I danced and worked myself along Beck's body like my life depended on it. Because it probably did.

Beck stood stiff for a moment before giving into the beat. And giving into me.

We danced. Eyes closed, bodies inseparable, we danced like we'd been doing this together for years. Beck's breath rushed hot along my temple, and I nuzzled into the skin below his neck, laving it with my tongue when I could no longer resist capturing the taste of him.

His knee was between my legs, snuggled up under my balls, rubbing, rubbing, and I wanted to strip and climb on top of him on the floor.

I felt at home dancing in a club, but this was different. I always focused on me and my body, ever aware of how I looked and what I was doing.

But not now. Not with Beck. He was all that mattered.

I couldn't hear the music anymore. I couldn't feel the cool air of the room. I couldn't smell the liquor and the faint hint of carpet cleaner.

I only heard Beck's breath in my ear, his heart beating against mine. I only felt his hands and his body and his heat. And I only smelled him. Clean, aroused Beck.

I raised my head and opened my eyes to stare into his, the gold sparking in his irises. We leaned into each other. Two breaths away. One breath away.

A brush of our lips.

And then a voice yelled, "Enough!" And the reality of where we were slammed into me so hard I staggered. Beck gripped my waist and hauled me back against him. Our chests heaved against each other, and, when Beck's arm loosened, I groaned.

His hand slipped into mine, and he squeezed so hard, I thought he'd break the bones in my hand, but I didn't protest. Because I needed to hold onto him as much as he needed to hold onto me.

I stepped back and stood beside him. And we faced our fate.

Dark Man's lips were wet and his cheeks flushed. Kane looked like he was in pain.

I had no sympathy.

Dark Man didn't take his eyes off of us. "Where are the numbers?"

Numbers? Was he talking to us?

Kane shifted in his seat. "He should be here soon."

Dark Man's eyes narrowed, flashing something that resembled anger, and I shifted closer to Beck.

"You said that an hour ago." His eyes didn't waver from us, but I knew he talked to Kane.

"I apologize," Kane said. "Maybe one of the boys can entertain you while we wait longer." He turned to Carl. "Please take them to the dressing room and have them... freshen up. We'll call for them when we're ready."

Chapter Six

My knees threatened to give out. I thought we'd gotten out of this club.

Carl motioned us to walk ahead of him as we staggered out of The Gold Room. Maybe Beck and I could take him? Tackle him and make a run for it? But then another bodyguard appeared beside him and I gave up that plan.

A minute later, we were back in the dressing room. Alone.

The lock clicked in place, securing us inside. The sound reverberated around the room.

Beck stood with his back against the door, palms flat on the surface, chest heaving as he looked at me with wide eyes, ruffled hair.

A hard bulge in his shorts.

I fisted my hands, about to ask if we could... take advantage of this moment... the two of us... before we had to do whatever was asked.

My mouth opened and Beck pounced, his body colliding with mine, sending us careening back onto the couch.

He landed on me, and I grunted under his weight, but I didn't need to breathe. Not with his lips on mine, his tongue licking my mouth, giving me breath.

I fisted his hair and angled our heads so we could get deeper, so much deeper, to forget about everyone and everything else and this layover from hell.

Beck's hips churned, and our shorts were so thin, I could feel every thick ridge of his arousal. I moaned at the feeling and slid my hands down his bare, muscled back, grabbing handfuls of his ass and tugging him closer, oh so closer because I wanted him on me, all over me, in me.

Yes, *in* me.

But Beck had other ideas. He broke our kiss and sucked on the skin below my ear as his hands tugged at the laces on my shorts. And then his hand was inside, grasping my shaft and... my eyes rolled back as he tugged and stroked, swiping his thumb over the head to use my precum as a lubricant. Every couple of strokes he dipped down to cup my balls and swiped that patch of sensitive skin right behind them.

“God, Beck,” were the only words I was able to speak in English as his head lowered, his lips and tongue nipping at my neck before he latched onto a nipple.

His hand never broke his rhythm, and my hands fluttered uselessly on his neck and upper back since I'd been rendered paralyzed by the sensations on my dick and the pattern of teeth and tongue Beck made down my torso. His head lowered, and his hot breath coated the head of my cock for one minute. Just one minute to give me warning before my entire shaft was engulfed in wet heat.

I wasn't huge, but I wasn't small either, and Beck took every inch into his mouth. His throat swallowed around the head, and I think I screamed. Or maybe I cried.

He pulled off and gripped the base, locked eyes with me for one scorching moment and then returned to something he clearly loved to do, if his skill was any indication. He rolled my balls on his tongue, all the while keeping a steady rhythm of strokes on my shaft.

When I didn't think I could take it anymore, his mouth was back and this time, he wasn't fucking around. Beck meant business. He hollowed his cheeks and sucked and bobbed, the erotic sounds filling the dressing room and driving me out of my fucking mind.

I couldn't last and I didn't want to. Why delay what we both wanted so much? My balls drew up tight and I think I muttered, “I'm coming,” or, “now,” or, “holy fuck,” and then erupted into his mouth, my back bowing off the couch as I came. Beck's throat worked against the head, swallowing everything until I had to push on his shoulders because the sensation was too much.

He pulled off, breathing hard, hair ravaged where I'd gripped it, mouth open and wet and swollen.

And then, I pounced back.

His shorts were already unlaced, which he must have done somehow like a ninja while he was blowing me. His cock stood out, hard and proud, red and glistening with precum. I shoved him onto his back and sucked him into my mouth.

I wanted to return the favor and make Beck feel as good as he made me feel. I was succeeding, if Beck's moaning and nonsensical words were any indication.

He tasted amazing on my tongue, smooth skin over swollen hardness. And with a few pumps of my wrist and swirls of my tongue, he was done.

Overboard. Coming in my mouth and gasping my name. "Nate. Fuck, Nate. Goddamn, Blondie." I shut my eyes and swallowed, loving the nickname he'd given me the most.

I collapsed on top of him, my head on his hip. His fingers carded through my hair, but I could feel them shake slightly in the strands.

I nestled into his skin, something I rarely did. But he smelled so good, and I was so tired.

Maybe... maybe I could sleep. Right now. And then wake up and Beck and I would be back in that hotel room. Together. Under the covers and naked. We'd wake up yawning and laughing about that horrible dream we had about the dead guy in the living room.

"Nate," Beck croaked my name.

I pressed my lips to his hipbone and then faced him, propping my chin on my arm. "Yeah."

He didn't look stressed anymore. Or anxious. He looked tired. Then his lips twitched, just at the corners, and his chest hitched. A small sound escaped his throat. I crawled up his body to get closer to his face, now worried he was one of those weirdos that cried after having an orgasm.

But then, his face cracked, and he threw back his head and roared with laughter, tugging me into his chest so that I giggled into his neck. His mood was contagious, and the outrageousness of the situation had us both gasping for breath as laughter wracked our bodies.

I wiped the tears from my eyes. "I've done some crazy stuff in my life, but nothing like this."

Beck shook his head, rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "This has to be a dream. I keep thinking I'm going to wake up and none of this will have happened."

I wrapped my fingers around his wrist and tugged. He opened up those golden eyes and watched me, the grin fading from his face.

I rubbed the inside of his wrist with my thumb. "Is that what you want?"

He took a deep breath and raised his eyes to the ceiling above us before returning his gaze to me.

"I don't know what's going to happen next. But I can tell you that I'd willingly do this whole night again if it meant I'd get to meet you."

It was on the tip of my tongue to make a joke, but his face was so earnest, his eyes so full of vulnerability that all I could do was lean in to press a kiss to his lips. And speak the truth. “Me too.”

His tongue swiped my lips, and I angled my head to deepen the kiss just as a knock sounded at the door.

I pulled back. Beck turned his head to eye the door. I slid off of him and laced up my shorts as he sat on the couch and did the same. When he stood up, he began to walk toward the door, but I grabbed him.

I laced our fingers together. “We’ll figure this out together, Beck.” He didn’t look at me, keeping his eyes on the toes of our boots facing each other. “No matter what he says, we go out there together. We can’t separate.”

Beck looked resigned and I thought he’d ignore me. But finally he raised his eyes to mine, bit his lip, and nodded.

“We’re ready,” I called.

The lock unchecked and I raised my eyes, expecting to see Carl’s bald, shiny head walking us to our doom but instead Luis barged into the room, shutting the door behind him.

“I gotta get you guys out of here.” He rushed around the room, gathering our clothes and thrusting them at us. “Change. Now.”

We didn’t argue, and sorted the pile of clothes until we found our own. I only had one sock, so I shoved it into my pocket and pushed my bare feet into my shoes.

Luis wrinkled his nose. “It smells like sex in here.”

I glared at him, and he broke his frantic mode for one minute to wink at me. Then his face locked into serious mode again. “Okay, here’s the deal. You gotta get Rudi here. Kane’s been stalling with Asim long enough.”

Fucking Rudi. If he wasn’t dead, I’d kill him myself.

“But—” Beck started but I cut him off.

“Okay, so what if we can’t find Rudi?” I asked.

Luis narrowed his eyes. “Find him. Or at least his arm. Because the numbers Kane needs to give Asim are in that fucking tattoo.”

Chapter Seven

It could have been daylight for all I knew. That's how bright the strip was, even at three in the morning.

People were everywhere, a weird variety of tourists and gamblers and clubbers.

Luis had led us out a back door, telling us to return by dawn, that they'd slipped something in that Asim's drink. He'd be passed out for a couple of hours.

I didn't see how that was a good idea. The dude would be pissed when he woke up.

We held hands as we walked silently, heads down, back to Il Albrego. I had never been much for PDA but this wasn't about that. This was staying connected to the only thing that felt real in the whole world right now.

My sister's wedding seemed in another time or dimension, my flight scheduled for some morning a lifetime away.

I wanted a drink. And a shower. And a burger. But first we had to figure out what to do about Rudi.

"You remember seeing any numbers on that tattoo?" I asked Beck as we rode in the elevator back up to the hotel room.

Beck gave me a suffering look. "I'm sorry. I was focused on the fact that *he had no pulse!*" He ended the sentence on a shout.

I clenched my jaw and exhaled a breath sharply out of my nose, about to yell at him how I didn't deserve to be snapped at, when he stepped up into my space. His hand gripped my waist and his forehead lowered to my shoulder. He slumped against me, and I raised my arms, hugging him back.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I know. It's okay."

"I'm tired."

"Me too."

"And hungry."

"I want another room service burger."

He chuckled and raised his head. His lids dropped, and he tugged me closer, our heads touching, his lips at my ear. And then he began swaying, ever so slowly to the Muzak playing softly from the elevator speakers. He hummed along with the tune, and I pressed my nose into his temple, breathing him in.

He smelled like tequila. And sweat. A hint of soap. And us.

I wrapped my arms around him tighter, my fingers pressing into his shoulders, wanting to crawl up him, on him, into him.

I wished again this was another time. Another place. Anywhere we'd be free to explore whatever this was.

When the elevator dinged, we pulled apart, the reality of the situation once again settling on our shoulders. I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to ride in an elevator again without thinking of Beck.

Beck pulled the key card out of his pocket and swiped it down the lock at our door. My palms began to sweat as we waited for the little light above the handle to turn from red to green.

The green light lit, the door click unlocked, Beck pushed down the handle, and we were back at the scene of the crime.

Literally.

The place was silent as a tomb. Which, yes, I realize how distasteful that analogy was, but it was true, okay?

There was no screeching parrot or anything. Just a silent hotel room with a dead guy on a mattress.

This was one fucked up layover.

We stood at the head of the mattress, staring down at Rudi. I thought his color looked pretty good for a dead guy. When did rigor mortis set in?

Beck squatted and craned his neck, staring at the God-awful blue tattoo. "I think I see some numbers... Why don't we just take a picture of it?"

I squinted at him. "Oh right, let me just go retrieve my phone from Kane and ask him if I can Instagram a picture of his dead employee's arm."

Beck huffed. "Sorry, I forgot we don't have our phones."

"Can we cut his arm off?"

Beck stared up at me from his squat on the floor.

I scrunched my lips, thinking. "Aren't our food trays still in the bedroom? I had a steak knife that came with my burger—"

"Are you kidding me right now?" Beck said, standing.

"What?"

"You can't saw an arm off with a steak knife."

"There's no... blood flow, right? So it won't be messy."

Beck's eyes bugged out of his head. "But there is something called bone, Nate. It's really hard. And requires something stronger than a steak knife."

"Can we just lop off the flesh then?"

Beck blinked at me, then returned to his squatting position again, examining the tattoo.

"So, I take it we're not going with my idea then," I said.

Beck continued to ignore me as he reached out and gingerly prodded at Rudi's bicep, rolling his arm slightly to look at the tattoo wrapped around...

And Rudi moved.

Moved.

And then chaos.

Beck yelped and fell-slash-scrambled backwards, away from the moving dead man. He crashed into me standing behind him, and I went down. We were a mass of limbs and body parts on the floor as I screeched and he hollered, both of us trying to get away from the dead man.

Who was now rising to a sitting position and blinking at us.

Blinking at us.

With eyes that were alive. And a mouth that was moving and a chest that inhaled and exhaled air and surely a heart that was beating too.

And that mouth was saying, "Who are you?"

And Beck and I crouched on the floor, hugging each other, staring at this ghost or thing or whatever it was that was no longer dead and motionless.

Rudi yawned and stretched his arms over his head. "Fuck, what time is it? I slept like the dead."

I saw red.

I lunged at Rudi, who widened his eyes and fell backwards as I attempted to claw my way onto the mattress and strangle him. Beck clamped his arms around my waist, tugging me back.

“You motherfucker!” I yelled at Rudi, who currently cowered at the end of the mattress. “What the hell did you do to us?”

“Calm down, Nate!” Beck growled into my back, tugging as I squirmed to free myself from his grip.

And then I stopped my efforts and whirled on him. “You! You said he had no pulse!”

Beck threw up his hands. “He didn’t! I swear. I mean, I’m no doctor or nurse or whatever, but I’ve felt a pulse before and that,” he pointed a finger at Rudi, “that had no pulse!”

We turned to Rudi who eyed us like we were ax murderers. Did he overhear us talking about sawing off his arm?

He held up his hands, palms out. “Okay, for real, who the fuck are you guys?”

I shook my head. “We have done a lot of shit in the last twelve hours. We got screamed at by a parrot, we met a guy named Kane, we wore gold lamé shorts with boots like the gayest gladiators in the world, and then we had to grind on each other for some guy named Asim.” I took a deep breath as Rudi’s eyes widened; recognition, mixed with something like horror, dawned on his face. “And so we’re gonna need some answers, *Rudi*.” I spat his name at him, and he flinched.

And then he went into hurricane mode.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” he mumbled, hopping up from the mattress and running around the hotel room like a chicken with its head cut off. “What time is it? Fuck! How did I sleep this long! Kane is going to kill me. Oh man. Where are my clothes?”

He pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that had been piled in a corner, and eyed Beck and me as we sat on the floor. “Uh, so, I guess it’s been fun, but I gotta go now—”

Beck beat me to it, hopping to his feet and advancing on Rudi. “I don’t think so. I don’t fucking think so. We need to know what the fuck happened last night and most importantly, where is our shit?”

Rudi blinked at him, his whole body radiating confusion so I talked.

And talked and talked.

From the beginning, waking up to a Rudi who seemed dead to the world. How we went to Trance and everything that conspired there and how we came back to get some numbers off of Rudi's arm.

When I finished, Rudi looked like he might laugh. Or cry.

Beck shook his head. "Now that I know I'm not going to be arrested or questioned in a homicide, I don't even give a shit anymore. I don't need my stuff. Wasn't much anyway."

"Beck, I need my ID. I have to get on a plane in," I glanced at my watch, "five hours."

Rudi held up a finger. "Give me a minute." He dialed the hotel room phone and spoke in a low voice. I didn't know what he said or who he called, but a booming voice on the other end led me to believe it was Kane.

When he hung up, he turned to us. "Come with me. Kane said he has your stuff."

Chapter Eight

By the time we arrived back at Trance, the sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon, painting the sky in a slash of pinks and oranges.

Beck and I didn't want to enter, but Rudi insisted, so we followed him in.

The club was deserted, much like it had been when we arrived. Rudi led us back to THE GOLD ROOM, where Asim lay on a booth, drugged and snoring away.

Kane and Carl sat in a booth beside him, smoking cigars and drinking like it was perfectly normal to drug a man.

And did they ever sleep?

Kane scowled at Rudi. "Where have you been?"

Rudi chuckled awkwardly and scratched the back of his head. "Uh, funny story..."

"It's not funny at all," I snapped.

Rudi looked shamed.

"Ah, my Light does have some fight in him," Kane murmured, eyes on me. Beck shifted closer, and Kane's eyes flicked to him, catching the movement. His lips twitched into a smile before he returned his gaze to Rudi. "What happened?"

Rudi ran his tongue over his teeth. "Well, uh, first," he pointed at us, "those are not the guys."

"Excuse me?" I hissed.

"What?" Beck said.

Rudi glanced at us out of the corner of his eye. "Not sure what happened. I need my phone but those guys are not the guys who were supposed to, um, entertain."

"For God's sake." Beck propped his hands on his hips and rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

"How did this happen?" Kane demanded.

Rudi rubbed the back of his head nervously. "I dunno. I can't remember anything..."

Kane's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What do you mean?"

Rudi shrugged. "I took those pills—"

"Which ones?"

"The ones in the baggy, with the red mark on them—"

"For fuck's sake, Rudi, those were the bad batch."

My eyes widened as Rudi glanced at us. His shoulders rose up to his ears. "Ooops."

Beck tilted his head. "I'm sorry. Am I understanding correctly that we also ingested this 'bad batch' of pills? Is that why Nate and I know nothing about the night before?"

Rudi bit his lip. "You guys were hot and I thought we'd have a little fun..."

"So you slipped us drugs?" I asked.

"I just told you I was getting you a special drink," Rudi explained weakly.

"A special drink," I said through gritted teeth, "means top shelf liquor, or an extra cherry or a fancy umbrella. It doesn't mean a dissolved pill, jackass."

"Sorry?"

"Are you asking or are you actually apologizing?" Beck said.

"I'm apologizing?"

Kane interrupted. "I can't listen to this shit anymore." He threw Rudi a key. "Give them their things, and let them go home."

I sat in the booth at the diner, hugging my bag, petting it and making mewling sounds.

"Can you stop? People are starting to stare," Beck said, tossing a balled up napkin at me.

I tucked my bag between my hip and the wall, gave it one last longing look and then turned to Beck. "Don't be jealous because I am paying more attention to my bag than you."

He sighed, but his lips curled at the ends and he ducked his head, like he didn't want me to know how much he found me amusing.

Rudi paced outside of the diner, talking on the cell phone he'd retrieved from the club. After repossessing our bags and wallets, Rudi told us he'd buy us breakfast as an apology for the mix-up.

He said he'd explain what he could and while part of me didn't care, since it was over, I wanted to know. Because I knew my best friend would ask fifty million questions and wouldn't believe me when I tried to tell him about my layover.

Rudi walked back in and slid into the booth beside me. He sipped his coffee and clasped his hands together on top of the table.

"I thought you were different guys," he said.

"Different guys?" Beck queried.

Rudi sighed. "See, I was supposed to meet these guys at the hotel bar. The one we met at? Except I saw you two. And you were talking, and I thought... I don't know why I thought you were them. I'd never met them before, just hired them through a service. I called just now and turns out I... uh... got the hotel wrong."

I stared at him. "No offense, Rudi, but I don't think you are super bright."

"Nate!" Beck hissed.

Rudi shrugged and picked at his cuticles. "It's cool. I'm not really that smart."

Beck glared at me. Well crap, now I felt bad. "I'm sorry, Rudi. I shouldn't have said that, but—"

"Honestly, you have every right to be mad at me." He winced. "I bet you were kinda freaked out."

Understatement right there. Instead of saying that, I nodded.

"And how the hell did you have no pulse?" Beck asked. "I checked."

Rudi waved a hand. "I have low blood pressure normally so I don't know... maybe those drugs dulled it so much it was too weak for you to find it." He frowned. "Damn, I really could have died, huh?"

I wanted to snap that he could have killed us, too. But whatever. He was buying us breakfast. I could forgive.

As we ate, Rudi explained that he often tattooed flight times and license plate numbers onto his body to keep track of Kane's "shipments". He talked

about it conversationally, like this was all normal and everyone's boss used their body as a way to keep track of important things.

He didn't say what was in these shipments and frankly, I didn't want to know. I scarfed down my omelet and hash browns like my life depended on it.

I had a plane to catch in a couple of hours.

A waitress took away our empty plates and refilled our coffee. Rudi threw a wad of bills on the table and stood. "Well, I better get back, because Asim should be waking up soon." He toed the ground. "It was nice to meet you?"

I raised an eyebrow.

His gaze swept from Beck back to me and then he grinned. "I bet you guys were super-hot dancing together."

"Get the fuck out of here, Rudi," Beck growled, but a laugh rode under that growl and I smiled.

Rudi waved and walked out, that bright, ugly tattoo a blue blur on his swinging arm.

My phone vibrated on the table. The battery had died while it languished in my bag at Trance, so I charged it at our table.

I glanced at the display to see a text from my sister.

Ready for your flight? Or are you having too much fun in Vegas?

I texted back:

Ready. Vegas is boring.

I lowered my hand to drop my phone back on the table, when my eye caught on the camera app.

My finger hovered and I tapped it. It opened to my photo album, and I sucked in a breath.

"Uh, Beck."

His eyes were on the door Rudi exited, and his gaze swung to me. "Yeah?"

"I think... I think we might be able to figure out what actually happened last night."

He straightened in the booth. "What?"

I winced and turned the display toward him. "I took pics."

We huddled over the table, heads together, and I thumbed through my album.

The first picture was a selfie of me, taken holding a large coffee in the airport before I boarded the plane to Vegas, my aviator glasses over my eyes, full-on duck lips. I chuckled and thought Beck would laugh and roll his eyes but when I looked at him, he had a small smile on his face.

Apparently, I amused him.

I took a couple of photos on the plane. One of my vodka bottle because I thought it was cute.

Another of the airplane magazine because the guy on the front was hot. And another of a woman who wore the brightest shirt I'd ever seen in my life and I wanted evidence for my lawsuit when I inevitably went blind.

Beck watched them all, that smile turning into a grin.

Ok, so I definitely amused him.

I took a couple of photos of the Vegas strip once I arrived from the airport. I definitely remembered that.

And then... we got to the part of the night that was fuzzy.

The pictures were fuzzy too, probably because I was drunk and/or drugged out of my mind.

Half of a face, the gold-green eye unmistakable, the corner of his lips pulled up into a mischievous smirk. Another of me, a selfie, with a blue-tattooed arm over my shoulders.

A blurred shot of the sidewalk with Beck's boots, clearly taken at night.

The DJ booth, the parrot beak poking out, the sleek black catching the strobe lights in Trance.

A photo of Beck, the parrot tattoo glowing on his neck, tongue out, hand raised in devil horns.

I snorted a laugh.

"What the hell?" Beck muttered.

Beck and I on the dance floor of Trance. Both shirtless. Our cheeks smushed together, smiling at the camera, foreheads shiny with sweat. The next picture, I had my tongue down his throat. The lights highlighted the differences

in our hair. My blonde strands shown pale and golden and his dark ones glistened.

“Light and dark,” he muttered.

“We look hot together,” I said.

More blurry shots of us dancing, Rudi mooning the camera. A shot of Beck walking down the sidewalk, with Mac’s tail trailing down his back.

“Fucking bird,” Beck said.

Back at the hotel. Our lavish room. Rudi running around naked with Mac flying through the air chasing him, Beck on the couch laughing.

Beck squinted at the picture. “This is insane.”

“I wish I remembered that.” I cocked my head. “Looks hilarious.”

And then that was it.

Our night. Only available for replay in the tiny SIM card on my phone.

I leaned back in my booth, paging back through some of them as Beck took a sip of his coffee across from me. I went back to the photo of us together on the dance floor. Happy and smiling beside each other.

I looked to Beck, but his eyes were downcast, his hands cupping his coffee mug. His shoulders hunched slightly, and he took a deep, tired breath.

My smile died, and I leaned forward, my fingers wrapping around his wrist. “Hey, you okay?”

He looked up and smiled, but it was weak. Not the bright Beck smile I’d become addicted to. “Sure. You excited for your sister’s wedding?”

“Yeah, I am.” I tugged on his wrist, and he unwrapped his hand from his mug. I laced our fingers together. “What are you going to do now?”

He kept his eyes on our hands and shifted his jaw back and forth. “Probably find a bartender or waiter job here. I mean, it’s Vegas, right?”

“Where are you going to live?”

“There are tons of hotels. I’ll get a room until I can afford rent.”

My eyes trailed to his black, beat-up duffel bag in the booth beside him, and my heart ached thinking of him in a seedy hotel room. Alone. Every night.

“What’d you want to do?”

The subject change must have startled him because he looked up, brow furrowed. "What?"

"When you were in college, what were you in for?"

A wistful look crossed his face. "Photography."

A thrill raced through me, a ghost of an idea, whispering words. "What kind of photography?"

His gaze traveled over my face and a small smile appeared on his lips. "Portrait photography. Models. People. I love working with what clothes look best on them and makeup and lighting." And then his smile faded. "I'd hoped to work for a magazine or advertising firm or something."

That ghost was no longer a vapor. It was a full-fledged idea that rose out of my throat. "Come home with me," I blurted.

He jerked back, tugging his arm with it, but I didn't let go. I couldn't let him withdraw his hand because I didn't know if he'd ever give it back.

He stared at me. "What did you just say?"

I licked my lips. "Come home with me."

"What are you—"

"I have a spare bedroom in my apartment. You can stay there until you can afford your own place. Just help with utilities. And grocery shop. I hate grocery shopping. And unloading the dishwasher. That's my least favorite chore." I was rambling now, and Beck's face was blank. "I'm a graphic designer. That's what I do. And I have tons of connections. Hell, sometimes I need portrait photographs—"

"Nate, you have no idea if I'm any good—"

"I know you are, Beck. I just know it."

He blinked, his cat eyes bright and glossy. His lower lip trembled and I had him. I knew it. Just...

"No," he shook his head. "No, Nate, that's crazy. You don't know what you're saying. You're just..." he waved a hand around us, "caught up in this, but if I come home with you, you're going to regret it within hours."

"Don't tell me I'm going to regret it." I scowled.

"You *will*." He clenched his jaw and tugged his hand. I tugged back.

I wanted him with me. I knew it more than I knew anything else. I couldn't let him stay here. I couldn't leave him behind.

I leaned closer. "I'll make you a deal. Come with me to my sister's wedding. Just one day. And if I still haven't regretted this." I nodded toward our hands. "Us. Then you have to come with me. Or at least seriously consider it."

"Nate, this is crazy. I don't have the money for a flight, and I'm not showing up to a wedding uninvited—"

I held up my free hand. "First, I have a plus one. My best friend was supposed to come and then he got called into work. Two, I'll buy your plane ticket. If there's a seat available on my flight, it's a sign."

Beck didn't say anything for a moment, studying my face. "You're crazy."

I nodded. "This is true."

"This is crazy."

"Also true."

He looked again at our hands and then stared out the diner window. I studied his profile, his strong jaw and full lips and those eyes. I wanted more time with him.

I was about to plead, get on my knees, anything, when he turned to me. He bit his lip, a smile breaking through the uncertainty.

And then he said one, single, beautiful word. "Okay."

Chapter Nine

I jiggled my leg and stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows of the airport at a taxiing plane. I shifted in the hard seat, wincing at my sore muscles. A woman across the aisle from me stared at my neck. I glared and placed my palm over the love bite Beck had left behind last night. Then I thought, fuck it, I was proud of that bite mark. So I lowered my hand and elongated my neck, letting her look her fill. She rolled her eyes and went back to her magazine.

Nosey broad.

It was hot in here, and I was still a little hungover.

And I thought now that this might have been a bad idea. A really, really bad idea.

This morning, I'd woken up next to Beck. A gloriously naked Beck, with his face tucked into my neck and his leg thrown over my thighs. I'd wanted to stay in bed and repeat the night before.

Instead I'd shifted out from under him, dressed and gathered my things. Wrote him a note. And then I left.

Now my muscles wouldn't relax, every one screaming at me to go back to him. But I couldn't. I just couldn't.

I pulled out my phone and thumbed through the photos. The first smile of the morning creeping across my face.

We'd had to find a suit for Beck last minute. We bought one off the rack at some department store, and he still looked like a million bucks in that thing at my sister's wedding. I took a picture of him while he tied his tie, head bent as he eyed the knot. The next picture was him flipping me the bird, a smirk twisting his full lips.

I'd laughed and lunged at him.

He'd called me a horny bastard.

I had dozens of pictures of my family. My tearful mom. My proud dad. My gorgeous sister. My ridiculously good-looking brand new brother-in-law. My older brother and flower girl niece. But I flipped through those quickly. I'd look at them again later. Right now, I needed to see Beck.

Shots of Beck at the dinner table, his eyes rolling into his head as he ate his steak. "*So tender!*" he kept saying, and I told him he needed to stop, because it

sounded creepy. He'd kicked me under the table, I punched his arm, and then we kissed until someone at the table cleared her throat. Grandma was such a cock-blocker.

Us dancing. Me singing karaoke.

And then shots in the elevator. Blurred because that's when tongues roved and hands grasped. Clothes untucked.

Then one last one. Beck's head on the pillow, facing me. A smile on his lips, gold-green eyes drooped in exhaustion and post-orgasmic bliss. If I'd turned the camera on myself, I'd have looked the same, I'm sure. Ravaged. Because I'd wanted, accepted, and loved Beck moving above me, over me, inside me.

I exited out of my album and glanced at the time. Twenty minutes until boarding. My leg resumed its jiggling. I didn't want to watch the people entering the boarding gate. Because it drove me crazy with every second that passed, and I didn't see his black hair.

I'd left the note because I'd needed it to be his choice. I didn't want to have to convince him and plead with him. And I would have. If I'd stayed in that hotel room until he woke up, I would have debased myself to get Aaron Becket to board that plane with me to Chicago.

And maybe he wouldn't have caved, and it would have been awkward and horrible. Or maybe he would have caved, but would have regretted it later, not being able to think through his choice.

So I gave him the chance. I told him if he didn't want to join me, that was fine. But then I wouldn't contact him again. I needed a clean break. I didn't share in the note that the reason was because I thought I was falling in love with Beck.

But I told him the gate and flight and left his ticket that I'd purchased and printed at the hotel on the desk waiting for him. He just had to make his choice.

I'd be here.

And God, I hoped he made the choice to be with me.

A voice over the loudspeaker announced boarding in ten minutes, and I began to sweat, rubbing both hands on the legs of my jeans.

I pulled my sunglasses down over my bloodshot eyes and slumped in my seat, arms crossed over my chest, staring at the ugly diamond geometric pattern on the carpeted floor.

I let my mind wander, and, when I felt like I was going to come out of my skin, I walked over to the small stand that held drinks and snacks and magazines. I perused the racks, thinking the guy on the cover of muscle and fitness had a great body but he was no match for Beck's face.

I grabbed a bottle of water and remembered how sexy Beck looked when he tipped his head back, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed.

Fuck me, I couldn't even read or drink. I walked away without making a purchase, head down, stomping back to my bags.

Some guy was there in a black baseball cap. In my seat. And I couldn't believe what an idiot I was to leave my stuff behind. I walked faster and opened my mouth—

The head raised and two gold-green eyes peered at me from under the black brim.

My knees almost gave out.

I stumbled forward, arms out to embrace my man, but he stood up and held his hand up, palm out. "No."

I caught myself at the last minute and lowered my arms awkwardly at my sides, wobbling slightly on my feet. "What?"

His jaw clenched and he shook his head. "Don't get all, 'Oh Beck, I'm so glad you came' Hallmark moment with me."

My heart dropped right out onto this ugly carpet. "You're not getting on the plane?" My voice was barely a whisper.

His eyes blazed. "You bet your ass, I'm getting on that plane."

I didn't know what to say, because he said he was getting on the plane, but why did he look so angry?

He glanced around him and then stepped closer to me, lowering his voice to a harsh whisper. "I woke up to an empty, cold bed. Do you want to know how that made me feel?"

I scrunched my lips to the side. "I'm guessing... not good?"

"That's right, not good!" he shouted, then lowered his voice again. "I like morning sex. It's my favorite. I don't like to be surprised and cheated out of morning sex because you decided to go and be all chivalrous and pull this bullshit." He waved a hand in frustration, but I didn't care about his words

anymore. Relief placed my heart back in my chest and warmed my body. Hell, even my headache lessened.

Beck was coming home with me.

He was still ranting about setting fire to my note in the hotel toilet, and I tried to hide a smile.

Because it was really cute, how angry he was that he didn't get to get off this morning.

He stopped mid-sentence and stared at me. "Are you laughing?"

A giggle burst out and I tried to cover it with a cough. "No."

His eyes widened. "Oh my God. No, you're laughing at me. You bastard."

Now I ignored my prickly Beck and wrapped my arms around him, hauling him against me. I tucked my face into his neck and laughed.

He stayed stiff at first and then his muscles relaxed. His hands rose at his sides and hugged me back.

"I'm sorry," I said when I stopped laughing.

He took a deep breath. "When I woke up and you weren't there, I thought you changed your mind." He paused. "I didn't like that feeling."

"So it's not because you didn't get to have sex."

He chuckled. "It's a little bit of that."

I leaned back so I could look at him. "I needed you to make this decision on your own. I know I can be... persuasive."

He smiled and brushed his fingers along my jaw. "Yeah, but I like that about you."

The voice over the loudspeaker announced it was time to board. We grabbed our bags and handed over our tickets.

"So, your name really is Aaron Becket," I said.

He smiled at me. "Yeah."

"You didn't lie to me, then."

"No."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "I don't know why."

We placed our luggage into the overhead bins and sank into our seats. I rested my head back on the headrest and turned to face him. He did the same and laced our fingers together.

“So,” he said, “I guess what happens in Vegas doesn’t always stay in Vegas?”

I laughed. “You’re the best souvenir ever.”

The End

Author Bio

MEGAN ERICKSON is a former journalist who switched to fiction when she decided she liked writing her own endings better. She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband, two kids, and two cats.

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THE LONELY DROP

By Vanessa North

Photo Description

Two men lie naked in bed. One is on his stomach, with his head out of the frame, the other strokes a hesitant hand down his lover's back.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Ten years ago, I turned him down.

One night stands were his norm, and not because he couldn't have had a relationship if he'd wanted one. He could pretty much have any man he wanted. I walked away because I deserved better.

Now our paths have crossed again. He has the world at his feet. It's a tempting thought to throw away my lifetime of ideals for a single night with him.

Do I still have the strength to walk away?

Do I even want to?

Take the story where you want it to go.

My only request is for a contemporary story with a HEA.

Thank you!

~ Pamela Su ~

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: culinary/bartenders, reunited, second chance, long distance, businessmen, masturbation, switch/versatile

Word Count: 23,989

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Dedication

To Pamela Su.

Author's Note

Some events in this story take place during the snowstorm that hit the southeast United States in January 2014. In order to make this work with my story timeline, I took some artistic liberties with details of the storm, including the dates the storm occurred.

Asheville, North Carolina is a special place to me, a place I lived for several years. The Haywood Inn in this story is an amalgam of Asheville hotels, and should not be confused with the very real Haywood Park Hotel downtown. Though the primary settings in the book are fictitious, street names and neighborhoods are based on real places, and reliable sources (AKA Google and Urban Spoon) inform me that Nick's favorite noodle shop is still located on Pack Square.

THE LONELY DROP

By Vanessa North

Prologue

May 2003

Campus was deserted.

All the underclassmen had gone home for the summer, leaving only the few seniors who lived on campus. Mom wouldn't be coming in until the next day for graduation, and I'd finished my final work study shift at the library.

Finished.

Tomorrow, I'd be a college graduate. I felt a pang of nostalgia as I walked toward the dorm where my friend Kevin lived. There was something particularly collegiate-looking about this part of campus, and every time I'd walked through here, I'd felt it like an epiphany. *I'm in college*. Today I felt it like a punch. This was the last time I'd walk over to Kevin's dorm.

Kevin. He was going to grad school in New York—so he could work part time for his dad and learn the business. We'd talked a bit about me going too, living together in the city. I'd been accepted at Columbia, but I couldn't afford it, so I was staying in Massachusetts to get my MBA. I was going to miss him something fierce.

I trudged up the steps to his room on the third floor, finding the door wide open and Kevin sprawled on his couch, staring at the boxes stacked by the door. I knocked and he looked up.

For a moment, he looked like a runaway puppy that just discovered he'd lost his owner. Then he smiled and all was right in my world. I missed him already. He was right in front of me, smile shining like a lighthouse, and I missed him already.

"Dad got me a new cell phone for graduation." He stood up and thrust a piece of paper into my hand. "There's the number. Don't you dare lose it, okay?"

The vehemence in his voice startled me. "I won't." I shoved the paper into my pocket and kicked the door closed behind me. "Wanna order a pizza? One last time?"

He laughed, then shook his head. "I can't believe it. It seems like yesterday—I mean, we really made it."

“Yeah we did.” I grinned at him as he flopped down on the sofa. I moved across the room to the beds. The top bunk had been stripped down, but Kev’s bed still had navy blue sheets on it. I sat down, kicking off my shoes. “So, that’s a no on the pizza?”

“I ate my last three packs of Top Ramen for lunch so I’m not hungry yet, but maybe later. Sorry I already packed up the TV, or we could play video games.”

I shrugged. “S okay. Want to go out?”

He shook his head. “Why am I sad, Nick?” He looked up at me. “We’re graduating and I’m supposed to be so happy, but mostly I just feel empty inside.”

Ah, shit. I held out my arms, and he moved into them. Some of the other guys on the team would be assholes about it if they saw us hugging like this, call us faggots or whatever. We were both out to the team, but it didn’t make the teasing any easier to take. As of tomorrow, we weren’t on the team anymore, and if I wanted to hug my best friend then I would, and they could all be damned.

Playing soccer in college would have been hell without him. The day I came out to the team, he stood up and told them he was gay too. And from that day on, we were tighter than brothers. He had my back; I had his.

“Are you worried about moving back to New York?” I asked, squeezing him a little tighter before letting him go.

He stretched out on the bed in front of me and shrugged. “It would be easier if I weren’t moving in with my folks.”

“Yeah.” I met his parents freshman year, and still felt like I’d walked into a freezer every time I thought of them.

He rolled onto his side and tugged me down with him. “I’m going to miss you, you know? But maybe I can come out and see you sometimes.”

I nodded, afraid to meet his eyes, afraid he’d see my feelings for him and laugh at my crush. “Definitely.”

“Hey, Nick. Will you look at me?”

I let my eyes travel up the front of his T-shirt to rest on his face. My face flushed with embarrassment, and I started to look away, but stopped when he cupped my chin in his hand.

“What are—?”

When his lips touched mine, my brain switched off. He nudged at my mouth, gently plucking my lips between his own. He drew back a little. “Is that okay?”

Was it? I didn't know. I didn't care. And I couldn't talk. I leaned in and kissed him. He groaned into my mouth and pulled me roughly against his chest. It made me feel weak and flushed at once. It was so different from how he'd touched me before—and he was an affectionate guy, he hugged me often. But this embrace was... *carnal*.

I shoved closer to him, pressed our bodies as tightly together as I could, letting my hands travel over every bit of him I could reach. He seemed to melt against me, his body going soft and responsive—well, except for the one part of him that wasn't soft at all. He nipped at my lips with his teeth, and I ground my dick against his.

I pulled away enough to break the kiss, then dove into the warm, slightly damp skin between his neck and shoulder. This was crazy. I knew he didn't love me. He didn't have boyfriends, he had hookups. But with his hands on my skin and in my hair, and holy fuck, down my pants, it was hard to remember why that mattered.

“What do you like?” he murmured into my ear, his breath tickling. My whole body felt hot, and I realized that the expression “turned on” meant so much more than just being horny. Horny was impersonal. Horny could be solved with my hand. This was anything but. This intense chemistry was Kevin and years of friendship and desire and being there for each other—it was like being lit up from the inside out because it was *us*.

“What do you mean?” I licked at the salty skin of his throat, reveling in it.

“I mean, what do you like?” He pulled back a little to look in my eyes, and I pulled him into another kiss. He ground against me, hard, then pulled away again. “Come on, Nick, I'm not gonna get all judgy. I'm verse, I'll do whatever, but you know—I want to make you happy.” His grin was sweet and a little shy.

I blushed, this time not from arousal, but embarrassment. “I've never...”

His eyes grew wide. “You're a... wait. No, that guy at the club that time—you guys were...”

He trailed off and stared at me. “You're a virgin?”

Fuck. I untangled myself from his arms and legs, wondering how the hell we got so intertwined so quickly. “Yeah.”

He pressed further. “You mean, anal right? You’ve done other stuff? BJs, dry-humping, mutual jerk-offs…”

How much more embarrassing could this get? “This is a mistake.”

I tried to sit up, but he pulled me down. “Wait a minute, Nick. Why? For fuck’s sake, what are you saving yourself for? It’s not like you can get married. I mean, come on.” He laughed, and my flush deepened. Of course he wouldn’t get it; he’s the king of the one night stand.

“Just forget it. Forget all of it.” I shoved away from him, humiliated. I didn’t expect him to understand—he didn’t grow up the way I did—but I certainly didn’t expect him to make fun of me either.

“Aww, come on, Nick, *stay*. I want you to stay tonight.”

Tonight. One night. I could stay there, lose my virginity to the guy I loved, and walk away in the morning knowing he’d never love me back.

No. I couldn’t do it.

“I deserve better.” I said softly. “I want my first time to be about love, not just being comfortable and being scared of the future. I want it to be special.”

I swallowed around a lump forming in my throat. I *had* to get out of there.

“I have to go.” I stood up and straightened my clothes.

I crossed the room to the door, which hell, we hadn’t even *locked*, and as I opened it, I took one last look over my shoulder at him. Confusion and something like pity warred for dominance on his face. I closed the door behind me, and I practically ran to my own room. Hurt, ashamed, and alone, I threw his new cell phone number in the trashcan outside.

Chapter One

November 2013

I'm the master of the multi-task.

At least, when I'm behind the bar, that's true. With the bar phone tucked between my ear and my shoulder, I can pull a perfect draft and nod a friendly hello to the two businessmen walking through the door, all while plotting my bar manager's ex-husband's violent murder. Not that I'd actually kill anyone—I'm a pacifist. Hell, I don't even eat meat. I just wish the guy would stop complicating my life.

"Jenny, I can cover the bar by myself for maybe another half hour, but I need you, or I need to pull someone from upstairs before happy hour gets in full swing. I swear to God, Daniel has the number one spot on my shit list right now."

"I know, I'm sorry. Miriam's on her way to watch the kids. I'll be there as soon as humanly possible."

"This is the third weekend he's forgotten in as many months. When you gonna sue for sole custody since you're pretty much living it already?"

"You gonna give me a raise so I can pay my lawyer for that?" she huffs into the phone. "Sorry, that wasn't fair. Miriam just pulled into the driveway. I'll be there in twenty."

She hangs up without saying goodbye.

I hand the draft off to one of Jenny's regulars, a scrawny red-faced guy in a trucker cap. "Here you go, Jonah." I smile at him, and he gives me a halfhearted grin, but it's clear he'd rather be flirting with Jenny.

I pick up two beer coasters and slide them across the bar to the businessmen, rattling off my greeting and gesturing to the menu above the bar, "Welcome to The Lonely Drop, guys, what can I get—"

I break off in shock as I look up to meet the very stunned gaze of a man I never expected to see in Asheville. He's all wrong here. He's too shiny, too perfect. He's too New York or London. What the hell is he doing *here*?

"Nick?" A rush of emotions slides across his face too fast for me to catalog them all. Surprise, wonder, pain, but then pure, unbridled pleasure. "Oh my God, Nick Hana, it's really you."

“Kevin Dorsey.” After all these years, his name doesn’t hurt to say, but I flinch anyway. He takes my hand like he’s going to shake it and then pulls me into a hug from across the bar. His scent rushes over me, bringing decade-old memories along for the ride. He must still wear the same cologne, because he smells every bit as enticing as he ever did. I resist the urge to bury my face against his neck and breathe it in, remembering all too well the taste of the skin there.

“Shit, Nick, I can’t believe it’s you. Small world, man. God, you look good.” He lets me go and then lets his gaze travel up and down my body, his grin going wider as he takes in my flushed cheeks. He’s one to talk. He’d been tousled-cute at twenty-two, but with his coffee-colored hair cut short and ten years more experience behind his hazel eyes, he’s grown into his looks. He’d been cute, and I’d thought he was gorgeous then. Now? He’s devastating.

“S-so do you,” I stammer. “I—you’re in *Asheville*.”

He laughs. “For a couple of days. Dad’s taking over a company here, and he sent us down to do some of the early transition stuff.”

“Your dad sends you to fire people?” I can’t help the bitterness in my voice, and his smile falters a little.

“Well, it’s part of my job. I’ll be hiring people too.” He looks around the Drop and looks back at me, confusion plain on his face. “And you’re... tending bar?”

I flush red all over, part anger, part embarrassment—and more anger because I have nothing to be embarrassed about. Some of my favorite people on the planet tend bar, and often as not, I do too.

“I own the bar. And the restaurant upstairs.” I turn to his companion, a pretentious-looking ladder-climbing type wearing too much cologne and a suit that’s cut a little too big—more like he’s got a bad tailor than like he lost weight. “Hi, Nick Hana, proprietor. I went to college with Kevin. We played soccer together.”

“I’ll have the IPA.” He glares at me, obviously annoyed I’ve interrupted his opportunity to kiss up to the boss’s son.

“Dom. This is one of my oldest friends, Nick Hana.” Kevin’s voice is cold as he repeats my introduction. The guy—Dom—snaps out of his sulk and reaches out to shake my hand. As soon as I let go, I turn to tap his beer, hoping to hide how flustered I am at seeing Kevin again.

“What for you, Kev?” I call over my shoulder.

“I’ll have the same. You brew on site?”

“We do.” I can’t help it, my chest puffs a little. I’m *proud* of this little brewpub. It’s a good place, a friendly place. I’ve worked hard to make it the kind of place where the hippies and hillbillies, businessmen and retirees all feel welcome. A good beer, a good meal, and good company. I built that. And yeah, I have an MBA and I use it to pull drafts, and I don’t care what anyone, least of all Kevin Dorsey, thinks about that.

I hand them the beers.

“We do brewery tours on the weekends. If you’re still here Saturday, you should come by.”

“We won’t be.” Kevin’s face falls a little, then brightens with one of those smiles that always devastated me. “But next time, I’ll see if I can arrange to stay longer.”

Next time. Kevin Dorsey is going to be in Asheville again. Next time. I try to stamp down the hope unfurling in my heart. No. I don’t want Kevin in my life. I don’t need his flirtatious smiles or his friendly hugs, or the temptation when he turns to me and says something like “Stay. I want you to stay tonight.”

Ten years ago, when I was a shy, still-virgin at twenty-two, it was hard enough to say no to him when he said those words, a warm, turned-on gleam in his eyes. I deserved better than to be a notch in Kevin’s bedpost then, and I still do. Ten years later, with a few serious relationships behind me, I’m more convinced than ever that sex is best when it’s about love.

No, I don’t need a *next time* with Kevin Dorsey.

I notice the heavy plastic coaster next to Dom. “You guys are eating upstairs?”

“Yeah. The girl working the desk at the Haywood Inn recommended it. Small world you would own the one restaurant she gushed about.”

I make a mental note to send Tammy lunch sometime next week. “Well, the lasagna is my mom’s recipe. I remember you liked that, back then.”

The coaster starts blinking and vibrating. Kevin reaches for his wallet, but I wave him off.

“On me tonight. It was nice to see you.”

“Listen, Nick, I’d love to catch up later. How late are you working tonight?”

“I’ll be here until after we close. At midnight.”

He frowns. “Okay, listen, I’ll come downstairs after dinner and leave my cell number. I just... man, it’s good to see you.” The frown turns into one of those brilliant smiles, and it hits me right in the gut. I find myself smiling back. Apparently, any willpower I had around Kevin Dorsey was used up in one fell swoop ten years ago.

“I’d like that.”

Three hours later, Kevin returns to the bar, sans Dom. Jenny and I are moving in practiced tandem behind the bar. She sings along with the music coming over the speakers and tosses her cocktail shaker like she’s the second coming of Tom Cruise in that eighties movie. The mood is light when she taps me on the shoulder and says, “There’s a hottie standing by the bar with his phone number on a napkin. Nice suit, too, he’s probably loaded.” She whispers, “You lucky shit.”

I roll my eyes at her. Jenny’s obsession with rags-to-riches romance novels is legendary. The only thing she’d like more than to believe I was living one would be to be living one herself. “It’s just Kevin,” I tell her. “Old soccer buddy.”

But when I turn and see him there, hands in his pockets and that warm smile on his full lips, I feel like I should be growing Pinocchio’s nose. There’s no such thing as “just Kevin.”

Jenny snorts and pats my shoulder. “Uh-huh.”

“Where’s your colleague?” I ask, placing a coaster in front of him.

“He went back to the hotel, thank God. He’s an insufferable little shit. I can’t begin to tell you how pissed off he was when he realized there was no filet on the menu.” Kevin chuckles, then mimics his smarmy coworker. “Why would you waste a perfectly good per diem on rabbit food?”

I laugh; I can picture it perfectly.

“The meal was outstanding, by the way. I had your mom’s lasagna. It’s even better than I remember.”

“Thanks. I added nutmeg. She’s probably cursing me out for it from beyond the grave.”

His face falls. “Oh shit, Nick.”

A lump forms in my throat. Of course, he didn't know. It's not like he'd have seen her obituary in the small hometown paper where it ran. I don't like to visit the raw place inside where I still grieve for her. An only child to a single parent, I'm unmoored now, family-less, and there are no words adequate. The tightness I feel in my chest, it's more than loneliness, it's the isolation at the end of a family line.

"It's been a few years." I say the words as though they'll protect me from my own grief, the way time sometimes does.

"I didn't know. I would have..." he trails off and looks down at his shoes. "I don't know what. I would have come to the funeral. I'm so sorry, man."

"Thanks, that's very kind of you to say."

"Hey, I know we drifted apart after college, but I thought..."

I hold up a hand. "It's been ten years, life happened in the meantime."

"I wish I'd known it was happening to you." He offers another smile. "So, want to tell me more about it?"

"About Mom? No offense, Kev, but I really don't want—"

"About your life. You have this place. You're living in North Carolina. I want to know more."

I pull an IPA for him and set it on the coaster. I pull one for myself and go around the bar to join him. "After Amherst, I got my MBA, same as you. Then Mom started getting sick right about the time I finished school. I had some offers in Boston, but I moved home to Vermont to help take care of her. She was in hospice by the end of that year. After she passed away, I married her nurse. A few months later, I realized I had been insane with grief, and we divorced, amicably. I fled to North Carolina and bought this place. Turned it into a vegetarian brew pub, and here we are."

He stares at me, jaw dropped. "You can't be serious. You got married?"

I manage not to crack a smile, shrugging instead, but the longer he stares, the harder it is to maintain my nonchalance. My lips start to quiver. Before I know it, I'm doubled over laughing, and he's scowling at me.

"You are so full of shit, Nick."

But now he's laughing too.

"I did *not* get married. I just threw that in there to see what you would say. I needed to get out of New England, though, so I wrote a business plan and came here."

“Your mom—” He tries to make a disapproving face.

“Would be laughing just as hard as I am at the expression on your face when I said I got married.”

“Yeah, she would.” He raises his glass. “To Mama Hana. Thanks for teaching me about pot and falafel. The world is better because you were in it.”

We drink to my mom’s memory, smiling at each other over our pints.

“How about you?” I ask. “You ever settle down?”

A flash of something raw scuttles across his face before his carefully cultivated, good-natured mask returns. “No. I’m not the settling type. I shot for the moon once, but that crash was pretty hard.”

“Still too pretty for monogamy.” I roll my eyes at him. “Why am I not surprised?”

“It is what it is,” he deadpans. Then he drains the rest of his pint in one swallow. “Listen, I have an early meeting tomorrow.” He grimaces, probably remembering my comment earlier about him firing people. “I’m going to go. Here’s my number.” He hands me the napkin. “And, you know, if you aren’t doing anything after you leave here, text me. I’m staying at the Haywood Inn, room 311. I wouldn’t mind your company while I’m here. I’ll be here until Thursday.” He offers a sly smile, puts a hand on my thigh, and leans close. “I’ve missed you, Nick. I’m glad I got a chance to see you.”

He gives my thigh a squeeze, brushes a kiss across my cheek, stands, and drops a few bills on the bar. “Call me if you want. Even if it’s after I go back to New York and it’s not for anything more than to say hey. Don’t be a stranger.”

“Kev...” I don’t even know what to say to that. Did he just proposition me? And then back track?

“Don’t over think it, Nick.” He smiles again. “And don’t lose my number, okay?”

I look down at the napkin in my hand, suddenly remembering the humiliation that led me to toss a similar scrap of paper in the garbage ten years earlier. “Right. Um, about what you said about company? Are you talking about catching up on old times or...?”

“I’m talking about whatever you want.”

“I’m not going to have sex with you.”

He flinches. "My friendship has never been contingent on whether or not we had sex. I'm sorry if I ever gave you that impression. Call me, don't, it's up to you. Like I said, I'm here until Thursday."

He flashes me one more smile, but this one doesn't seem to have any heart behind it. Then, he walks out of my bar.

I tuck the napkin into my pocket and return to my work, wondering how he's the one who propositioned me and I'm the one who feels like an ass.

Yeah, I'm a chickenshit.

I don't call him. I don't even copy the number into my phone. I almost throw it away. Twice. The second time, it actually makes it into the garbage can in my little office at the back of the restaurant, but I dig it out and stick it in the safe instead. Out of sight, out of mind, but if I really want it, I know where to find it. Done.

I have a moment of weakness Wednesday night. The Drop is only a ten-minute walk from my house on Montford. I stand on my porch for twenty minutes watching daylight leach from the sky, until it's too dark to walk. I would feel silly driving over there to get his phone number. I fish my phone out of my pocket and dial the bar.

"Lonely Drop!" Jenny answers. I can hear bar noise in the background, laughter and music and clinking glassware.

"Hey, Jenny. How's everything going?"

"Hey, Nick! Everything's fine, baby. Crazy busy. You don't usually call in on your night off, what's up?"

"Nothing. I thought I left something in my office. Was going to ask you to get it for me. But it's not urgent, and you're busy, so no worries."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, go serve some beer."

"Night, boss."

Thursday comes and goes, and on Friday morning, the regret hits me hard. He's gone, and I've missed any chance I had at making a real reconnection with him.

I used to think I got nostalgic over my college years because everyone does, but honestly? I get nostalgic about Kevin more. I miss him. I miss the soccer

games, and how he always knew exactly where I'd be on the field for a pass, like he had some sort of Nick-radar. I miss the post-game celebrations and how he'd pull me into his sweaty body for a hug. I miss bringing him to Vermont with me for the holidays because he loved my mom and she fussed over him the way his own mom never seemed to.

I've blown my chance to reconnect and it hurts. It hurts more than I thought it could after ten years. All of ten minutes' conversation overrode ten years of moving on, and my heart aches like it broke yesterday.

Friday night, the bar is too busy for me to think about anything but pulling drafts and mixing drinks, but when I finally lock the door and walk to my car, his phone number is tucked in my pocket.

At home, I undress, tossing my clothes—which stink of beer and bar food—into the hamper, and I lie down on my bed in my boxers. I stare at the number—his handwriting still so familiar. Finally, I dial.

“Hello?”

His voice is rough from sleep. Oh, shit, it's two in the morning. What the hell am I thinking?

“I'm sorry!” I blurt out. “I'll call you tomorrow. Oh God, I'm so sorry, Kevin.”

“Wait, Nick? Wait, don't hang up! Is that you?”

“Yeah, I'm sorry, I forget not everyone keeps barman's hours.”

“S okay. I don't have to go to work tomorrow. I'm glad you called.” I can hear the smile in his voice. It's true, he's glad. A rush of warmth tingles through me. He's glad.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I was thinking about you all day.”

“Really?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“I thought you were mad at me.” I play my fingers over the squares of my quilt, feeling weak for admitting it, but also feeling like it's okay, because he's just a disembodied voice on the other end of the phone, not real, standing in front of me and smelling like heaven and ten-year-old memories.

“No, disappointed in myself. I let you think... I let you think I just wanted to hook up with you—and I'm not gonna lie, Nick, I totally would hook up with you. But I really want my old friend back. Can we do that? Be friends again?”

Relief washes over me. “Yeah. I'd like that.”

“Awesome.” The warmth in his voice makes me feel good down to my toes. My cock chubs up a little, and instead of being embarrassed, I enjoy the feeling of being turned on without him knowing.

“What were you thinking about? You said you were thinking about me?”

“About lots of stuff...” He trails off, clears his throat, and then when he starts talking again there's an almost fake cheerful note to his voice. “Especially how much fun we always used to have on the soccer pitch. You still play?”

“Yeah, I play in a league at the park. My team kinda sucks, but we have fun. You?”

“No, I wish. I travel too much, and Dad thinks...”

I wait for him to finish the sentence. When he doesn't, I prompt him, “Your dad thinks what?”

“Nothing. It's not important. You know how he is. Remember when I came out to him?”

God, how could I forget? Kevin came over to my dorm room, shaking, on the verge of tears because his dad was a cold, unfeeling asshole. Mr. Dorsey wasn't mean, exactly, just careless with his son's feelings. I'd never felt so helpless as that night Kevin spent in my room, curled up with me on my twin bed. He slept, but I didn't. I started bringing him home on the holidays after that, because my mom had more than enough parental affection to share.

“Yeah. He any better now?”

“He doesn't really care about me being gay. That would require him actually caring about me.”

My hand stills on the blanket. I'm shocked to hear him say the words. He never had, when we were in school. I'd always supposed something that unfair was best left unsaid, but there's a power in acknowledging it.

“He sucks, Kevin,” I whisper.

“Yeah, but that's old news. Some things never change. Now, at least I have the luxury to think of him more like my boss than my dad, you know?”

“He acts more like your boss than your dad. Why do you work for him again?”

“Because working for him is the best our relationship has ever been.” His sigh is a little sad. “He’s warming up a little lately because Trish—you remember my little sister?—anyway, Trish is having a baby. Maybe he’ll be a better grandfather than he was a father.”

“One can only hope,” I grunt.

“What’s it like, owning a restaurant?” There’s a wistfulness to his voice, more than curiosity, maybe even jealousy.

“It’s terrifying. And wonderful. And stressful. But I love it.”

“Your mom’s influence is all over the menu.”

I smile at that. “Yeah, she’d have loved it. Nutmeg in the lasagna aside.”

“So, are you a full-time vegetarian now? Or do you still sneak bacon sometimes like you did in college?”

“No more bacon. I’ve been a real vegetarian for about six years now. It seemed disrespectful, somehow.”

“To your mom.”

“Yeah. After she died.”

“She was really special, Nick.”

The lump is back in my throat. I nod, then realize he can’t see me, so I say, “Thanks.”

“Is she buried in Vermont?”

“No, she was cremated. I have her ashes here.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. I was going to scatter them in the mountains where she taught me to ski, ’cause she loved it there, but I’m not ready yet.”

“Maybe give me a call, when you do? I’d like a chance to say goodbye—even if it’s just over the phone.”

Just over the phone.

Like our slowly rekindling friendship.

“When are you coming back to Asheville?” I hold my breath, waiting for his answer.

“January sometime. I’ll need to interview candidates for the now-vacant management positions. We’ll do the first few rounds over the phone, but I won’t make a final decision until I meet with them in person.”

“Will you call me? Maybe we can have lunch. There’s this fantastic noodle place in Pack Square.”

“Yeah, I’ll call you.” He yawns and I hear it through the phone.

“Hey Kev, get some sleep.”

“Don’t want to hang up yet. I have my buddy back.”

“I’ll still be here tomorrow.”

“You promise?”

“I swear.”

“Don’t swear. Mama Hana hated it when you swore.”

“I promise.”

“Good night, Nick.”

“G’night, Kevin.”

Chapter Two

Thanksgiving morning 2013

I call Kevin right before I open the restaurant for lunch, knowing it will be too crazy later in the day, and somehow, even if I can't say it outright, wanting to express my thankfulness that he's in my life.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Nick!" His voice is full of exuberance when he picks up the phone.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Kevin." I smile, trying to picture him in New York, wondering what his home looks like. "Are you at home?"

"Nah, Mom decided she wanted to go someplace warm, so we're spending the weekend in the Keys. How about you?"

"At the Drop. We've got some Thanksgiving specials planned. My tofurkey is legendary."

He laughs, a low chuckle. "You really serve tofurkey? What about the root vegetable stew your mom used to make?"

"Hey, some people, myself included, like tofurkey. I make the stew too. And butternut squash bisque, onion and goat cheese tarts, pumpkin fritters. The desserts are the best though. The pastry shop across the street sends over the best pecan pie I've ever had, and we make our own pistachio and Bailey's ice cream to go with it."

"Pistachio and Bailey's on pecan pie?" His voice is thick with longing.

"It tastes even better than it sounds. It's like eating an orgasm."

He laughs. "I dunno, I've eaten my share of spunk, and I bet your ice cream is better."

"You know, vegetarians taste better." The flirtatious words pop out before I can stop them.

"Are you offering?"

"Offering what?" I hedge. I opened myself up for this bit of sensual banter, the least I can do is let him say it.

"To let me taste your orgasm?" he teases. I can't stop the visual that pops into my head. Him on his knees, looking up at me with lust-dark hazel eyes while I thrust down his throat.

I bite back a moan.

"I'll make you some ice cream," I offer, my voice only shaking a little bit.

"It'll do." He sighs. "Hey, I gotta go. Thanks for calling, man. It's good to talk to you."

"Yeah, you too. Happy Thanksgiving."

Christmas Eve 2013

I miss the call because Jenny's car broke down. I drive her and her kids to an Ingles parking lot where her ex is supposed to meet her to pick them up. She mutters something about wanting the exchanges to happen somewhere there are security cameras.

"Jesus, Jenny." I stare at her. "And you're letting him take your kids?"

"It's not like he's actually going to show up. And if he does, if he's drunk or stoned, we call the police. I won't let him take them if he's high." She tucks one of her long curls behind her ear. "Who stands up their kids on Christmas?"

I grunt. My own sperm donor had pretty much stood up my entire life, so I didn't really have anything to say to that. I know one thing for sure: I'd rather grow up the way I did, with no dad at all, than have someone volatile like Daniel for a parent.

We wait an hour.

After I drop Jenny and the two crying kids at her house, I drive home, and it's not until I see my cell sitting on the counter that I realize I hadn't had it with me.

Two missed calls. One is Jenny thanking me for waiting with them; the other is Kevin.

"Hey, Nick. Merry Christmas. I... I didn't like thinking about you being alone. For the holiday. Well, at all really, but also for the holiday. Then I realized you probably have a boyfriend or something, and you're celebrating with him. And that's awesome. I hope... I mean, I'd really like to know you're doing okay. Merry Christmas."

I listen to it three times before I text him.

I'm fine, Merry Christmas.

I listen to his message again, smiling at the way his voice turns flat when he mentions a boyfriend.

No boyfriend. Not for a while.

A few minutes later, he texts me.

Tell me you aren't alone.

Alone isn't so bad.

My phone rings. I don't even have to look to know it's him.

"Hi, Kevin. How are you today?"

"Do you want me to fly down there?" His voice is all growly, and I'm ashamed of how much that turns me on.

"What? No." I laugh. "It's not a big deal. It's not like this is my first Christmas alone." That Christmas had sucked. I'm still amazed I didn't go out of my mind.

"Dude! I'm serious. I'll fly down there, we can hang out."

I can't believe he's offering. It's sweet, and thoughtful. And not the kind of thing you do for someone you've barely talked to in ten years.

"Kevin. Stay home, celebrate with your family. Hey, how's Trish?" I change the subject to his sister, hoping for a reprieve.

"She's forty-one weeks pregnant and tired of hearing manger jokes. Don't change the subject."

"I thought pregnancy only lasted..." I start ticking off weeks on my fingers.

"Her due date was last week," he says.

"Well if she's a week past her due date, you should definitely stay in New York. You don't want to miss the birth."

"January sixth," he says abruptly.

"What?"

"I'll be in Asheville January sixth. I'm staying at the Haywood again. I'm staying through the weekend so I can come to your brewery tour on Saturday, and I would really like to take you out to dinner."

"Dinner? Like a date? But you don't date."

He sighs heavily and doesn't speak for a moment. When he does, his voice is so sad I want to take it back.

"I really wish you'd stop basing everything you think about me on the way I behaved in college."

“I don’t!” Do I?

“You do. And that’s okay for the most part, because we had fun together in college, and I like that you remember me that way. But it kinda stings that you assume I’m still chasing every hot ass that crosses my path.”

I want to believe him. I really do. But something niggles in the back of my brain. He’s the one who offered a hookup that first night when he showed up at the Drop.

“When was the last time you had a one night stand?”

“When was the last time you did?” he shoots back.

I let my silence speak for itself.

“Fine. November, before I came to Asheville. A guy from my gym. He was hot and we had fun and I don’t feel guilty about it.”

“I don’t think you should feel guilty.”

“Spare me. I know you think sex should always be about love—but sometimes it’s just about sex. About two hot, sweaty, naked bodies rubbing together because it feels good. It feels good, and I’m not ashamed of enjoying it.”

“I’m not trying to make you feel ashamed.” I frown into the phone. How did we go from him offering to fly down to keep me company for the holiday to *this*?

“And I’m not trying to make you feel like a puritanical uptight asshole. No, wait, I am.”

Ouch. An angry flush heats my face. “It’s working,” I admit.

“Okay, so maybe we stop with the value judgments about each other’s sex lives?”

“Okay.” I sigh. “I’m an asshole, I’m sorry.”

“I’ll call you in January, when I get into town.”

“Please do. Kevin, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Forget it. Merry Christmas, Nick.”

“Merry Christmas.”

New Year's Eve/New Year's Day 2013/2014

He sends me a selfie and a text from Times Square.

Playing tourist. Kinda fun. Happy New Year, Nick.

The Drop is packed, so I barely have time to text, *You too*, before turning my phone off so it won't distract me anymore.

When I crawl into bed at three in the morning, I turn it on and find more texts.

Kissing anyone special tonight?

Nick?

Me neither. Thinking about it though.

I shake my head and send a text of my own.

Drop was busy tonight. Only kiss I got was from Jenny.

Late as it is, I don't expect a text back, but it comes within minutes.

You kissed a girl???

I laugh.

She kissed me.

The phone rings.

"Hey," I try not to yawn as I answer, rolling onto my belly.

"You just get home?"

"Yeah. What are you doing up at three in the morning?"

"Couldn't sleep. Was waiting for a text."

My breath catches a little. So damned unfair of him to flirt with me like this. I don't know how to respond.

"Nick?" he prods.

"Sorry, I'm exhausted. I have no witty rejoinders."

He chuckles. "Okay, I can take a hint. I was going to angle for some phone sex, but..."

Oh good grief. "Are you kidding me?"

He laughs outright. "Only a little. I'd totally sex you up over the phone. Do you have to be in love with someone to have phone sex with them? Because I'm okay with being taken advantage of."

“Well, I’m not.” It would be just as easy to love him now as it was ten years ago. I worry that I’m halfway there already. Just the thought of phone sex with him has me grinding my dick into the mattress.

“No phone sex then.” His voice sounds sad. “That’s cool. It’s good to talk to you anyway.”

“Yeah. I almost didn’t expect to talk to you again after Christmas. I’m sorry I was an asshole.”

“Well, I happen to like assholes, so you’re forgiven.”

It takes me a minute to put the pun together. I half-laugh, half-groan into the phone. “That is the worst joke ever.”

“Hey Nick, what’s it like?”

“What’s what like?”

“Sex with someone you love. I mean, I’m assuming you aren’t still a virgin—oh, God, tell me you aren’t still a virgin.”

The question takes me by surprise, but not for the reason I would have thought.

“You’ve never been in love?”

“Once. I was in love once.”

Wow. I’d never realized it before, but jealousy *hurts*.

“Well then you know.”

“No, I never slept with him. It was an unrequited thing. Very angsty.”

I try to imagine him pining away for this unknown someone who was stupid enough not to love him. I can’t—the whole situation seems absurd to me, so I answer his question instead. “I’m not a virgin. I loved the guys I’ve been with, but I don’t know that it was ever really in-love-kinda-love, now that I look back. I’ve had some relationships. It was... good. I loved connecting with someone emotionally and physically at the same time.”

“Okay, so I’m trying to picture it... you’re a bottom, right?”

I snort. “Um, sometimes. Sure, I like to bottom.”

“Okay, I like this picture. Continue. What happened next?”

I laugh out loud then. “Still angling for phone sex?”

“Can’t help it, your voice is sexy.”

“I need to go to sleep.” I yawn.

“Okay. I’ll let you go. Happy New Year, Nick.”

“Happy New Year, Kev.”

It takes me a very long time to fall asleep.

January 6, 2014

Nervous butterflies stirring my guts wake me before dawn. I might see Kevin tonight. I armor my heart with the knowledge he’s only here temporarily, that this reunion, however welcome, is not some fairy tale with a happy-ever-after ending. Stupid heart doesn’t seem to care.

I head over to the Drop at ten thirty to get the pub ready to open, wondering if he’ll stop by. Jenny’s kids are still out of school on holiday break, so I handle the lunch crowd by myself, thankful it’s busy enough to keep my mind off the impending reunion with Kevin. But when the lunch rush is over, my thoughts go straight to him. Stupid brain.

The text comes at four-thirty.

*At the hotel—gonna take a shower and then check in with work.
Are you at the Drop?*

I almost succeed at not picturing him in the shower. Stupid dick.

Yeah. Come by when you finish up with work. Jenny comes in at six. Dinner?

He doesn’t answer for a long time. Finally:

Sorry. Was in the shower. Date dinner???

Your overuse of punctuation is very romantic. Friends dinner.

I can almost hear his put-upon tone when he replies.

*Fine. Friends dinner. I’ll meet you at the Drop at 6????! xo, Mr!
Romance!?!*

I can’t help it, I laugh.

No, I smell like a brewery. Gonna go home and shower. 7.

I start wiping down the bar and my phone buzzes again. *See you then.*

I can’t wait. Stupid, stupid heart.

Chapter Three

He's waiting at the bar, wearing dark jeans that are borderline too-tight and a tight black T-shirt. It's a good look for him, drawing the eye to the athletic lines of his chest and shoulders. When he sees me, his face lights up with one of those gorgeous smiles of his.

"Hey." I approach, not sure whether to shake his hand or hug him. I want to kiss him, I realize. The thought terrifies me but refuses to leave my head. The memory of our first desperate kiss in an almost-bare dorm room competes for dominance in my brain with wondering what ten years has done for his technique. I'm so gone.

"Hi." He stands and pulls me into a hug. He's a few inches taller than I am. If I were brave enough, I could fold my head onto his shoulder and breathe in his scent. The hug lingers a little longer than it should, then he lets me go.

"Buy you a drink?" he asks, gesturing at the row of taps and grinning.

"Not here. Come on, let's walk."

We end up at my favorite noodle place, and it's crowded but comfortable for a weekday evening. He charms me over dinner with stories about the travel he does for his dad's company.

"The boss is a jerk, but there are perks."

"Yeah?"

"Went to Paris for a month last year and was wined and dined by sexy French men. I gained ten pounds and a healthy appreciation for dirty talk."

"You speak French?" Why did I not remember that?

"Just enough to get by." He flashes me a shy smile. "It was fun, being a novelty to them. A big dorky American who accidentally says 'fuck me' instead of 'kiss me.' End result was the same though."

"How do you mix up the words for kiss and fuck?"

"It's easier than you think."

I'll have to take his word for it. "So, last time you came to town it was to fire people. And this time you're doing job interviews? How does that work?"

"I already interviewed them by phone, but a face-to-face interview is the final step. We're going to transfer someone from New York to be the general

manager, but I need a new sales manager and a new HR manager. Once those two are in place, they'll take over future hiring decisions."

"Hard to imagine you have many employees willing to leave the city to come here."

He shrugs, giving me an odd look. "Asheville has its charms, I'm learning. Besides, it only takes one."

He looks like he's about to say more, but my phone rings. I check the caller ID, and it's the Drop.

"Sorry, I have to take this—Hello?"

"Nick, it's Jenny. I'm sorry to interrupt your date."

"It's not a date, it's dinner with a friend. What's up?"

"Daniel came by the house and he was all drunk and threatening. Miriam called the police, and he took off, but she's scared he's going to come back and try to take the kids. I'm not sure what to do—Miriam's threatening to quit, and I need to go home and calm her down."

"Whoa, slow down, Jenny. Does Miriam have a car?"

The noise she makes sounds affirmative, so I continue, "Give her directions to my place. You all can have a sleepover there. For God's sake Jenny, tomorrow you are going to file for sole custody and a freaking restraining order. I'll go meet her at the house and get them settled, then I'll come take over at the bar. As soon as you leave the Drop, head to my house. Do *not* even think about going to your place alone, okay?"

"Are you sure, Nick? You don't need my drama."

"Jenny, you're the most irreplaceable employee I have, and you're my friend. Yes, I'm sure. And I've already got your drama since it affects the workplace. That's not a judgment, sweetheart—Daniel is his own person, you aren't responsible for his issues. But, let's do what we can to get you out of this situation once and for all, okay?"

"Thank you, Nick." She snuffles into the phone.

"You're welcome. I'll see you soon."

I hang up and turn to Kevin. He's already procured our check from the waiter and paid it.

"I'm sorry, I hate to cut the evening short—" I start to explain, but he holds up a hand.

“No worries. Besides, now I get to see your house.”

Miriam and the kids are sitting in Miriam's car in my driveway when we pull in. I wave to the three of them, and they get out and follow me up the steps. Kevin gathers their bags from the trunk and joins us.

Samantha, Jenny's three-year-old daughter, wipes her nose on a sleeve and looks up at Kevin warily as I unlock the door and usher them inside. “Who are you?”

“I'm Kevin. I'm Nick's friend.”

“Are you his boyfriend?” Blake, the six year old, asks. “Mom says he dates guys instead of girls.”

“Um, no, I'm not his boyfriend.” Kevin glances over at me. “But I date guys instead of girls too.”

Miriam, a pretty college student who has been watching the kids for Jenny since before she was divorced, herds them into the bathroom to brush their teeth before they can ask any more questions, leaving me standing in my kitchen with Kevin, who is looking around with curiosity.

“Wow, this place is so... oh.” I look at his face to see him staring at a set of copper measuring cups sitting on the counter. They'd belonged to my grandmother, then my mother, and now me. They'd been a familiar sight in Mom's kitchen.

“I use them every day.” I pick up the tiniest one, the quarter-cup measure, and stroke a finger over the engraved measurement on the side. “It's nice to see something of hers getting everyday use.”

“She had me polish them once.” He comes and picks up the one-cup measure, mimicking my actions, stroking the engraving with his thumb. “We went to visit for Thanksgiving, remember? I had never washed up after Thanksgiving dinner before.”

“That's because you were a spoiled rich brat.”

He laughs. “I hated being a spoiled rich brat. Which is such an entitled, shitty thing to say.”

He sets the cup down, takes the small one from my hand, and sets it down next to his.

“What are we doing, Nick?” he asks softly, not letting go of my hand. “I know this is going to be cut short tonight, and I understand why, but I need to know what *this* is.”

I swallow hard, forcing myself to meet his gaze. He's more vulnerable in this moment than I've ever seen him. “I don't know, Kevin. I thought we were just... friends again.”

“That's fine. Just so you know, I wouldn't mind it being more.” He runs his hand up my arm, slides it behind my neck. His thumb tracing the line of my throat, he moves in close like he's about to kiss me. “I think about that afternoon in my dorm room, the day before graduation. Do you ever think about that? Our first kiss?”

My eyes drift closed, amplifying the warmth of his hand on the sensitive skin of my neck. Of course I think about that kiss. With him this close, the scent of him in my nose, his touch on my skin, I can almost taste him. When his lips press gently against mine, it takes everything I have to pull my head away.

“Kevin... I can't. You come here, you stay in a hotel for a few days, and you go home. You might sleep with someone while you're here and have a good time—that works for you, and I'm not judging you for it, but I can't be someone's Mr. Right Now.”

He closes his eyes and sighs, looking like he's going to reply, but then Blake and Samantha come running into the kitchen and I'm reminded why our evening is being cut short.

“I have to go back to the Drop so Jenny can come over here,” I tell him.

“Will you drop me off at my hotel on the way?” he asks, resignation in his voice. “I have an early morning tomorrow.”

“Of course.”

I show Miriam where to find the guest rooms and the remote for the TV, and we say our goodnights to her and the kids.

Kevin is so silent on the drive to the hotel, if I couldn't smell him, I'd swear I was alone in the car. I pull up in front of the Haywood Inn and turn to say goodbye and apologize again, but stop short when I see the smile on his face.

“Kev?”

He reaches out a hand and brushes a fingertip down the length of my nose, then drops it.

“Call me tomorrow, okay? I’ll come by and have a pint.” he says brightly, and a flush of relief washes over me. I’d been so sure he’d decide he didn’t want to see me again now that *more* was off the table.

“Okay, sounds good. Good luck with the interviews tomorrow. I hope you find someone good.”

He smiles. “Thanks. Me too.”

And then, he’s gone.

Chapter Four

January 7, 2014

Kevin strolls into the Drop right in the middle of happy hour. Jenny, having spent a chunk of her day with her lawyer, is closing the bar, but I need to stay and see her through the post work-day rush. I give Kevin a little nod as he approaches the bar, and he smiles wearily. I pull an IPA for him and set it in front of him as he sits down. When he reaches for his wallet, I wave him off.

“On me. You bought dinner last night, the least I can do is buy my old buddy a beer.”

“Thanks.”

“How’d the interviews go?”

“Good. I think I have my HR manager. Still undecided on the sales manager, but I still have a few more interviews to go through for that position.”

I nod. “Hiring is tough. Any chance of promoting from within?”

“Nah, the sales team is a mess. If their sales had been stronger, they might not have needed to go looking for a buyer. Ugh, I don’t want to talk about work. Please tell me there’s a good gay dance bar somewhere in this town.”

I laugh. “Yeah, but the scene over there won’t get good until about five hours from now.”

“Come with me? It’ll be like old times.”

Old times. Wingmen again. Getting all hot and bothered watching him dance, and then going home alone while he picks someone up. Oh, yeah. *That* sounds fun.

“I don’t really...”

“Oh, you really, really do. Come on, Nick.” He rolls his eyes and starts ticking things off on his fingers. “Dancing. Loud music. Sweaty bodies. Cute twinkles and big hairy bears and flashing lights and boners for days. And if you don’t, you ought to. It’s called fun, and people have it sometimes.”

“I have fun!” I protest.

“Then come have fun with me.” He takes a swallow of his beer, then gives me goddamned puppy-dog eyes. “Please?”

“Fine.” I cross my arms over my chest. “I’ll meet you at the hotel at ten.”

“Yes!” He grins at me. “Just like old times.”

I leave my car in a parking garage near work and walk over to the hotel. It’s a cold night, and I’m grateful for my heavy vintage pea coat to wear over my club clothes. I can look the part as well as the next guy, with my tight jeans, no belt, and tight T-shirt, but tonight I feel like I’m not just looking the part, but playing a part. When I walk into the opulent lobby of the Haywood, Kevin is waiting for me, dressed in his own version of club clothes—black leather pants and a charcoal gray sweater. He looks positively mouth-watering as he crosses the room toward me.

“You look great,” he says, eyeing my jeans. “Are we going to call a cab?”

“Nah, we can walk.” I grin. “It’s cold, but I’m sure nothing like what you’re used to in New York.”

He smiles. “No, it’s really mild here. I like it.”

He follows me out onto the street and falls in step beside me as we head toward the club. We can hear the bass thumping a block away. It sends a little thrill through me. Once upon a time, I’d loved dancing with Kevin. Just hearing the thud of dance music brings back memories of the way he could move, all hips and sensuality. He was right, I really ought to do this more often.

We pay the cover, and I don’t miss the way the bouncer’s gaze travels down the length of Kevin’s body, the appraising way he smiles. I tense up, wanting to stake a claim, but I can’t really do that because he’s not mine.

“You boys have fun.” The bouncer winks at me.

I check my coat, showing the little ticket in my pocket, and I head for the bar. Kev is already there, and he turns to me with a shot glass in his hand.

“For you, my love.” He presses the shot into my hand. A quick sniff tells me it’s tequila. I raise a brow at him, and he holds up his own glass in a mock salute. I grin and tip mine back.

As the liquid burns a sweet fire down to my belly, I start to sway with the music. I don’t even realize I’m doing it until Kevin takes the glass from my hand and puts it on the bar. He takes my hand and leads me onto the dance floor, pulling me in close to his body, chest to chest, pelvis to pelvis.

I let the beat wash over me as I press in closer, rocking my dick into his in a way I'm only bold enough to do because we're on the dance floor. He slides his hands down my sides, holding me in place.

"...so fucking sexy when you dance, you know that?" He has to practically shout it to be heard over the music. I don't say anything; I close my eyes and *dance*.

His body is hard and hot and he moves with perfect rhythm against me, hips shifting in a sexy roll. When he spins me around and starts to rub against my ass, I moan, throwing one arm over his shoulder and cupping the back of his head. His hair is soft as silk, a little damp. I gather some of it in my fist and I tug.

He smooths a hand down my chest and his lips find the side of my neck just as his fingers pinch over my nipple.

Oh *fuck*. It feels good, really fucking good, tense and sharp at once. I trust him not to go too far in public, so I nuzzle my forehead against the side of his face and let him manhandle me.

Another tug at my nipple sends my brain reeling.

"Oh, God," I whimper, biting my lower lip.

"You should see the look on your face right now," Kevin says. "You look completely lost *and* found. You look like a man should look on the verge of an orgasm. You look fierce and fine and so damned hot. All the guys in this room wish they were dancing with you, and they're jealous because I'm the one holding you. They think I'm going to be fucking you later, and they get hard just thinking about it. About that face you're making, and me causing it. How does that make you feel?"

"Turned on," I admit, though it's really his dirty talk, and not the idea of the others watching us that turns me on.

"Yeah?" His hand slides down from my nipple to brush softly over the front of my jeans, barely a touch, but enough to make me jerk a little in his arms. "Oh, definitely yeah." He presses against my erection and rocks his own into my ass. Then, he spins me around again and pulls my arms back around his neck. "This, Nicholas, is called fun." He says it close to my ear, then kisses the side of my face. "Now, let's go get another shot."

I laugh as he tugs me toward the bar. We each do two more shots and then return to the dance floor. This time, he nods at me and then turns to a freckle-

faced twink wearing eyeliner and no shirt. He runs his hands down the guy's chest, asking a question, and apparently likes the answer he gets, because pretty soon, he's got the twink pressed back to his chest and moving against him just like he had me a few moments before. Kevin crooks a finger to me and I move in, chest to chest with the twink and rest my hand on his hip.

"Nick, this is Caleb," Kevin shouts over the music.

"Hi, Caleb," I shout.

"Hi, Nick." He smiles at me. "I love the way you move."

I leave my hand on his hip, but reach the other over his shoulder and slide it behind Kevin's neck. The three of us writhe together. Caleb's cock rubs against mine as we dance, and it's clear he's getting turned on. Soon, Kevin will make his move, and I'll have to call a cab to get home. I lose the rhythm at the pang of jealousy working through me, knowing it's my own stubborn fault.

Caleb runs a hand down my chest and leans close to my ear. "You guys can fuck me together if you want. You're both hot as hell."

"No thanks, buddy." Kevin somehow orchestrates getting Caleb out from between us. "But thanks for the dance, that was hot."

And then he's leading me back to the bar. After two more shots—how many have I had now?—he parks his ass on a barstool and sends me out to dance by myself so he can watch.

I give him a fucking show. For me, there's nobody else in the place but him. I shake, I shimmy, I gyrate to beat the band, and all the while I can feel his stare, hot and focused on my writhing hips, my legs, my ass. I close my eyes and imagine him getting turned on, letting the heat that washes over me guide my movements.

Caleb comes back, sticks his fingers in my belt loops, and drags me close. "Let's make loverboy jealous," he says in my ear, picking up my rhythm and grinding against me. He's a good dancer, not as good as Kevin, but enthusiastic and sexy. He runs his hands over my body, nips little bites along my jaw. It's exquisite sensual torture, to be touched like this, to touch back, knowing the one I really want is across the room, watching, maybe getting as turned on by watching as I am by knowing he's watching. Caleb doesn't try to kiss me, but he presses his forehead to mine and buries his hands in my hair. "Your man can't take his eyes off you. Lucky bitch."

I look over to Kevin sitting at the bar, and our eyes meet. He gives me a feral grin and comes back to the floor to claim another dance of his own.

I lost count at five shots of tequila, which is a really bad idea, and something I really ought to know better than to do. Or something. The point is, I'm a bartender; I know better. Shit, I can't feel my teeth. This bathroom mirror pep talk is making me feel even stupider than when I walked in. And I felt pretty stupid when I walked in. Letting some random guy do a body shot off your abs in front of the love of your life will do that to you.

God, I'm all... sticky.

"Oh, Jesus, Nick." Kevin walks into the john and takes in my disheveled appearance—or maybe the way I'm leaning my forehead against the mirror. "Okay buddy. Let's go." He pulls one of my arms around his shoulders and sort of hoists me against him.

"We gonna dance some more?" I try to gyrate my hips, but he stops me with a hand on my chest.

"We're going to put you to bed," he grumbles.

Grouchy-ass. I frown at him. "Aren't you having fun?"

"They called last call fifteen minutes ago. It's time to go home." He leads me out the front door, and I'm blasted by the cold air. I shudder all over.

"Shit, you were wearing a coat. Where's your coat check ticket? I'll go get it." He holds out his hand.

"Come find it, loverboy," I taunt, gesturing toward my pocket. "Guess correctly and you win a prize." I shimmy my hips a little, giggling.

"Okay, one, don't call me loverboy. Two, you're never drinking tequila again. Now reach in your pocket and get the ticket out. Please."

"You said we were going to have fun." I pout. "I'm offering you a guilt-free grope. Have at it."

"You're being an ass," he growls. "Get the ticket out."

"Fine." I dig the ticket out of my pocket and thrust it at him. He disappears inside, leaving me shivering on the sidewalk. When he comes back, he drapes my coat gently over my shoulders.

“I had the bartender call us a cab,” he tells me, holding my coat closed around my chest. “It should be here any minute. Do you want to stay at the hotel tonight so I can keep an eye on you?”

“So you can seduce me?” I waggle my eyebrows at him.

“So I can make sure you don’t choke on your own vomit.” He grimaces. “How much did you have to drink?”

“I don’t know. Caleb and that bear he went home with each bought me a shot. Plus the ones we did together. And that beer...” I start ticking them off on my fingers, but I keep losing track. A car pulls up next to us, and I realize it’s our cab when Kevin bundles me inside.

The cab stinks like tequila. Huh. Actually, maybe that’s me. I close my eyes for just a moment but I must have dozed, because Kevin is hauling me out of the cab and into the hotel. I let him lead me to the elevator, then to his room. He strips me down to my boxers and tucks me into the king-sized bed.

I watch sleepily through half-closed eyes as he folds up my clothes and sets them on the desk. He picks up my T-shirt, lifts it to his nose and smells it as he glances over at me. He must think I’m asleep, because he watches me for a minute, a soft smile on his face. I want to ask him what that smile means, but I’m too tongue-tied by tequila and my own timidness to speak up. Finally, he sets my shirt down on top of my jeans and strips out of his own clothes.

He turns off the light and slides into bed behind me.

“Goodnight, Nick,” he whispers.

“G’night,” I mumble into the pillow. I freeze for a moment, caught out feigning sleep, but then his hand strokes over my back in a soft caress, and sleep catches up with me for real.

Oh. My. God.

The desire to tear my own brain out of my skull is only dampened by the fear of loud noises anywhere near my head.

Like the hotel alarm clock noise screeching away mere inches from me. I pull the pillow over my head, groaning. My mouth tastes like something died inside. Tequila? Oh, fuck me.

A heavy weight leans against my back and the noise, blissfully, stops.

“Sorry, Nick.”

The weight moves away.

“Kevin? Why am I in bed with you?” I clench my ass a little, relieved to not feel any signs of penetration.

He laughs, dropping a hand onto my shoulder and rubbing lightly. “Because you were pretty wasted last night, and I wasn’t going to send you home alone. Do you remember?”

“We went dancing.”

“And drinking. Tequila. Also beer. And God knows what else.”

“Some guy asked if we would fuck him together.”

“You do remember.” Kevin laughs again. “Anyway, yeah.”

“We didn’t...?” I hate not remembering everything.

“Some dance-floor shenanigans, but that’s it.”

Oh thank God.

“Thank you.” I let go of the pillow and roll to my side.

“For what?” He smiles at me and the fuzzy memory of him watching me—watching me what? *Breathe?*—rushes over me.

“For watching over me.”

He runs a hand through my tousled hair. “You’re welcome. Now I gotta get up and go in to the office. Why don’t you get some more sleep? There’s a glass of water and some ibuprofen on the bedside table.”

“I love you.” I roll to my other side and grab the glass. I don’t care if it’s tap water, it’s the sweetest glass I’ve ever had in my life. I take the two brown pills sitting next to it and swallow them with a grimace as Kevin gets up and goes about his morning routine. The shower turns on, and I hear him singing softly.

After a few minutes of listening to the running water, I really, *really* need to pee.

I stare at the bathroom door for minute. Hell, I’ve seen him in the shower before. Hundreds of times after games and practices. He won’t care.

I push open the door to the bathroom and stop dead in my tracks when I see him through the glass enclosure. His back is partially to me, and the way his arm is moving, he could only be doing one thing.

I've never thought of myself as a voyeur, but my mouth goes dry at the sight of him, water flowing over his muscles, his eyes clenched shut and his mouth open in a gasp of lust. A mirroring arousal shoots through my body, a tight ache across my skin. I should turn around, leave, give him his privacy, but to my utter shame, I can't tear my gaze away from him.

He tilts his head so the water hits him in the chest. His broad back hides his hand on his dick, but his arm moves up and down in strong, steady strokes. His ass cheeks flex and release as he rocks forward. He's gorgeous, a beautiful masculine figure lost in sexual abandon, but beyond that, he's my Kevin, the man I loved ten years ago, the man I probably never stopped loving, and the man I will never have—at least not on my terms.

To see him like this feels like a prize I haven't earned. I back slowly out of the room and close the door. Just as it clicks into place, I hear his sharp cry, and I cover my mouth to keep from groaning. I wait a long moment before knocking.

“Hey Kev, comin' in. I gotta pee.”

“Hold on, I'm almost done.” He calls back. I hear the water shut off and then he opens the door, his lower body wrapped in a towel.

“All yours.” He grins at me. I manage a tiny smile as I pass by him, and blush bright red when he starts whistling as he gets dressed.

I'm waiting for my hard-on to subside enough that I can pee, when he calls out, “Do you drink coffee? There's a pot here, but I didn't want to make it just for me.”

“I'll drink a cup,” I call back. Then, to my humiliation, he comes into the bathroom to get water. He glances over to where I stand, red-faced with embarrassment, and gives me a little leer.

“Heh, waking up next to you did the same thing to me.” He winks, then takes his coffee pot out of the bathroom.

I drag my hungover ass in to work in time to open the restaurant for the lunchtime kitchen and serving staff, but immediately go hide out in my office. I can't believe I went out dancing and got drunk enough to black out. I haven't done that since... well, since college. And then this *morning*. Watching Kevin in the shower... What the hell is wrong with me?

At just after noon, the door to my office slams open and Jenny stands in the doorway, glaring at me.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

I blink up at her, wincing. Is she always this loud?

“Britney tells me you haven’t come out of your office since you unlocked the door this morning. I come in three hours early to do the bar purchasing and you have Corey handling the bar alone during the lunch rush. He was so deep in the weeds I thought he was going to cry. Corey. The jock. Cry.”

“Men cry too, sweetheart,” I tell her.

“And there’s one sitting in front of me who’s going to be crying real soon if he doesn’t tell his favorite employee what the hell is going on.”

“Are you always this loud?”

“Are you *hungover*?” Scandalized, she scoots inside the office and shuts the door behind her.

I nod.

“You. *You* are hungover. Wow. And you’re normally so uptight.” She sits down. “What happened?”

“I went dancing. With Kevin. And I did shots. Lots of shots.”

“Did you fuck him?”

“Jenny!” I glare at her.

“Did he fuck you?”

“Not better.”

“Did you, or did you not, have sexual intercourse with that man?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but no, I did *not*. I did wake up in his hotel room though. And…” No, not telling her about the shower. “And I wish we had. Not drunk, because I’d never forgive myself if the only time I ever got to be with him was because I was drunk. I just wish things were different.”

“Oh, baby. How long has it been?” See, this is why I love Jenny. She reads between the lines.

“Ten years—well, probably more like twelve if I’m being honest.”

“You haven’t had sex in twelve years?” Her jaw drops.

“No! I’ve had sex, Jesus, Jenny. I’ve been in love with him for twelve years.” So much for that reading between the lines shit.

“Oh.” Her eyes get really wide. “Does he know?”

“No, and it’s going to stay that way. I have my friend back. Even if it’s temporary, with him living in New York and me living here, we’re hanging out like old times and it’s good. I can’t ruin that.”

“But what if he feels the same way?”

“He doesn’t.”

“How do you know? Has he told you he just wants to be friends? Is he seeing someone else? Is he married?”

“No, not that I know of, and hell no.”

“What do you have to lose?”

“My dignity?”

She scoffs. “There’s no dignity in love, Nick. It’s messy and embarrassing and *fantastic*, but it sure as hell isn’t dignified. What do you have to *lose*?”

“My friend.”

“You have other friends. And honestly, you guys can’t be that close if one little love declaration ruins everything.”

“One little love declaration?”

“Well, I don’t exactly have you pegged as the ‘taking out a billboard in Times Square type.’”

“And anything less than that is ‘little’? There’s no middle ground?”

“I’m not talking literally. Damn, Nick, you really are hung over. It’s a metaphor. The big gesture. I don’t see you as a big gesture guy. You’re the kind of guy who loves quietly. And those guys? They either nut up or die alone.” She crosses her arms over her chest at the end of her speech, clearly pleased with herself.

“Thank you for my daily dose of melodrama.”

“Yeah, whatever. Got the liquor inventory?”

I hand her the printout.

“Nut up or die alone, Nick. I’m just saying.” She stands up and walks out of my office. She returns a few minutes later with a bottle of ibuprofen. “Courtesy of Britney. Now, go help Corey before the boy has an aneurysm.”

“I don’t think aneurysms are caused by tending bar alone for thirty minutes,” I call after her as she disappears down the hallway.

“Yeah, yeah. Help the guy out. By the way, it’s snowing pretty hard already. You might want to consider closing early tonight.”

I look out the window, wincing at the brightness. Sure enough, snow is flying. I pull up the weather app on my phone and see they’re only calling for a couple of inches. We should be fine to stay open.

By two o’clock, the restaurant is deserted and nearby businesses are closing. The TV above the bar is tuned to CNN showing massive shutdowns of roads in Atlanta, which is a few hours south of here. It looks like something out of a post-apocalyptic movie.

“We need to close.” Jenny comes up beside me and gestures at the TV. “I checked in with Miriam and she said the kids are building a snowman, and to take as long as I need here. I can help you close up.”

“I hate the idea of closing for an inch of snow.”

“Nick, you have four wheel drive. Most of your staff doesn’t. Corey’s car is rear wheel drive and he lives up on Sunset. You think he’s going to make it up those hills if it’s icy? And Britney needs to get to campus—she can walk if she needs to, but would *you* walk down Merrimon in a snowstorm?”

She’s right. I send the staff home, and I flip the sign on the door.

That’s when I get the text from Kevin.

*Going to try to get a flight out before everything shuts down.
Raincheck on the brewery tour?*

It hits me—a wave of physical pain. I’d expected a few more days with him. My waning hangover seems to roar back to life for a moment.

“Shit.” I dig the heel of my hand into the throbbing between my eyes.

“Nick?” Jenny looks up from where she’s wiping down the bar.

“He’s going home to New York.”

“Ah.” She puts the rag down. “Well, he’ll be back.”

“No, I don’t think he will. He’ll have finished up his interviews. Why would he come back?”

She sighs. “Sorry, Nick. At least you can stop pining over him though.”

“Yeah.” I look down at the phone and send one last text.

Travel safe, buddy.

An hour later, the bar is closed and clean and I head home. My phone rings as I’m pulling into my driveway. I half expect it to be one of my employees, stuck and needing a ride, but the caller ID says *Kevin*.

“Kev?”

“Hey, Nick. Bad news, good news, and more bad news. Bad news: looks like I was too late. They cancelled my new flight. Good news, they scheduled me back to my old one.”

I’m not gonna lie. I feel a little thrill at this news. “What’s the other bad news?”

“Can’t get a new hotel room. The Haywood already rebooked my room and everywhere I’ve called has told me they’re booked. I hate to ask—”

“Stay with me.” The words are out before I can stop them. “I’ll come get you at the airport.”

“Are you sure, Nick?”

“Of course. I’m not going to leave you stranded. I’ll call you when I get close.”

Chapter Five

He's waiting just inside the doors when I pull up in front of the airport. He practically runs to my car, tosses his suitcase in the backseat, and lets himself in the passenger side before I can even turn on my hazards.

"Well, hey." I grin at him as I pull out of the pick-up lane.

"Hi. Thank you. Oh my God, thank you, Nick. I hate spending the night in an airport. If you weren't driving, I'd kiss you."

His words stir a sweet little flutter in my belly, but I shrug. "It's not a big deal."

"Shut up. It's a big deal to me. Thank you, for real."

I glance over at him, and he's smiling, a great big grin of appreciation and warmth. I can't help but smile back. "You're welcome."

The house is dark when we pull up—disconcerting, seeing as how I always leave the porch light on when I'm not home.

"Shit," I mutter. "I think I've lost power."

"Do you have a generator? I'll help you hook it up." He gathers his suitcase and follows me inside.

"No generator. I should, just to keep the fridge running, but most of the time... well, most of the time I don't need stuff like that. I don't lose power often enough to make it a priority."

"I hereby volunteer to help you eat the perishables and drink the beer," he says as he follows me upstairs.

I point to the guest bedroom. "You can put your suitcase in there. Ugh, I am *so* not in the mood to drink beer." I scowl at him. "I'm still feeling last night a little bit."

"Sorry, bro." He leers a little bit. "But you sure looked hot, losing all your inhibitions like that."

"I wish you wouldn't do that."

"What?"

"Tell me I'm hot. Stuff like that."

“Oh, here we go again.” He rolls his eyes. “It was just dancing. Your virtue is safe.”

“It’s not about virtue. It’s...” My face flushes hot. “I watched you in the shower this morning.” Shit. Why did I confess that?

“You watched me—oh.” I see it, the moment it registers what I did. He turns a little red, but then tries to shrug it off. The emotions on his face flit between anger and amusement, but never embarrassment. Not like he has anything to be embarrassed about. *I’m* the one who crossed a line.

His voice is quiet. “I know I flirt inappropriately, but that was private.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I feel horrible. I’ll let you get settled in here. I’m so sorry.”

“Apology accepted. But, hey—” He reaches for my arm before I can escape. “Just talk to me for a minute, because I don’t understand, Nick. So you saw me jerking off. So what? I just don’t get it. You’re so uptight about sex, but your mom was a hippie. Free love and all that jazz. I respect your choices but help me understand them.”

“The only thing free love ever got me was an absentee father.”

Oh. Shit. I never meant to say that out loud.

“You know you can’t get pregnant, right?” He smiles a little, but it’s not funny to me. It shaped everything.

“For me, sex has to mean something. It has to be more than... what you said about bodies rubbing together. Because that’s temporary, and I need more. Can’t you understand why I need something—someone—to last?”

“Do you think, if it were you and me, it would be just bodies? Do you really think that, Nick?”

I want to do something to erase the hurt on his face. I look down to where his hand rests on my arm, and I shrug it away. “It wouldn’t be, not for me.” I start to leave, and his hand closes on my arm again, this time jerking back roughly.

“It wouldn’t be for me, either. You’re one of the best friends I ever had. I think we would be amazing together. I wish you’d let me prove it. One night, just give me one night to sho—”

“One night.” Of course. Here I’m thinking it’s possibly *more*, but he’s talking about a one-night stand. A get-it-out-of-our-system fuck. “I can’t...”

“You can’t give me one night?” He pulls me close, so we’re standing face to face, and he leans close enough to feather a kiss across my cheek.

I can’t give you only one, without wanting to give you every one.

I don’t say it, because then it would be out there between us. It would mean everything, and I’d lose this last chance to be with him. Instead, I close my eyes and tilt my head, pulling him into a kiss.

He stills against me, his hand still gripping my forearm. It tightens briefly, then he lets go and his hands are on my face and he’s returning the kiss. It’s hungry, urgent, and our whole bodies get into it. He drops one hand to my waist and tugs me hard against him. I grind my hardening dick into his and fist my hand in his hair. His answering groan comes with a nip of his teeth in my lower lip.

My chest heaves in excitement and anticipation as I push him toward the bed. A creaky old thing, not as comfortable as the king-sized one in my bedroom, but I don’t care, I want him, here, now, before I change my mind.

His hands tangle in my shirt as he pulls it over my head, and I hear fabric ripping. He curses under his breath, but I kiss the word away and attack his buttons.

“God, I hate business attire,” he mutters, trying with trembling hands to help me. *Trembling.*

“Shhh.” I push his hands back, a wave of tenderness sweeping over me. I lift one to my lips and kiss it. “Let me undress you.”

All that urgency turns to sweetness as his hands fall away and he takes a deep breath. I slip each button free, kissing down his chest, through his undershirt, as I make my way lower and lower. When the last one is loose and his shirt falls open, I skim it from his shoulders and let it fall. I peel his undershirt up his body, drinking in the sight of him.

I toss the shirt aside and run my hands up and down his chest, taking everything in by the low light coming in the window. Lean, but no longer athlete-taut. Still beautiful. He’s not the same lithe young man I fell for on the soccer team. His chest is a little broader, his belly a little thicker. His ass is rounder, and hallelujah, it feels great in my hands when I knead it and pull him close again for another kiss.

Our kiss is slow this time, soft and exploring. A nudge here, a teasing foray of tongue there, and then his hands kneading my ass right back.

I pull away from the heaven of his mouth and kiss my way from his chin down his throat, loving the prickle of his stubble against my lips. When I reach his clavicles, I suck gently, bringing a warm red spot to the surface. I brush my finger over it, and then look into his face. Wonder, softness, and oh, the *heat* I see there. The same heat warms my limbs and lifts my cock.

“Time to lose the pants,” I suggest, and his hands fly to his belt buckle.

I follow his lead, dropping my jeans and briefs to the floor.

“Nick, you’re...” He trails off, shaking his head. “I know you don’t want me to say it, but you’re so goddamned hot.”

I chuckle. “I think now is an appropriate time for flirtatious compliments.” I duck my head, blushing. “Thanks.”

He pulls me down with him to the bed, and we’re kissing again. Echoes of our first kiss, almost eleven years ago, wander up to the surface, but I push them back, concentrating on the here, the now, the feel of his cock rubbing against mine, the sounds he makes deep in his throat when that happens. When his head falls back and he growls, I feel like I could combust right there from that noise.

“Stop, Nick.” He pushes my hips away from him a little. “Frottage is wicked fun, but I don’t want to come like that.”

“Are you that close?” I reach between us and grip him in one fist, slowly pumping my hand up and down. He’s not circumcised, and I pull the foreskin up and over the glans, then push it back to expose him again. I could play with that skin for hours and never get bored. I tug at it, twist it gently, slide it up and down, all while he makes the most amazing noises deep in his throat. I watch it sliding in my fist, watch his hips rutting up into the air.

“Fuck.” He throws his head back against the pillow and fists his hands in his hair. “Stop, I want to blow you.”

I drop his dick and flop onto my back. I grin at him and gesture to my own cock. “Be my guest.”

He gets a wicked look in his eye then, and he grabs the pillow and shoves it under my hips, pushing my legs apart as he moves down my body.

“I like an all-access pass.” He grins at me just before he takes my cock into his mouth.

Holy...

He slides his tongue around the head, teasing me with light flicks between sucks. Using his hands to stroke my shaft and play with my balls, he focuses his attention on all the little spots that get me hot—under the head, a flick of tongue. Behind my balls, fingers and a sweet press to the skin of my taint. And then, with a wicked leer, he lets my cock slide from his mouth, pushes my legs over his shoulders, and tilts my ass toward his face.

“Kev!” It’s a half-shout, half-plea as he pulls my cheeks apart and stares at my hole. He leans close, sucking one of my balls into his mouth while he brushes a thumb over my opening. He releases the testicle and pulls back to watch his thumb petting me.

“You’re so sexy, Nick. I like how you let me just spread you open and look my fill. Your cock is gorgeous, but I’d be a stone-cold liar if I said I didn’t want to be inside this ass.” He dips the tip of his thumb inside. It’s dry, no lube, and it burns a bit, but he doesn’t push further. “You want that, babe? I’ll make it so good for you.”

I nod. I do, I want him every way I can have him, if all I get is one night.

“Do you have condoms?” The question seems to come from very far away. Condoms are...

“In my bedroom. Um, we should check the expiration date.” I start to sit up and his thumb slips away, leaving me feeling empty, even though he’d only barely dipped inside.

“I’ll get them. Tell me where.” He pushes me down to the bed.

“Last door at the end of the hall. Next to the bed, in the top drawer. There’s lube there too.”

“Got it. I’ll be right back.”

He disappears out into the darkened hallway, and for a moment, I’m annoyed by the power outage, the dim light growing dimmer as afternoon turns into evening. I want to see him. I hear a muffled curse and sit up, but then he returns, brandishing a bottle of lube and a strip of condoms.

“I tripped over your running shoes.” He smiles sheepishly and tosses the supplies on the bed. Then he’s on top of me, pressing his body full length against mine with a sweet grind as he kisses me until I gasp for air.

He opens the lube bottle and squeezes some into his hand. He holds it there for a minute, letting it warm, then runs a slippery finger around my hole. He

pushes inside, just a little, while adding a little more lube. He opens the condom and rolls it onto his dick. I watch him pour more lube on his hand, then stroke it over the condom, getting ready for me.

“How do you want me?” I ask. It’s a vulnerable thing, acknowledging his lead. He’s straddling me now, so I can’t turn, can’t lift my hips, can’t do anything until he chooses to let me.

“Just like you are.” He moves between my legs and pushes them up toward my chest. “Want to see your face. It’s better like that.” He smiles. “At least, it is when it’s more than just bodies.”

I nod my agreement. I want to see his face too. His cock nudges against me, and I take a deep breath.

“Are you ready?” He presses a bit, and I nod, letting out the breath and pushing against him as he slips just the head inside.

“Oh.” His eyes squeeze shut like he’s in pain, then open wide, wider than I’ve ever seen them. He grips my hips in his hands and pushes forward a little more, watching my face as he slides deeper. I bear down against him, and suddenly he slides freely and we both gasp. His cock feels huge, intractable and nudging deep. It’s almost too much. I struggle to accept it, my whole body tense and my erection flagging.

“Nicholas.” He’s staring at me, that wide-eyed look on his face again, and I shudder. This is Kevin, looking at me with a mix of adoration and ecstasy. *Kevin*. And then he nudges forward again and the tension inside me lets go. My head drops back and I let my legs fall to the side.

“Oh God, Nick.” He draws back, thrusts deep, and then we’re golden. It feels amazing. I grab my cock and tug it to full hardness as he sets a rhythm. I roll my hips into his thrusts, riding the heat and the friction, loving him, and loving this with him.

He leans over me, drops to his elbows and kisses me, rough and sloppy around the shocked gasps he’s drawing from me.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Nick. You feel so good.” He whispers against the side of my face, in my ear, along my chin as he covers it with nips and kisses.

“So do you.”

It’s never been good like this. Never have I felt this exposed, this inside out. I love him. I love him tonight like I’ve loved him for years, and I feel it all over

my skin like a fire, in my dick and balls like a storm, in my heart like a catastrophe.

It's too intense to last long, though I want it to last forever. I feel the orgasm welling up and I try to take my hand away from my cock to prolong it, but he just replaces it with his and gives me the final two tugs to push me over the edge.

I bury my face in his shoulder, shuddering through the shock of it, the intimacy of his adoring gaze on me too much for me to see, knowing it's only for tonight.

"Nick, baby, *Nick*." He groans out my name one last time as he drives deep and shakes. His face is barely visible now in the low light, but what I see is beautiful. All his masks are stripped away in this moment of utter vulnerability, and I don't think I've ever loved him more.

Afterward? He falls asleep. What a cliché. I can't help but smile as I watch his chest rising and falling. He rolls to his belly and snores, and I just watch, running my hand in slow strokes down the length of his spine, admiring the curve of his ass and the firm, tan skin. Not ready to stop touching him, not ready to give him up.

I promised him one night, and I won't try to hold him longer. I want to—but I won't.

"Nick?" He calls into his pillow.

"I'm here." I lie down beside him, wrap my arm around his waist and pull him against me.

"Mmm. That's nice. Nap with me."

"Okay, Kev. Whatever you want."

"Want to wake up next to you."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Good."

But you are, aren't you?

Chapter Six

We wake up around suppertime, when the lights come on and the house roars to life around us.

“Hey,” he says softly, stroking a finger down my face. “No regrets?”

I smile in spite of my fears for what this means for our friendship. “None.”

“Cool.” He leans over and kisses me, just gently at first, then, with a little groan, deeper, rolling his weight onto me and thrusting his semi against my leg. When he draws back, we’re both a little breathless. “You’re gonna get me going again.” He smiles, biting his lip.

“Mmm. That could be fun.” I stretch in his arms, enjoying the press of his body along mine. “But let’s eat supper first, I’m starving. Might as well take advantage of the power while we’ve got it.”

“What would you usually do on a night off?” He asks as we pull on our clothes—he trades his suit for a pair of sweats and a T-shirt from his luggage—and head for the kitchen.

“I usually work until after the happy hour rush, then hang out for a bit to make sure everything is good before I head home. But most nights I stay until close. Very weird to be home during the afternoon.”

“You work every day, don’t you?” Something strange crosses his face. I’m not sure whether it’s revulsion or sadness.

“It’s different when your job is your passion.” I shrug. “It’s not like going into an office every day to make money for someone else.”

I pull out the Dutch oven and a couple of cutting boards. My pantry is unprepared for this storm, but I bet I can throw something together.

“Do you like beets?” I ask, digging through the vegetable drawer. I look over my shoulder to catch him nodding. Okay, vegetarian borscht it is. I grab a head of cabbage and hand it to him. “Knives in the block on the counter. Cut it into half-inch wide strips.”

While he starts slicing cabbage, I peel and chop the beets and a couple of carrots. I slice an onion and set it to browning on the stove.

“Why do you work in the bar rather than the restaurant?” he asks, still slicing cabbage. “You love the cooking stuff, right?”

“I hired a chef to run the restaurant kitchen. The Drop is my baby.” I smile, upend my vegetables into the Dutch oven on top of the onions, and reach for the potted herbs on the windowsill. I pick a few stems of dill and start chopping them. “I started the brewery and bar first, then expanded into the restaurant space when it became available. It was always part of the plan, but it happened a little sooner than expected.”

“It sounds like a pretty sound operation?”

“Yep. We’ve done pretty well for ourselves. You can put the cabbage in the pot now.” I grab a quart jar of vegetable stock from the fridge and pour it on top of the vegetables in the pot, admiring how the beets turn everything a delicate shade of red. Covering the pot to let it simmer, I grin at him. “It’ll be ready in about an hour. Any idea how to pass the time?”

He grins back. “I can think of a thing or two.”

“Oh yeah?”

His grin turns into something almost like a leer before it falls away, and he looks serious, even sad, but as quickly as the grin disappeared, it’s back, and he takes my hand. “You promised me one night. I hope you didn’t think I’d only make you come once. That was too pretty a sight to not have a repeat.”

I shudder slightly as he pulls me close enough to kiss, a hot little nibble of lip on lip, a hint of teeth, and then he’s rubbing those lips against my throat, my Adam’s apple, my ear.

“Fuck,” I mutter, letting my head thunk against the cabinets and my eyes close. “I bet you say that to all the guys.”

The warm, wet heat of his mouth disappears for a moment, then I feel his hands on either side of my face. My eyes snap open to see his face right *there*, right in front of mine, all soft and genuine. “Nick. You’re not ‘all the guys’. Nothing that happens between us is like anything I’ve had before. You promised me a night. Can I get one more promise from you?”

I wince, knowing I’d give him anything he was bold enough to ask for, be it kinky shit outside my comfort zone, or even running out to the nearest Ingles to get him some bacon for breakfast—I wouldn’t eat it, but I’d cook it for him every day if he’d just fucking *be here*. “What’s that?” The words come out wavery, and I hope he thinks I’m turned on and he doesn’t realize how close I am to breaking apart in his hands.

“Teddy Roosevelt says comparison is the thief of joy. Stop stealing our joy. Stop comparing me and you to whatever else either of us has done. One night. Let it be just us.”

“Said,” I whisper.

“What?”

“Teddy Roosevelt is dead. Past tense. Said.” I smile, letting him see I’m only teasing.

“I’m quoting dead politicians in order to get in your pants and you’re correcting my grammar? God, what a pair of tools.” He snickers, but his voice is gruff, his New York accent as strong as I’ve ever heard it when he says, “So, come on. Can I suck your cock or what?”

I’m undone. I pull him close, and this time I’m leading the kiss, trying to make up for bringing my hurt into this moment. I tell him with thumbs easing his jaw wider. I tell him with teeth nipping at his upper lip, my tongue teasing over it. I tell him with my hands dropping down to his chest, then to his waist, settling in to hold his body close to mine. I tell him with every part of me touching him—there has never been anyone in my life who compares to him.

When he pulls his lips from mine and sinks down to his knees, my chest heaves and I’m struggling to catch my breath. He draws my pants down my legs as if he’s unwrapping a gift, and when he smiles up at me, beaming really, it’s like I just gave him the one gift he wanted most.

His tongue steals out to lick at the head of my cock. The flicker of wet heat, a tease, is enough to wrench a groan from me. Then? He goes after me in earnest. He takes me deep, swallowing around me until he gags a little, and it—fuck, it turns me on, knowing he wants me that badly.

“Kev...” I manage that much of his name as he pulls back, then he takes me deep again, and I grunt heavily as I fight the urge to thrust into his mouth.

He pulls off and looks up at me. “What are you waiting for? Let go, Nick.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I mumble. “Use you.”

He grins up at me. “You’re not going to hurt me. And I want to be used.”

Oh. My. God.

He takes me back into his mouth as deep as he can, and I do it, I let go. I thrust gently at first, but at his appreciative noises, I find myself getting rougher

and thrusting deeper. I run my hand through his hair, experiment with gripping it a little in one hand. A strange thrill runs through me, unfamiliar. I knew about making love—how sweet it could be, but I've never realized how heady it is to have someone trust me enough to use him like this. Heat curls up my spine, and I hold his head still as I push into his throat. He doesn't struggle against me, instead he makes this sound, vibrating around my cock. When he cups my balls in one hand and rubs my taint as he pulls away, my knees actually get weak.

"Come on, Nick. Come in my mouth, on my face. Wanna taste it. Wanna see it. Wanna feel it."

His words, his hands, *oh, hell, his mouth*. He's running his tongue up and down my shaft, looking up at me with adoring eyes. When he closes his mouth around the tip of my cock again, I can't hold back anymore. I roar out his name as I come. He swallows the first spurt, then lets the rest hit him in the face, and the sight is so breathtaking, a sharp zing of lust slides through me. I want to do it again and again. This isn't a night of casual sex, this is baring myself to him, every animal piece of me, and trusting him to still like me afterward.

"That was..." Speechless, I tug him up and kiss him again, wiping at the spunk on his face with a kitchen towel, but loving the taste of myself in his mouth. When he starts rubbing against me, I toss the towel aside, reach my hand into his pants and jerk him slowly. He whimpers into my mouth and starts to pull away from the kiss, so I use my other hand in his hair to hold him steady, not letting him hide from the intimacy.

Something about being sated already makes me feel powerful as I ramp up his arousal, drive him crazy with wanting, but backing off when he gets close. He finally wrenches his head away from the kiss and buries his face in my shoulder.

"Want it so bad, Nick," he whines. "Make me come, please."

I speed up my hand and he thrusts into it, making the most amazing noises as he loses himself in the pleasure. He's *loud*, and I don't know how I never realized before how sexy that kind of abandon can be.

His teeth clamp down on my shoulder as his cum splashes hot and wet between us. I hold him as he shudders against me, so fierce and beautiful.

When he slumps in my arms, I kiss the side of his face, his chin, his throat. Everywhere I can reach to kiss him, I do.

"So good," I whisper. "That was so good."

He straightens up and smiles, his expression all soft and sweet. “It really was, wasn’t it?”

I nod. “Best ever.”

The smile widens to a grin, not a cocky one, but a bashful one. He’s blushing—I never knew Kevin Dorsey was capable of such a thing. A rush of tenderness works through me and I pull him into another kiss, gentle and loving. When we finally separate, he’s still blushing.

“Shower?” he suggests, gesturing to the mess between us. I nod, pull up my pants, and lead the way.

The next morning, I awake to melting snow and too-bright sunlight streaming through my windows. We’d made love two more times in the night, taking turns topping, and he fell asleep in my bed, the big spoon curled around me. I try to ease out of his embrace without waking him, but no such luck.

“Hey.” He smiles at me, running a hand through my hair. “Where you going?”

“Shower.” I smile back, wondering if he’d mind if I kissed him. I settle for picking up his hand and giving it a squeeze. “Unless you want it first? I’ll start the coffee.”

“Mmmm. I wouldn’t mind staying in bed.” He arches an eyebrow at me.

“I have to get the restaurant ready to open for lunch. I might not have a full staff, so...”

He nods. “Yeah, I get it. Hey, about last night—” He’s cut off by his cell phone ringing on the table next to my bed. I hand it to him, and he frowns at it before answering. I start to stand up, but he tugs me down, holding onto my hand while he talks.

“Hey, Dad. Yeah, I wrapped things up yesterday. I sent the HR paperwork through last night, Carolyn said she’d take care of it... I was planning to come back on Monday... Fine... No, that’s fine. Can you have Carolyn reschedule my flight? I got snowed in at Nick’s place. No, he has nothing to do with why... Dad, he’s my friend. I’m not having this conversation with you. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He hangs up, looking for a moment like he’s about to throw the phone, but instead he sighs heavily and drops it next to him on the bed. “I need to take the

first flight out I can get. Apparently, there's an acquisition on the table in Ohio, and he needs me in New York to run some stupid meeting."

"I see." I don't see. I've never understood his relationship with his dad. And I'm really curious as to how I fit into their conversation.

"It's stupid. He could cancel it. He's just jerking me around."

"Do you need a ride to the airport? I can..."

"No, I don't want to put you out. I'll take a cab."

"Okay." So many questions, but no words to ask them. "So, I'm going to take that shower now."

"Yeah. Hey, I'll get the coffee started." He smiles bleakly at me. "At least we can have breakfast together before I go."

I linger in the shower, trying not to wonder about his conversation with his dad. What was he talking about when he said "I'm not having this conversation with you?" What did I have nothing to do with?

Finally, I go downstairs and join him in the kitchen. He's made coffee and eggs, and drops the toast in the toaster as soon as I walk in.

"Shower's free," I tell him, reaching for the coffee pot.

He shakes his head. "Not gonna shower. Want to smell like you all the way home."

His words hit me like a punch to the gut.

"Um, okay." I scratch the back of my neck and try not to stare at him.

We sit down and eat our eggs in near silence.

"Are eggs vegetarian?" he asks suddenly. "I was surprised to see them in your fridge."

"Lacto-ovo vegetarian, yes."

"That sounds like a pregnancy thing," he snickers.

I shrug. "Ovo means egg. Lacto means milk. Lacto-ovo vegetarians eat eggs and dairy but refrain from consuming meat or fish."

"Got it. And bacon? What about vegetarians who eat bacon?" he teases.

"Confused college boys raised by hippie mothers associating pork with rebellion." I grin. I had never even really liked the bacon, but when your mom teaches you how to roll your own joints? Your options for rebellion are limited.

Silence falls over the table again. Finally, I ask, “So, you had your one night. I don’t suppose…”

He looks up at me as I trail off, his fork paused halfway between his plate and his mouth. Finally, he sets his fork down and prompts, “You don’t suppose what?”

I look away for a moment. What do I really want to ask him? “I don’t suppose you’ll be back in Asheville any time soon?”

He looks down at his plate, then at me. He nudges his eggs around with his toast for a moment and says quietly, “I’d need a pretty good reason. I’ve got my new hires, so…”

Right. His work was a good reason. Not me.

I nod brusquely, stand up, and bring my plate over to the sink. “Well, travel safely, okay?”

“Ah, Nick, don’t—”

“Let’s not drag this out, Kev. It was fun. We were good together. But you’re going back to New York, and I’m here, and it would be silly to make more of it than it was.” I’m not going to admit my feelings for him, no matter what Jenny says about big romantic gestures. I can handle him leaving because he has to, but I can’t handle him rejecting me. At least this way, I can still have the fantasy.

“Nick.” His voice shakes a little on my name, but I turn on the faucet, and he doesn’t say anything more.

When the cab pulls up outside to take him to the airport, I breathe a heavy sigh of relief.

Chapter Seven

“He’s gone back to New York.” Jenny’s voice is almost accusing as she says it, pulling a pint and staring me down in the mirror behind the bar. “And you two...?”

There’s no use denying anything. “It was every bit as awesome as I knew it would be, and now he’s gone, and I feel like shit.” Dammit. How does this woman manage to make me spill my guts all the time? Aside from trucker-cap Jonah, the bar is empty, but I look around guiltily anyway.

She hands the pint to Jonah with a flirtatious smile before focusing her attention on me.

“Did you tell him how you feel?”

“Not exactly.” I squirm under her glare. “I told him it wasn’t just sex for me.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said it wasn’t just sex for him either.”

“And you let him *go*?”

“He didn’t want to stay!” I glare at her. “He said he would need a really good reason even to visit.”

“Those were his exact words? What else did he say?”

“Nothing. He started to explain about how his work is done, but I couldn’t deal, so I called a cab for him.”

“The bartender’s solution to unruly patrons? Not exactly a winning strategy in personal relationships.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, I didn’t treat him like an unruly patron.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She turns her back to me. “What do you think, Jonah?”

Jonah smiles at Jenny like she made his day. He turns to me and says, “It’s like the time the sorority girls from UNCA were getting rowdy. One of them tried to tell you they had a designated driver, but you just piled them into the cab anyway.”

“It is nothing at all like that.”

“Is too.” Jonah laughs his wheezy little laugh. “Dude, I’ve been drinking here for years. Once you’ve decided how you’re going to remove the situation from your bar, you don’t listen to anyone. Remember how their designated driver showed up a half hour later.”

“How was I supposed to know he was really coming?”

“You could have listened.” Jonah gestured with one arm, the other folded across his chest. “That’s the point. You get uncomfortable in a situation, you make up your mind, and you turn off your ears.”

“I do not. I’m an excellent listener.”

Jonah snorts and shakes his head. “Sure you are.”

“I’m a freaking bartender. It’s like a required skill. Jenny, tell him.”

“Oh no, honey. You’re doing a great job not listening to the man all by yourself, thereby proving his point.”

I look back and forth between the two of them, with their smug, self-congratulatory grins.

Fuck, they’re right.

I pull out my phone and fire off a quick text.

Are you still at the airport?

A few moments later, my phone buzzes.

Boarding now. Thanks again for taking me in last night.

Shit. Boarding, which means he’s going to be on the plane, and he won’t be comfortable talking to me about the shit we really need to talk about.

What were you going to say, this morning? Before I cut you off?

I wait for what seems an interminably long time, but he doesn’t answer. I’m not sure whether he’s collecting his thoughts or has turned his phone off. When the answer doesn’t come after an hour spent busying myself around the bar, I figure it probably won’t come any time soon.

The bar actually starts to get busy later in the afternoon—businesses are still closed all around us, but the roads have cleared, so everyone is out getting their drink on. Ain’t no party like a snow day party, I guess.

Just when I think I might have a moment to slip away to check my messages, Jenny’s shitbucket ex, Daniel, shows up. I come around the bar to

stop him before he can even sit down. I gesture to Jenny to stay behind the bar, and Jonah comes and stands at my elbow.

“You need to leave, Daniel.” I make my voice as firm as possible. “You aren’t allowed to come within a certain distance of Jenny and you know it. If you come in my bar and stir shit, I will call the police.”

“She’s taking my kids away, Nick. I want to see my kids.”

“They aren’t here, Daniel.” I look over his shoulder out into the street. “You should talk to your lawyer. There are conditions to your custody. Coming in to the bar isn’t going to do you any favors.” I don’t mention the fact that he’s high as a kite. I don’t want Jenny coming out from behind that bar.

“This is a public place. Maybe I want a beer.” Daniel juts his chin belligerently, pulls the nearest chair out from a table, and sits down next to a pair of young women. “Ladies.” He tips his baseball cap at them.

“I don’t serve people who are already drunk. Please leave.” I turn to Jonah and whisper, “Call the police.”

Jonah nods and crosses to the bar and picks up his phone. He keeps his gaze on me as I turn to Daniel.

“Okay, Daniel. Jonah’s calling the police. You could leave now, before they get here, or they’re going to take you out of here.”

“I’m not leaving.” He crosses his arms over his chest. The two women stand up, shrug apologetically at me, and move to another table.

I decide to try another tack.

“Daniel, do you really think they’re going to let you see your kids if you get a drunk and disorderly ticket? While violating the terms of your restraining order?”

“She can’t keep them from me!” he shouts, slamming his hand down on the table and sending an empty glass crashing to the floor. The shattering noise just seems to anger him further. “For fuck’s sake, she works in a goddamned bar!”

“She makes a decent wage and provides for the kids and while she might spend a lot of time in a bar, unlike you, she does it sober.” Jonah is back at my side, glaring down at Daniel. “Now why don’t you do like Nick said, and get the fuck out of here.”

“Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?”

Oh, fuck.

Daniel jumps to his feet and shoves Jonah hard, and the next thing I know, punches are flying, Jenny is shrieking, and more of my glassware is hitting the floor than I have *ever* lost in one day before. I try to reach in to break up the fight but only end up getting a knee shoved in my groin. *Motherfucker*. An inch higher and he'd have bruised my balls.

Then I hear the blissful sound of sirens. It's surreal, like something out of a movie, cops jumping out of the car and running into my pub. They manage to separate Jonah and Daniel, slapping cuffs on both of them until they can sort out the situation.

It takes hours. I close the pub.

Luckily, some of the patrons had pulled out their phones and recorded video of the whole thing, so the police could see exactly what happened. They said they still had to take both guys in, but Jonah probably wouldn't be charged.

"We'll need you to file a report of the damages." The officer who took my statement was the last to leave.

I nodded. "Insurance company will need that anyway."

"Okay, Mr. Hana. We'll call you if we need to speak to you again." She looked over my shoulder at Jenny. "Young lady, he's going to be locked up tonight, but I have no guarantee about tomorrow. You call us immediately if you see him. You got a safe place to stay?"

Jenny nodded, exhaustion plain on her face.

The officer smiled gently. "You do right by those kids, Jenny. Everyone knows it. Take care of yourself too, okay?"

Jenny's face crumples then, and the officer takes her leave. I pull Jenny into my arms and hold her through the sobs racking her body.

"My hero." She finally straightens up and smiles weakly at me. Her eyes are all red, and she's still shaking a bit.

"Me? Nah. How about Jonah?" I raise an eyebrow at her and she blushes.

"He's sweet, but he drinks a lot and he got in a bar fight." She shrugs. "I don't need that in my life. Nice guy though."

"I can clean up by myself tonight, hon. Why don't you go home and get some rest?"

"Thanks, Nick." She hugs me again. "I think I will."

I walk her out to her car, and then return to the bar and start cleaning up broken glass and putting up the bar stools.

Hours later, as I crawl into bed, I remember the text I'd sent Kevin. I pull out my phone and check my messages.

Sorry, phone was off in flight. Don't want to text about it. Call me?

Then, when I didn't answer that one, he sent another about a half hour later.

Nah, nevermind. You were right. I shouldn't make more of it than it was. Bye, Nick.

My veins turn to ice. That sounds awfully final. I had told him *I shouldn't make more of it than it was*. I never said anything about him making anything of it at all, did I? What the fuck had I said? But the morning feels like it was eons ago, and my brain is fuzzy with exhaustion.

Before sleep can overtake me, I send off one more text.

Call me.

He doesn't call.

Not that night. Not the next day. Not that week.

My calls go unanswered.

Two weeks after we were snowed in together, another snowstorm hits. I snap a few photos of the snow and send them to him with a text.

Don't think I'll ever see the white stuff again without thinking of you.

I don't expect an answer, but I'm still disappointed when I don't get one.

On Valentine's Day, the bar is full of singles and the restaurant is full of couples. Jonah is at his customary barstool flirting with Jenny, and I can't help but feel a little wistful as I watch couples walk by on the street outside. Jenny starts laughing loudly, and she gestures me over to see what's so funny.

One of her regulars had given her a box of candy hearts covered with profanity instead of love words. Some of them are funny, some crude, but I snag a yellow one that says simply "I'm a dick." I take a photo of it and send it to Kevin. I pop it into my mouth, letting the sugar dissolve on my tongue, leaving its chalky flavor behind.

I've taken to texting him at random times. It comforts me, but he never answers, not even to tell me to stop. Maybe it comforts him, too. Or maybe he's blocked my number and hasn't seen any of them. Yeah, that's probably more likely.

A few minutes after I send the candy heart photo, he texts me three words.

No you're not.

It's a small thing. Just three words. But it feels huge. He hasn't blocked my number, and he doesn't think I'm a dick.

A few weeks later, I see a familiar profile across Pack Square, near the noodle shop where we ate on our aborted date. I shout his name and hurry across the street, but he's gone when I get there, and he doesn't appear to be in any of the restaurants or retail shops nearby. Maybe he was a figment of my imagination. Maybe I thought I saw him, just because I wanted to see him.

The last Thursday in March, Jenny is awarded sole custody of Samantha and Blake. Even though she's taken the day off, Jenny brings Miriam and the kids by the restaurant for supper and takes a moment to come downstairs to celebrate with a hug and whispered "thank you" in my ear. When she pulls back from the hug, her eyes widen, and she covers her mouth.

"What? You see a ghost?" I prod her gently.

"He's here. Your guy." She nods her chin, pointing with it over my shoulder.

I turn around and there he is.

Kevin.

He's standing inside the doorway to the Drop, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, not his typical weekday business attire, and he's watching me. For a moment, he looks like a runaway puppy who just discovered he'd lost his owner. Then he smiles and all is right in my world.

"Kevin." I cross the room to him, not sure whether to hug him, shake his hand, throw myself at him? In the end, I stand there, awkward as all get out, and say, "You're in Asheville."

He nods, then looks away. "You got a minute to talk?"

"I can't. Jenny's got the night off, and Corey's not coming in until after his evening classes. But later? Can you stay?"

“I’ve got dinner plans, actually.” He blushes, not meeting my gaze. “But I can come back, after.”

“It’s really good to see you,” I blurt as he turns to leave. He looks up then, meeting my gaze at last, and he grins.

“You too, Nick.”

And then he’s gone.

Chapter Eight

When Kevin returns, it's after midnight and he knocks on the door to be let in. Corey is cleaning up behind the bar, so I gesture for Kevin to follow me to the office.

Once there, I'm not sure where to sit. Behind my desk? Kevin looks around and settles into one of the chairs, and I sit on my desk, facing him.

"So—" we both say at the same time. After some awkward laughing and throat clearing, I gesture for him to go ahead. He shakes his head, and I start.

"Why are you here? Something with work?"

"Yeah, you could say that." He shrugs. "But that's not what I need to talk to you about. Do you like it here? Asheville? Are you happy?"

"Mostly. I mean, I'm *lonely*, Kev. I don't have family, just my employees and my friends from the soccer team. It's not Vermont, but it kind of reminds me of Vermont, without all the memories with Mom."

"Is it home? I mean, would it hurt to move somewhere else?" He's staring at me intently, as if my answer to this is really important.

"Yeah, it's home." I nod, not sure whether I'm convincing him or myself. "Why?"

"Because I need to make a decision. I need to decide whether to take the General Manager position at the company we acquired. It would mean moving to Asheville. It would mean leaving New York. It would mean leaving my father's direct employ. It would mean—"

"Move here? To Asheville?" I try to imagine it. If he lived here, we could... what? Date? Be friends? Soccer buddies again?

"Yeah. So I have a pretty good reason to be here—work. But it's not the only reason. I have a history of making a mess of what I want. And of making more of things than what they are."

My heart thuds in my chest, a hot lump of emotion taking on a visceral, physical sensation inside me.

"Kevin... what exactly are you saying?"

He stands up and paces over to the door, then back toward me. He walks around the office a few times, and then sits down again.

"I love you, Nick. Since forever. I kept trying to say it without saying it, and I wrecked it. I loved you back in school. Remember I told you I had been in love once, and it was an unrequited thing? It was you. You were the guy, you were always *my* guy."

I'm stunned. "You never... all those times..."

He rubs a hand over his face, scrubbing at his eyes. "I know you think I'm a total slut. The only reason my hookups ended up always being one-night stands was because I didn't want them, I wanted you. And by never showing that I could handle commitment, I made you think I wasn't cut out for it. I fucked it up."

"Kevin..." He *loves* me?

"When we started talking again, this winter, it was everything to me. It was the second chance I always wanted, and I pushed you for more than you wanted to give me. I'm an ass. I'm sorry. I wanted to apologize. Because if I take this job, I'd like to have a friend here in town, and I promise it all stops now. I'm not pushing anymore."

"You didn't push me," I whisper.

"What?"

I speak up. "You didn't push me. I wanted you. I've been in love with you for years. Hell, Kevin, the only reason I held out as long as I did was because I thought it was one-sided. I thought if I told you how I felt..."

Nut up or die alone. Jenny's words seem to echo in the office, months after she said them.

"I thought you'd reject me. I was scared to make a big gesture. You didn't ruin it, I did."

"How could you think I would reject *you*? Are you crazy?" He stands up and moves between my knees. I wrap my legs around his waist and pull him closer. The look of tenderness on his face takes my breath away. He strokes a finger down the side of my face, tilts my chin and looks me straight in the eye. "I love you, Nick. I want you. As my friend. As my lover. My boyfriend. Not to scare you, but maybe husband someday. It's not legal here, but it is back home. I want as much of you as you can give me."

My mind is reeling. Did he just say *husband*?

“I want that.” I say the words before he can take his back. “I want that. We’ve wasted a fuckton of time. I want all that, with you, and I want it right fucking now.”

His kiss is demanding, claiming. A reunion and a victory celebration both at once. I run my hands up his back and into his hair. I pull him so close, he tumbles forward until I’m flat on my back on my desk, my legs around his waist as he grinds into me.

It’s out-of-control hot when he slips his hand up under my shirt, tweaking at my nipples, first one, then the other. I writhe underneath him, trying to get our cocks lined up just right. Crazy, doing this here, when any one of my employees could walk in.

“Does that door have a lock?” he murmurs against my lips.

“Yeah.”

His weight disappears off me for a moment, then he’s back. He yanks me to my feet and reaches for the button of my jeans. He tugs them down, running his hands over my thighs and ass.

“I want you right here, bent over your desk.”

“I don’t have condoms.” I manage to croak out.

“I have never gone bare with anyone. Ever. And I get tested every year. I got tested three weeks ago, negative. And I haven’t been with anyone but you since November. It’s totally your choice, Nick, but I’m cool with it.”

“Do it. I want this. But use some of that.” I nod at a big jug of olive oil on the shelf behind him.

He smiles and reaches for the jug, cracking its seal. “Do I want to know why this is in your office?”

“It was a sample. New supplier. It came with the mail, and I haven’t brought it up to the kitchen yet.”

“Hmmm. Fortuitous.” He turns me around, pushing me forward until my chest hits the desk. I grab the sides and hold on. There’s something particularly vulnerable in bending over for someone. Not only letting him have my ass, but offering it to him, trusting him with my body, and with my anticipation, my expectation.

Trusting him like this with words of love between us is a heady thing.

His fingers slide slick over my ass, warm in contrast to the cold wood against my face. His cockhead slips inside me, hard and wet with the oil. I groan at the first tight burst of pain, but then I'm in it with him, pushing back, bearing down, and drawing him inside.

"Fuck." He whispers. "God, being inside you bare is like..." He shudders, not finishing the sentence. "Can I move?"

I nod, pretty sure I'm beyond speech. He starts slowly, just easing in and out of me, letting us both feel the subtle differences. Sex without condoms. A commitment of sorts, between us. A promise. I thrust my hips a little faster, urging him to fuck me harder, faster. He doesn't disappoint. He puts one hand on my shoulder, one on my hips, and he drives into me with every bit of passion and love he'd held back over the years.

"I'm going to come," he says. "Oh fuck, Nick, I'm—" He breaks off in a wordless sound as he starts to shudder and shoot inside my body. I've got my hand on my cock, I'm jerking it as he gets off, but I'm not there yet. As he pulls out of me, his cock slides easily, slick from his cum in my body. Then he turns me over and takes my dick in his mouth.

His cum-covered cock is sticky against my leg, but I don't care. His cum is inside my body, and the thought is more of a turn on than I would have imagined. He probes my ass with a finger while he sucks me, and we both groan when it slides in easily. He strokes deep, feeling for my gland, and when he bumps it, I shudder. It feels so fucking *good*. The visuals in my head, of his cum and his finger in my ass, and that look of adoration on his face while he sucks me—it's too much. He reaches up and claps a hand over my mouth as I come, shooting my spunk inside his mouth. He swallows all of me, and I shudder again. His hands and mouth ease away from me, and he straightens our clothes, smoothing mine with gentle hands.

"You're inside me." I draw him into a kiss.

"And you're inside me." He pulls back to say before he opens up to give me a taste. The urgency and demand is gone from our kiss, replaced by something sweet and gentle. Something I'd call love, something I'd never expected from him, but had always craved.

"I gotta go help Corey close." I tuck my head against his shoulder. "Will you stay? Come home with me tonight?"

"Anything you want, babe." His voice rumbles against my ear. "Anything."

Epilogue

November 2014

It's snowing hard as I hang up the phone. I can barely see the entourage coming up the front walk, but I can hear them.

Jenny's kids are chattering and laughing as they burst into the condo. They stomp their feet to clear their boots of the snow, and then they run to the kitchen, shouting about how Uncle Kevin promised them hot cocoa if they made it down the beginner slope without falling.

Jenny and Jonah trail in behind them, holding hands.

"Hey boss." Jenny grins at me. Her eyes are sparkling almost as much as the diamond on her finger. Turns out the only reason Jonah drank so much was because the bar was a convenient place to see Jenny. Once they started dating, he never set foot in the Drop again. Though I was sad to lose a regular customer, seeing Jenny happy more than makes up for it. They follow the kids into the kitchen, Jenny stopping to yank the wedding planning folder out of my hands. "You said you were done. No more planning until it's my turn."

Kevin comes in last, carrying his skis tucked under one arm. He leans them against the wall and comes straight to me. He kisses me with the sort of fierce promise that keeps me up at night sometimes.

"We missed you out there," he says, a little breathless.

"Yeah, I had to make a few last-minute decisions with the caterer. Gawd, that woman can talk. She thinks because I'm a restaurateur—" I make air quotes around the word "—that I want to hear every detail about the food. Seriously, if it's locally sourced and vegetarian, I'm good, right?"

"Right," he agrees, smiling indulgently. "Mom and Dad and Trish and Sean and the baby will be here tomorrow afternoon. Mom and Dad's condo is three doors down from ours."

"Great." I shiver. I've gotten to know his parents better the last few months, but I still find them cold and unapproachable.

"Trish and Sean and the baby are in the one right next to ours."

"Okay, good, they can be a buffer."

"Do you want to do it tonight?" he asks softly.

Scatter Mom's ashes. Say goodbye.

“After the wedding. So she can be with us.”

He smiles. “Anything you want, love.”

We say our vows in the ski lodge a few miles from the sleepy little house where I grew up, surrounded by his family and my friends.

Afterward, he and I take the ski lift up to the top of the mountain, but we don't ski down right away. Instead, we take off our skis, and we say goodbye to my mom, sending her into the morning sunlight, ash on snow. That feeling of being unmoored washes over me again, but Kevin takes my hand, a reminder I'm not alone.

“I'm so glad you came into the Lonely Drop that day,” I whisper to him. “I don't know that I could be here, that I could do this without you.”

“Me too.” He kisses my forehead. He doesn't need to say more. He's my family now, not just because of the rings on our fingers, but because he's made himself my anchor. We hold each other for a long while before I'm ready to go.

When it feels right, we ski down the mountain and into our new life, together.

The End

Recipe for Bailey's and Pistachio Ice Cream

To make the recipe vegan, please substitute full fat coconut milk for the whole milk in the recipe, and instead of using name brand Bailey's Irish Cream, use a vegan homemade version—several recipes are available on the internet.

Ingredients:

2 cups whole milk, divided into 1¾ cups and ¼ cup

½ cup Bailey's Irish Cream

1 cup pistachio butter*

1 cup sugar

2 tablespoons cornstarch

*To make pistachio butter, start with ½ cup water and 1 cup shelled pistachios (if salted, rinse excess salt). Using a food processor or immersion blender, puree until smooth, adding more water as necessary to reach desired consistency—slightly thinner than natural peanut butter. Sweeten to taste.

1. In a mixing bowl, whisk together the ¼ cup milk and the cornstarch until cornstarch dissolves.
2. In a saucepan, combine the rest of the milk with the Bailey's and the sugar and bring to a simmer, stirring constantly.
3. Whisk in the milk and cornstarch mixture, and continue to whisk as it simmers—at least five minutes to cook off the alcohol in the Bailey's. The mixture will thicken some, but will still be fairly liquid.
4. Remove from heat and place in a bowl. Chill in refrigerator until completely cooled—preferably overnight.
5. Once cooled, stir in the pistachio butter until fully blended.
6. Process in your ice cream maker according to manufacturer's instructions, then store in freezer.

Author Bio

Author of over a dozen novels, novellas, and short stories, Vanessa North delights in giving happy-ever-afters to characters who don't think they deserve them. Relentless curiosity led her to take up knitting and run a few marathons "just to see if she could." She started writing for the same reason. Her very patient husband pretends not to notice when her hobbies take over the house. Living and writing in Northwest Georgia, she finds her attempts to keep a quiet home are frequently thwarted by twin boy-children and a very, very large dog.

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