

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 12

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Volume 12

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 12.

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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ONLY YOU

By Shayla Mist

Photo Description

This is a lovely photo that immediately makes you scream “Cute!” There are two gorgeous boys doing a back hug. The blond is wearing what looks like a denim jacket, he has a small earring in his right ear and short hair, combed stylishly to one side. He has a sweet, nostalgic kind of smile (maybe a bit shy too). The brunet looks like the athlete type. He has his arms around the blond’s chest and his head leaned towards him. This one has a mischievous kind of smile, like he’s trying to act innocent even though he knows he’s been caught red-handed.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is me and my friend Hunt. For years I have loved him, my best friend since age four. For years I have waited around, putting my life on hold hoping that one day he would realize that he loved me too. For years he has sent me mixed signals making believe that he may feel the same way. Too many times I felt that we were so close to something happening between us but for whatever reason he always pulls away. He’s so affectionate and loving with me feeding me enough crumbs that I don’t want to give up, I hold on to hope. Well I can’t do it anymore. The pain of being so close to him but never truly having him? It’s too much. It makes me want to give up. Say something Hunt, because I’m giving up on you.

Thank You so much,

Sincerely,

Amanda

P.S. The song “Say Something” by A Great Big World is my inspiration for this prompt. I don’t know if Hunt’s problem is he’s supposedly straight, if he’s gay and a player, or something else entirely, that’s up to you. But an HEA is a must!!

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, musicians/rock stars, blow job, young adult characters, college, homophobia, bullying

Content Warnings: graphic violence

Word Count: 22,735

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Thanks a lot to Louise, Ava and Vess for their support and willingness to read my messed up first draft.

ONLY YOU
By Shayla Mist

1. Matt

Matt awoke with the feel of a heavy weight on his side. He soon realized it was his best friend's body. So close to his, they could have practically been fused together.

He froze, not wanting to wake Hunter up. Such moments weren't entirely rare lately, but he enjoyed them so much that to not take advantage of them was practically a sacrilege in his book.

Matt took deep, silent breaths and savored the feel of Hunter's hard body against his. He became aware that Hunter's hand had started to move, slowly caressing his hip. Matt bit his lower lip to stop himself from moaning, his cock weeping precum like a leaking tap. Hunter had no idea how much he tortured him. Matt started to taste blood from how hard he'd bitten his lip.

Hunter's hand journeyed farther up his hip, his fingertips stopping barely an inch away from Matt's belly, where his erection eagerly awaited Hunter's touch. Matt let out a strangled whine, barely audible, but enough for Hunter's hand to freeze in its position.

Long moments of silence passed as Matt tried to regain his control. His senses felt numbed, sexual tension fogging his brain. Dreamlike, he thought he felt Hunter's own hardness resting between his ass cheeks, pushing slowly against him. He knew it must be his imagination because Hunter would never, ever feel this way toward another man's body, definitely not toward his.

Then the worst happened—the cell phone alarm went off. They jolted, Hunter moving away fast, as if burned. Matt quickly lay on his stomach to hide his massive wood.

“Morning, Matty,” Hunter whispered, lips inches away from his ear for a few fleeting seconds as he scrambled out of bed, straddling Matt in the process.

He *did* sport a huge erection of his own, Matt noted, before Hunter disappeared into the bathroom, clad only in his boxers.

Matt groaned. Another delayed orgasm. He had to wait for his own shower time to finally jack off because he couldn't possibly do that while Hunter was in the shower. “Fuck,” he whispered, humping desperately against the mattress for a little painful pleasure. He hated when Hunter slept over.

Ten agonizing minutes later, Hunter was out of the shower, a towel loosely tied around his hips. Matt had, in the meantime, procured a towel of his own

which he used to strategically hide his still achingly hard cock. As his cock got more painful at the sight of his wet, half-naked friend, he also admitted to himself why he absolutely loved it when Hunter slept over. It was the story of his life ever since he'd turned sixteen and realized that girl parts did nothing for him. Whereas boy parts, in particular Hunter parts, did everything for him. That had been the turning point of his and Hunt's friendship. He'd agonized over what his best friend would think about him when he'd found out Matt jacked off, not fantasizing about boobs like all the other teenage boys, but about cocks and balls and sculpted asses.

The result of his worries had been spectacularly anticlimactic in comparison to the scenarios his active imagination had provided. Hunter had one day slapped him over the head during football practice and told him to "stop ogling their teammates' asses and concentrate on the damn game." Matt had almost had a heart attack. Hunter had just shrugged and rolled his eyes at Matt's dumbstruck face. "Buddy, you're no Oscar-worthy actor."

Six years later, still best friends and, to Matt's amazement, Hunter still had absolutely no problem sharing a bed with him, in the very platonic sense of the expression. Hunter kept begging Matt to rent an apartment together because he hated staying at the place he'd rented with another college student, Greg. Yet Matt had adamantly refused, claiming Hunter was too noisy, and he would distract him from studying. To this, Hunter always retorted by pointing out Matt and his band mates made double the noise when they got together and, more often than not, received complaints from neighbors.

Nevertheless, Matt did everything in his power to get a single room on campus, going behind Hunter's back. Hunter still didn't forgive him for that. Matt suspected that his increasingly frequent sleepovers were just Hunter's way to get revenge on him. Plus, it was harder and harder for Matt to hide his desire for his best friend. His painful morning wood was just minuscule (metaphorically speaking) proof of how fucked up he was.

Something had to give. Matt reached this same conclusion time and again. Especially every time he emerged from the shower after a very short and unsatisfactory jerk off session in which his fantasy supplied images of his naked best friend. Something had to give, or Matt would sooner than later go insane.

"Matty, I'm suddenly craving pancakes," Hunter called, bursting into the bathroom, still clad in just his towel, like it was nothing. No matter that Matt had just gotten out of the shower. And he was shaving. Naked.

“Jesus, Hunt,” Matt winced, having scraped his face bloody. “How many times do I have to tell you to knock before barging in?”

“Oh, sorry,” Hunter said, not sounding in the least regretful.

He appraised Matt’s shaving injury like a dentist looking for a cavity. “So, wanna go to Sally’s and order pancakes for breakfast?”

“We always go to Sally’s and order pancakes for breakfast when you stay over. Why do you still bother asking me?”

Hunter shrugged. “Okay, then, I’m getting dressed.”

You could have done that already, Matt inwardly snapped. Not that he was complaining; he was just having a hard time keeping his eyes fixed on Hunter’s face when he knew what lay lower. Sometimes it felt like Hunter was torturing him on purpose. The only reason why he didn’t seriously consider jumping his bones was the fact that he didn’t want to risk losing Hunter’s friendship. He couldn’t imagine Hunter would consciously tease him so much with something he knew he could never give to Matt.

Given that Hunter had already seen his private bits, Matt eventually emerged from the bathroom in his birthday suit. Hunter gaped at him, blushed, then turned his eyes elsewhere, much to Matt’s amusement. Matt dressed slowly, watching his best friend from the corner of his eye as he put his clothes on with the speed of light. Hunter’s face was flushed by the time he was done, while Matt still leisurely zipped up his jeans.

“Try not to barge in while I’m in the bathroom next time. Deal?”

Hunter nodded. After Matt put on his shirt, Hunter exhaled loudly and his mischievous grin was back in place.

“Pancakes,” he whined, doing his unmistakable eager puppy impression.

Matt rolled his eyes and slapped him on the back of his head. “Let’s go.”

They headed out the door toward Hunter’s favorite café, Sally’s, that served the *killer pancakes* Hunter loved so much.

“I don’t know how you can still look the way you do with the amount of calories you wolf down,” Matt commented, shaking his head in amazement as Hunter filled his mouth with a forkful of syrupy pancakes, moaning in appreciation. That sort of moan always went straight to Matt’s balls, and this time wasn’t an exception. He squirmed in his seat as his cock got half-hard.

Hunter grinned at him and wiggled his eyebrows. “I look hot, huh?”

“There’s no need for me to stroke your ego, is there?”

“Say, Matty, what’s your type?”

Matt choked on his own breakfast. “Huh?”

“You know, what kind of guys do you go for? I’ve never seen you with anyone. Are you even sure you’re gay?”

Matt took a deep breath. “Oh, trust me, man. I’m more than just sure.”

Hunter nodded thoughtfully.

“What? Did you decide it bothers you?” Matt asked, feeling nauseous all of a sudden. A brusque thought flashed through his mind. What if Hunter was still okay with him being gay only because he hadn’t actually seen him with another guy?

Hunter swiftly dismissed his worries with his next words, “No way, dude. I just worry about you. I don’t understand why you don’t have a boyfriend yet. We’re away from home. You’re free to be yourself here. Don’t you think it’s time to explore?”

Matt shrugged. “I don’t know. I never thought about it. What about you then?” he retorted, even though it pained him thinking of Hunter dating someone.

“I guess I just didn’t find the right girl yet. They all seem so…”

“So?” Matt encouraged him.

Hunter only shrugged again. “I don’t know. Superficial?”

Matt groaned. “We’re barely in our twenties. What do you expect? Girls want to live on the edge while they can, just as much as guys do.”

“I guess so.”

They fell silent for a couple of minutes, until Hunter spoke up again. “So, you didn’t answer my question.”

Matt looked at him askance.

“What guys are your type? What kind of guy do you see as handsome?”

Matt blushed. “I don’t know. Guys like you, I guess?”

Shit, he thought, *maybe I pushed it too far*. He instantly felt ashamed, blushing furiously. But, to his relief, Hunter grinned mischievously.

“Yeah, I guess you can’t help thinking I’m hot.” He flexed his biceps and winked like a kid.

“Jesus, grow up.” Matt sighed in exasperation, but grinned, nonetheless. How could he not fall in love with such a goofy guy? He’d been a goner the moment Hunter first smiled at him when they met, at the age of four. Of course, it had taken him over ten years to realize the profoundness of his feelings for his best friend.

With a sigh, he took a sip from his already lukewarm coffee and watched Hunter as he poured an unbelievable amount of maple syrup onto his plate. He knew, no matter how much he “explored”, he still wouldn’t find someone who had everything he loved about Hunter. The question was: for how long would he be able to handle being so lonely?

Matt and Hunter parted ways a couple of hours later and, despite being happy in Hunter’s company, Matt couldn’t help feeling relieved as he closed the door behind his best friend. Being around Hunter didn’t just take its toll on his body (having a half-hard cock for hours wasn’t a pleasant experience at all), but it ate away at his soul. It was getting harder and harder to keep from blurting out his feelings, to stop from shaking when Hunter touched him, oblivious to his inner turmoil. His heart was aching, knowing he didn’t stand a chance.

But Matt didn’t have time to mope around. His bandmates would be by shortly, and he’d get the chance to pour out his feelings as he sang. Matt’s therapy was song. Even if it didn’t always give brilliant results, it was the best he got.

He tried cleaning his room. That essentially meant throwing everything in the closet and propping his small computer desk against it to hamper everything from spilling out.

Half an hour later, the boys knocked on the door. They barged in when Matt opened it, and didn’t seem at all impressed with his attempt at cleanliness. Paul chuckled and surveyed the computer desk and closet doors wearily. “Are you sure it will hold?”

Matt blushed. “Don’t be a jerk. At least I bothered making space for us.”

“Yeah, Paul, don’t be a jerk,” Jeremy sing-songed, winking at Paul like they shared a kinky secret. Their secret was well-known to Matt though—they simply enjoyed teasing him and making him feel inadequate most of the time, albeit in a friendly manner. Jeremy liked to call him their boy-toy. *Gah.* Matt

swore one of these days, he'd leave their little band and find less sadistic people to play with, but as soon as Jerr's fingers touched the cords, and Paul's determined hands hit the drums, he'd forget all the torments he had to undergo with them. Their music was both his heaven and his purgatory. Plus, Gay for You, their band, could never exist with other people.

"We need to figure out a set list for the charity event," he reminded his band mates. Their friend, Delia, had invited Gay for You to sing at her charity gala. It would be their first time singing for more than twenty people, and Matt wanted everything to be perfect. Because of how big the event was, they had decided to play covers instead of their own music.

"I think we should sing songs about getting wasted," Paul mused. He was always the serious one even when he made jokes. But this one was definitely a joke.

"It's a charity event, Paulie," Matt reminded him. "I know you're trying to be funny, but let's be sensible."

They mused in silence, but it was still Paul who broke it. "Let's just sing gay songs," he suggested. "That's what this is all about after all. We're Gay for You and the charity is raising money for gay kids."

"Agreed," both Matt and Jeremy said at the same time.

"I suggest lots of happy songs," Matt added.

"Yeah, but we need a few of those sappy, romantic songs too. They make all the women coo," Jeremy said.

"Yeah, good idea. We could end it with romantic songs." Paul took out a notebook and a pen and started scribbling while talking, "I say, start with happy songs, intersect with some blues for couples to dance to, then end with some sad, slow songs to suggest goodbye. It will suit the mood. I bet everyone will be tired by the end of the evening."

He had a few song titles on paper and passed the notebook around for Matt and Jeremy to see.

"Taylor Swift? Seriously?" Jeremy grimaced.

"What?" Paul defended himself, blushing. "'Teardrops on My Guitar' is actually pretty good."

Matt smiled and decided to help his usually stoic friend. "I like it too."

He'd been listening to a lot of songs about unrequited love since he'd fallen for Hunter. He could add a few hundred to the list if need be. But lately, he'd been especially focused on one song in particular. He took the notebook from Jeremy, wrote it down and passed it back.

“Say something”? What's that?” Jeremy asked.

“Say Something (I'm giving up on you),” Paul said before Matt could reply. “Right?”

Matt nodded.

“I love that song,” Paul said, suddenly looking pained. Matt immediately thought that maybe he wasn't the only one who knew what unrequited love felt like, but before he could analyze it further, Paul's face became unreadable, and Jeremy interrupted, asking them to play the song for him.

Matt grabbed the guitar self-consciously. He wasn't very good at it, but he thought he could manage. Although the song was mostly on piano, it could easily be adapted for guitar. Paul joined him with his unique high-pitched voice as Jeremy listened, riveted till the end.

“That sounds cool,” Jerr whispered when they finished, eyes suspiciously shiny. “It will be the perfect ending song to our set list.” They all agreed, smiling.

The session continued with rehearsal and adapting the other songs they'd settled on, and Matt couldn't wait for the event night to arrive.

“So, what are we doing today?” Hunter asked from the other end of the line, not bothering with a good morning.

“Huh?” Matt took the cell away from his ear to glance at the clock displayed on the screen. It was little past 8 a.m., and Hunter had just rudely awakened him. What normal guy got up so early on a weekend? “You're not normal,” he muttered to himself.

“I asked, what are we doing today,” Hunter repeated.

“Hunt, go back to sleep. It's only eight,” Matt grumbled.

“I know. That's why I'm bringing coffee and pancakes. Let me in?”

Matt groaned, cursing the man for being such an early bird. He could hear Hunter calling him insistently from the other side of the door.

“Matty, I’m about to drop the coffee,” he whined, kicking the door with his leg in a rhythmical sequence.

Grudgingly, Matt got up and stumbled his way to the door.

“You’ll get as fat as a blue whale if you keep on buying those damn pancakes,” he said as he opened the door and found Hunter smiling at him guiltily. He held a coffee cup in each hand, a bag with alluring smelling pancakes wrapped tightly to his chest, held in place by his bulky arms, while the cell phone hung precariously between his ear and shoulder. He was wearing his tight, white T-shirt that showed pretty much every muscle underneath. It was Matt’s favorite, and he found himself drooling and trying hard to control his growing desire.

Hunter passed him by, heading for Matt’s bed. “But you’ll love me anyway, right?” he called behind him.

It took Matt a while to remember what they were talking about and, even more, for Hunter’s words to finally settle in. With a groan, he watched Hunter take his sneakers off only using his toes and heels with seemingly effortless movements, while at the same time, his hands were busy setting the coffees on the nightstand and digging in the Styrofoam container for his precious pancakes.

So clueless, Matt thought morosely. Sometimes he felt like strangling Hunter for being so dense. He really needed that coffee to deal with this.

“Why are you here so early?” he demanded, grabbing one of the cups.

Hunter shrugged, a pancake already lodged between his teeth. “I was bored.” His words came out like “I wash ball” because of his constant chewing, and, just like that, Matt’s anger evaporated.

“Tell me the truth, you’re just visiting so you have a reason to buy pancakes.” He hated himself for being so weak.

Hunter gave a mischievous grin in reply and licked syrup off his fingers with sensual swipes of his tongue. Matt felt his throat dry up. He coughed, and self-consciously covered his crotch with his coffee cup. He was only wearing his boxers, and there was no doubt that he was displaying a monstrous tent. Unfortunately, the damage was already done, judging by Hunter’s widened eyes that were now fixed on said area.

“I need to shower,” Matt blurted out, quickly heading for the bathroom. Only when he closed the door behind him did he realize he’d taken the coffee with him.

Great, now you look like double the loser.

He emptied the cup in one swallow and threw it in the waste basket. Good thing he at least had his own bathroom. It would have been a disaster if he had to share it with all the guys in the building and show them his most pitiful moments.

Thankfully, the shower helped Matt regain some sense, and, when he came back into the room, he wasn't any more self-conscious than usual of his naked body, now that his erection had died down.

With a yawn, he crouched in front of his closet and started perusing for something to wear. Hunter was diluting all the sugary goodness of his beloved pancakes with a mouthful of coffee, but as soon as Matt turned his back on him, he started coughing violently.

“Shit, Hunt, are you okay?”

Matt jumped in bed with Hunter and started slapping him on the back. “Want me to do that Heimlich move?”

Hunter shook his head between coughs and finally managed to speak, albeit with a shaky, rough voice “I'm okay. Pancake went down the wrong pipe.”

Matt gave him a pointed look that clearly said he got what he deserved.

“Drink a little more coffee,” he encouraged. “It should slide down easier.”

Hunter obliged and then let out a deep exhale. Matt kept rubbing his back, and, eventually, they both lay on the bed. Matt flipped over and unconsciously molded his back to Hunter's chest. His friend's hand came around his and rested on his belly, tracing soft circles with his fingers.

“Did your rehearsal go well yesterday?”

“Umhm.”

“When will you let me hear you guys play?”

Matt shrugged, “One of these days.”

“Liar,” Hunter accused, pinching Matt's nose. “You never let me listen to you. Ever since you joined that band, you stopped singing for me.” Hunter sounded disappointed.

“Aww, so cute.”

“What?” Hunter retorted blushing.

“Fine, I’ll sing for you then.”

He cleared his throat and tried a few notes, then started singing “Say Something”, pouring all his emotions into it, begging Hunter to hear him out, to read through the lines and see what his heart felt. His eyes got shiny as he sang, avoiding looking at his best friend, fearing what he’d see. He knew Hunter wouldn’t understand.

“Wow, that was beautiful,” Hunter said a few minutes after Matt was done.

His hold on Matt tightened to the point of making it hard to breathe.

“Matt, how does it feel to like another guy?” he eventually whispered.

Matt smiled sadly, “Painful, Hunt. It feels really painful.”

He couldn’t stop a stray tear from sliding down his face. To stop it from showing, he buried his face in his pillow and let sleep wash away his heartache.

2. Hunter

The lights were out when Hunter came back home. He sighed in relief that he didn't have to deal with his asshole of a housemate. He really wished Matt would stop finding excuses not to move in with him. It would have been so much better living with his best friend than with someone like Greg.

He kicked his shoes off almost with a vengeance, sending them sprawling in opposites corners of the narrow hallway. *Maybe Greg would end up stumbling over one of them*, he thought, with a satisfied grin, imagining the scene.

Just then, he heard the key turn in the lock, and Greg entered, almost knocking into Hunter on the way in.

"Oh, you're back early. What's the matter? Your boyfriend didn't put out tonight?" Greg sneered at Hunter.

"Fuck off, retard," Hunter replied, barely keeping his anger in check. One of these days, he would end up kicking Greg's ass so hard he'd rupture his organs if he dared insult Matt again.

"Oh, you're so sweet, defending your sissy's pride."

"That's it. I'm gonna kill you!" Hunter swerved around and punched Greg square in the face. But Greg was a volatile guy, quick to rise up when challenged to a fistfight. They were soon rolling on the floor, fists flying, knees jamming into stomachs, groaning and growling.

"Fucking faggot!" Greg screamed, landing a hard punch in Hunter's stomach.

Hunter groaned in pain, but soon recovered and kicked Greg square in the balls, making him whimper like kicked dog. "Call me faggot one more time, asshole, and you'll lose your nuts for good." For emphasis, he kicked Greg a couple more times, before putting his sneakers back on and leaving the way he came.

"Fucking son of a bitch," Hunter muttered as he walked aimlessly down the street. He really needed to move out now. Knowing Greg, he would probably invite his jock friends over and ask Hunter for a rematch.

Hunter had no choice but to go back to Matt's place. He felt good there. He loved spending time with Matt and sharing a bed like they did when they were kids, but something between them had changed. Even though they were the

same people and acted the same on the surface, Hunter could tell Matt had put up a wall between them, especially since they'd both moved away for college. It felt like Matt was drifting further and further away, and Hunter didn't know what to do about it. Without Matt, he felt lonelier than ever. If only he could tell what was really bothering Matty. But Matt never even hinted about anything. At least, not until this morning when he'd sang that sad song about unrequited love. Hunter had felt that for the first time he'd been shown a glimpse into what was bothering Matt.

Matt had never seemed to be in love with someone, although Hunter had always paid attention. He wanted Matt to be happy, but Matty had almost seemed asexual before. Now though, when he sang about love and confessed how painful it was afterwards, Hunter had realized that Matt had found someone to love.

Fuck, this is so complicated, he thought. He didn't want to stand in Matty's way, but judging by Matty's attitude toward him that was probably exactly what he was doing. Being around Matt all the time, he had become a hindrance, and Matt was too gentle to let him know.

Reluctantly, he had to agree that it was time to grow up and give his best friend a little more space, no matter how lonely the thought made him feel.

One more week, just this one week until I find a new place, and I'll leave Matty alone for a while.

Lost in thought, he'd arrived at Matt's place without even noticing. He knocked, but no one answered. He tried again, to no avail. He was about to take his cell out and dial Matt, when the sound of laughter stopped him. The voices were heading his way, and he could clearly recognize Matt's deep laugh.

Hunter sighed. From down the stairs, two figures emerged, Matt's shorter frame clad in a tight leather jacket, with his favorite cross earring dangling in the light of the hallway lamps and another tall and lanky form that Hunter soon recognized as belonging to Jeremy.

"Hunt, what are you doing here?" Matt asked as soon as he spotted him. "Oh, fuck, what happened to you?"

Hunter frowned, having momentarily forgotten the ugly bruises that marred his face.

"Had a quarrel with Greg."

"Fuck, Hunt." Matt gently shoved him aside and unlocked the door.

"I should probably go," Jeremy said, clearing his throat. But Matt didn't hear him, having already run into the bathroom, Hunter presumed, in search of his emergency kit.

Hunter appraised Jeremy from head to toe. He wasn't a bad-looking guy, but he definitely didn't look like someone fit for Matt. He was too... he couldn't put his finger on it, but he knew he and Matt didn't fit together. It made him cringe just to think of it.

For his part, Jeremy didn't seem to like him much either. They were civil every time they met, but that was it. At the moment though, Jeremy looked at him like he was a cockroach he wanted to step on. Or maybe that was just Hunter's impression. Either way, he looked pointedly at Jeremy, "Wanna come inside?" he asked halfheartedly.

Jeremy scoffed, "No, thanks."

In return, Hunter shrugged, "I guess I'll see you around then."

Jeremy backed off, calling a goodbye to Matt. Matt didn't answer, most likely because he didn't hear him, but it gave Hunter a sick satisfaction nonetheless to see Jeremy's face fall when he realized Matt didn't care that he was leaving.

With a relieved sigh, Hunter went inside and locked the door behind him. Finally, he had his best friend's undivided attention. Matt soon emerged from the bathroom, alcohol, sterile bandages and more paraphernalia at hand. "All right, clothes off. I bet there's more where that came from," he said, pointing at Hunter's face.

Hunter grinned. He liked bossy Matt. But then Matt froze, eyes gazing into nothingness.

"Matt?" Hunter asked, worried.

"Oh, shit. I forgot about Jerr. Where is he?"

Hunter couldn't help but smile at Matt's words. So he *had* forgotten Jeremy. *I knew that guy's not meant for him.*

"He left."

"Damn, I guess I should apologize later."

Hunter decided it was time to take Matt's mind off Jeremy entirely, so he pulled the best trick he had up his sleeve. He took off his shirt, showing Matt the purplish spots all over his skin.

Matt gasped and fell at his feet in an instant, studying Hunter's wounds carefully, and forgetting all about Jeremy or any other guy that could have been on his mind.

Hunter closed his eyes, as Matt examined every cut and bruise with the tips of his fingers. Although it hurt, Hunter couldn't help the tiny shivers of pleasure at the touch of his friend's hand. He shook his head. Not wanting to think what it must mean, he concentrated on the physical pain instead. With a happy sigh, he allowed Matt to clean and bandage his wounds. Not for the first time, he realized that, whatever these confusing feelings he was starting to have toward Matt meant, one thing was certain: he could never give Matt up. Without Matt being there for him unconditionally, Hunter would have no reason to smile.

Hunter couldn't sleep. Matt had accepted his plea to move in until he could find a new place, although Hunter could see he'd been hesitant about it.

Now Matt lay sleeping beside him, his soft breathing muffled by the pillow, his beautiful long hair falling like a cascade over the white sheets, and Hunter had all the time in the world to think. His mind kept bringing up the same questions: why didn't Matty want him around anymore? Was Matty dating someone and he was ashamed of introducing him to Hunter? Did he want privacy that much? Did Matt doubt their friendship?

Hunter tossed again in the narrow bed, the memory of Matt and Jeremy laughing as they climbed the stairs to Matt's room flashing through his mind. What if they *were* more than just bandmates? Maybe Matt wanted him away because he knew Hunter didn't much like Jeremy.

Ah, he felt like ripping his hair out. When had he and Matt become so distant that they couldn't communicate anymore? A long time ago, he used to know every thought that crossed his best friend's mind, even before Matt himself processed it. They used to be so in sync that they spoke the same things at the same time, they had similar dreams, similar gestures, similar reactions. They were more like twin souls rather than two different beings.

Now Matt seemed so far away, as if there were a whole continent between them, even though he was physically just inches away. Hunter missed him. He reached over and put his hand around Matty, feeling the hard ridges of his abs move beneath his hand as Matt breathed in and out. He buried his nose in his

friend's silky hair, inhaling the smell of his coconut shampoo. God, how he loved his long hair. Matt's hair was more beautiful than any girl's hair.

Matt let out a soft little whimper and leaned into Hunter's touch. His body radiated warmth, calling to Hunter like a mirage in the desert, and Hunter obeyed, like a thirsty traveler. He lined his body to Matt, feeling every inch of their nakedness merging and his fingers caressed soft skin, up and down Matt's torso. Hunter knew this body better than his own. He could bring up its image in his head effortlessly. Every muscle of Matt's body was a work of art. He might have been short and slim, but underneath the deceptive clothes lay a body of perfection, with hard abs and pecs, supple biceps and triceps, gorgeously sculpted legs. Matt was as beautiful as a Michelangelo sculpture, only warm and alive, and so good against him.

Hunter didn't really comprehend what he was doing until he felt Matt moaning beneath him. "Hunt," he called in a weak voice. Hunter couldn't tell how upset Matt was, but his voice was enough to shock him out of his trance. He froze taking in the sight of his best friend's back, still undulating slowly underneath him, and then, to his utmost shame, he realized in shock that he'd had Matt pinned down, unable to move. His cock was so hard it had escaped his boxers and was leaving a slimy trail right between Matt's ass cheeks.

"Shit," he cried, horrified at what he'd done, quickly stumbling away and falling on his ass on the floor.

"Fuck, Matty, are you okay?" he asked when Matt didn't move a muscle. How could this have happened?

"I'm fine," Matt eventually whispered, his face still buried in the pillow.

"Did I hurt you?" Hunter insisted.

"No, Hunt. I'm totally fine."

"Then look at me."

Hunter quickly got up and tucked his deflating erection back inside his boxers. He turned on the light.

"Matt, look at me."

But Matt still wouldn't raise his face from the pillow. "I'm fine, Hunter. Seriously," he said, voice muffled.

"I'm so sorry, Matty," he reiterated.

Matt didn't answer and Hunter found himself at a loss.

Eventually he grabbed his pillow and put it on the floor where he lay, trying to get back to sleep. Several minutes later, he felt Matt place a sheet over his back.

“I didn’t... penetrate you, did I?” he whispered.

“No,” Matt whispered back.

“Thank God,” Hunter sighed in relief.

Matt’s hand froze on his shoulder for a few seconds before he retracted it.

Hunter didn’t sleep all night. His mind was in a turmoil. For one, he was horrified that he’d been one step away from “raping” his best friend. But other more disturbing thoughts raced through his mind. He couldn’t seem to forget the perfect shape of Matt’s naked butt, the softness of his skin and the hardness of the muscles underneath. A body so different from that of a female—firmer, stronger, smelling so much more enticing.

He’d always admired men’s bodies, especially Matty’s. The past weeks he’d slept over at his place, he’d seen Matt naked numerous times, and he’d felt his groin stir uncomfortably, but he’d decided to ignore it. However, he couldn’t ignore it anymore. He’d crossed a line he never thought he’d be crossing, and now he was faced with having to reconsider his entire life choices.

The white picket fence, waiting for the right woman, having three children and a dog—that was his life-long dream. But in the light of what happened, he had to admit to himself that said dream was getting further away than ever before.

Fuck, I might be gay. Even as he thought that, Hunter knew he was just lying to himself. No straight man craved his best friend’s body the way he’d craved Matty’s the past few months, since they’d rekindled their old tradition of sleepovers. There was no question of might.

The morning after was awkward, to say the least. Both Hunter and Matt avoided looking at each other directly. For the first time since Hunter had started sleeping over, he didn’t feel like eating pancakes, opting for a ham and cheese sandwich and a black coffee at the campus cafeteria.

“So, what are you going to do about Greg?” Matt asked him after a long, uncomfortable silence.

Hunter shrugged. "I'll deal with it somehow. The lease is in Greg's name. I should look at the roommate ads."

He saw Matt nod from the corner of his eye, "I'll help you sort the good ones out."

"I can't really afford to have high standards. I can't keep staying with Greg. This fight was just the beginning. I knew he was a jerk from the start."

"It's all my fault. I should have agreed to us renting a place together."

Hunter shook his head. He'd never understood why Matt had refused to live with him, but, after what happened last night, he had the suspicion Matt had somehow seen through him and guessed his attraction before Hunter was even aware of it himself. Matt was too smart for his own good, and, like always, Hunter was extremely grateful for his best friend's intelligence. He couldn't imagine how much more awkward it would have been if this had happened while they stayed under the same roof.

They spent the rest of the day looking through ads for housemates whenever they had a break from classes. The awkwardness had slowly faded to an acceptable level, but Hunter was still relieved when they parted, having decided to go looking at apartments together the next day.

Thankfully, Greg wasn't home, and Hunter locked himself in his room for the evening, packing his stuff.

He didn't want to think about Matty, but his thoughts kept straying in that direction anyway. Matty's intoxicating smell, his sweet, innocent smile, his deep, raspy voice as he sang for him. All his bottled-up feelings from years of trying to live up to his parents' expectations, especially his father's, came flooding over him now. He was burning with desire for a life he'd tried his hardest not to want.

3. Matt

“This isn’t working,” Paul said in his usual calm matter-of-fact way, even though his frown and lip biting betrayed his distress.

“I’m sorry,” Matt sighed. “I just can’t concentrate.”

He felt bad for ruining everyone’s practice session, but thoughts of Hunter dominated his mind, and he kept missing his cue and getting his notes wrong. He was a total mess.

“Wanna talk about it?” Jeremy asked, looking concerned.

Matt shook his head. “Let’s just wrap it up for today.” Everyone nodded.

“Paul, you head out. I’ll join you later,” Jeremy suggested, surprising both him and Matt. Paul quickly recovered from his shock and left after waving goodbye, leaving Matt and Jerr alone.

“Can we talk for a second?” Jeremy asked him.

“Sure,” Matt replied, frowning.

“Look, I don’t wanna interfere in your life,” Jeremy started. It didn’t sound like a promising start to Matt. He was sure he was going to get a lecture.

“I know you like Hunter.”

Matt’s eyes widened. “H-how?” he stammered.

Jeremy rolled his eyes. “It’s pretty obvious you only have eyes for him, Matt. But... don’t you think it’s time to move on? He’s playing you.”

Matt cut Jeremy off. He wasn’t usually quick to anger, but he wouldn’t stand for anyone bad-mouthing Hunter. “Oh, you think you know Hunt so well? Mind your own fucking business, Jerr.”

Jeremy sighed. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have accused him of anything. But still, I think you’re wasting your time, waiting around for him.”

Matt said nothing, frowning at his bandmate and trying to resist the urge to strangle him.

“What’s this really about?” he eventually asked.

Jeremy’s whole face suddenly turned crimson. “Fine, I’ll cut straight to the chase. I like you.” Matt gasped in shock as Jeremy continued, “And I wanna ask you to go out with me.”

“Jerr...”

“Don’t say anything right now,” Jeremy interrupted. “I just want you to know that I’ll be waiting. Once you decide you’ve had enough of mooning over that friend of yours, you know where to find me.”

Matt shook his head. He wanted to tell Jeremy that he’d never be able to love someone as much as he loved Hunt, no matter how many years passed or how many men asked him out, but Jeremy cut him off again. “I told you. I don’t want an answer now. I just want you to know where I stand.”

He took a deep inhale and was out the door before Matt even had time to realize what had happened.

“Damn,” he whispered as his shaky legs failed him, and he fell on the bed. *I can’t believe I never guessed Jeremy’s intentions.* He’d been blind to his friend’s feelings even though they’d known each other for over two years. His head fuzzy with thoughts of Jeremy and Hunter, he eventually fell into a long sleep.

The next morning, he went to classes, and met Hunter in the afternoon to look at apartments for rent. The first apartment smelled of mold and cat’s piss, so they immediately dismissed it. The second one had no water heater, the third came without furniture. By the time they reached the fourth, their hopes and standards were significantly diminished.

“I’d forgotten how hard it is to find a good place. This is why I settled for living with Greg,” Hunter said with a sigh.

“Yeah. It sucks,” Matt agreed.

By then, they had reached the fourth place and Matt pushed the doorbell. After a couple of seconds, footsteps approached the door, followed by the sound of chains rattling and the lock clicking, before the door was opened, revealing a smiling, fortyish lady, with curly blonde hair and cute little dimples.

“One of you must be Hunter, right? You’re right on time.”

They both nodded and introduced themselves as they were welcomed inside.

“Two bedrooms, one living room, one bathroom and a kitchen,” the lady, whose name was Jenna, supplied and invited them to take a better look inside. The apartment looked spacious and smelled clean. The furniture was new and minimalistic.

“I had everything renovated recently. The sinks are all new and so is most of the furniture.” Both Matt and Hunter nodded in awe.

“It’s all very nice, but I don’t think I can afford this,” Hunter said, dismayed, after they had checked out the bathroom and made sure the heat and hot water worked.

“For two people, taking into account the location, I think the rent is very reasonable,” Jenna pointed out, giving him a meaningful look.

“Oh, absolutely, but I don’t have a roommate yet. In the ad you gave the price rent per room, so I thought there already was a roommate.”

Jenna nodded. “That’s true. I mean to rent this apartment to two people, but the description in the ad was clear enough. Two bedroom apartment, \$500 per person. Which means you would have to find your own second roommate. Or, if someone else wants to rent, you will have to negotiate your living arrangement with them.”

“That doesn’t sound very fair,” Matt said.

Jenna, who had lost her generous smile in the meantime, shrugged. “Look, I’ve had offers from other people. It’s your loss if you don’t take it.”

Hunter sighed.

“What about you, Matt?” Jenna asked. “Why don’t you move in with your friend? This apartment is very spacious. I doubt you’ll find better living conditions somewhere else. You could help your friend and get a good deal out of it at the same time.”

“Oh, I already have somewhere to live,” Matt found the need to explain himself. “I have my own room on campus.”

Jenna snorted. “We both know the conditions on campus.”

“Yes, but I have a band. We rehearse a lot, and neighbors don’t tend to complain, whereas if I moved off campus...” Matt excused himself further.

Before he had the time to continue, Jenna interjected, “Oh, that’s great! Didn’t I mention that I have soundproof walls? It’d be perfect for you!”

Matt’s eyes widened as he was unable to come up with further arguments on his behalf.

“Can we think about it, Jenna?” Hunter asked, his arm winding around Matt’s waist, as if to bring him comfort.

“Yes, of course, but you’ll need to hurry up. I have received many calls about the apartment. I can only hold it for you for two or three days, at the most.”

They said their goodbyes in a daze, Hunter’s hand never moving from Matt’s waist. Matt leaned into him as they walked away. They didn’t realize how close they were until a group of guys pointed at them and chuckled, calling them fags. Hunter jumped away from Matt, looking nervous.

Matt was amazed at his behavior. Hunter wasn’t like that; he’d never been ashamed of their friendship, always showing the finger or leering at everyone who bullied them when they looked too close. Matt felt devastated all of a sudden.

“I should browse more ads. Maybe I’ll find something eventually,” Hunter said, after they walked in silence for too long.

Matt nodded. “You really liked that place, huh?”

Hunter shrugged. “It was the nicest we’ve ever seen so far. But, well, it was only the fourth we visited, so... who knows?”

Matt nodded. He didn’t miss the fact that Hunter didn’t ask him to move in, even though he’d begged him for it continuously in the past year. What the hell happened between them?

It was late at night, and Hunter was going back to the place he shared with Greg. Although he was worried for him, Matt didn’t ask him to sleep over, and Hunter didn’t give any signs of wanting to. Matt knew the incident from their last sleepover had changed something irrevocably.

Even the way they parted was awkward. Hunter didn’t hug Matt goodbye like usual. He waved with a fake smile and all but ran away.

It pained Matt that Hunter had started to put distance between them. Was he disgusted by Matt? He didn’t act like it, but he certainly didn’t act as affectionately as before.

Matt snorted. “He’s probably scared of getting bitten by the gay bug. After so many years of friendship... how disappointing.”

He flopped down on his bed, curling up with his pillow. He couldn’t help a tear from sliding down his cheek, soon followed by another, and another. No matter how much he wiped them, the damn tears kept on falling, soaking his pillow and making his eyes puffy.

When was the last time he'd cried? Probably when Hunt fell and broke his leg in football practice, and he'd been so scared for him. Everything had always been about Hunt. He'd never thought of anyone else. Not even for a second did he imagine his life with someone else by his side, even though he knew how impossible his fantasies were.

He'd lost count of how many guys had asked him out since he'd come out of the closet. Although he'd been attracted by some, his heart still hadn't wanted to part with the illusions of being with Hunter. Delusions, more likely. For God's sake, he was still a virgin! If anyone found out, they'd laugh their asses off. Not even Hunter knew for sure, though Matt guessed he probably suspected it.

"You're so lame! You're the biggest loser!" he screamed, suddenly enraged. "Wasting your life waiting for someone who will never see you. What the hell is wrong with you, Matt?"

Fuck, he'd always suffered when Hunter carelessly touched him and gave him pecks with no consideration at all, but Hunter being indifferent and distant was something that hurt a thousand times more. Matt felt like his heart was breaking piece by piece. He couldn't do it anymore. Something had to give.

Out from his desk's drawer, he extracted a pair of scissors and looked at himself in the mirror. He needed to give up the past, he needed a fresh start, and, this time, he needed to stick to the decision to stop waiting for Hunter because he knew it would never happen.

With slow, deliberate movements he took the strands of hair that grew past his shoulders and cut them mercilessly. With every strand that fell he felt more powerful, more in control. He felt that he could really give up the past and start anew. It would hurt like hell, but he would do it. No more wasting time dreaming for the impossible.

"Shit, Matt, what happened to your hair?"

Paul's reaction was completely uncharacteristic. He was always calm, like everything bored him and nothing could touch him, like a cold marble statue. Matt couldn't help bursting out laughing. He regretted having cut his hair now that he was thinking more lucidly.

"Do you like it?"

Paul tilted his head, uncertain. "It looks good on you, but... I don't think you chose the most professional stylist."

Matt grinned. "I didn't. I cut it myself."

"That explains a lot of things."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Matt frowned.

"It looks like it's been cut with an axe. We're going to a stylist after classes. This needs a lot of retouching."

Matt opened his mouth to protest, but Paul swiftly cut him off. "There's no sense in arguing."

Matt shrugged and sipped on his cola, knowing when Paul set his mind on something, it was final.

After classes were over, they visited a salon and fixed Matt's hair, then decided to have lunch in the bistro down the street from the college. Jeremy would join them in an hour to practice on their set list for the party.

"So... what did Jeremy want the other night? I mean, if it isn't too personal..." Paul asked.

Matt was surprised. He thought Jeremy and Paul shared everything. As a matter of fact, he'd suspected they were going out, until Jeremy had dropped the bomb a few days ago about liking him. At the memory, Matt blushed, feeling suddenly self-conscious. How was he to face Jeremy now?

"He..." Matt cleared his throat and continued, "he asked me out."

Paul choked on his hamburger. It took a moment for him to recollect himself. "Really? I didn't think he'd have the guts."

"You knew he was interested in me?" Matt gaped. Paul shrugged and continued eating like there was no need for words.

"I don't know what to do about it, to be honest," Matt confessed.

"You like Hunter, right?" Paul asked, again surprising Matt.

"Jesus, am I really that obvious? Both you and Jerr figured it out."

Paul smiled sadly. "You tend to see these things in the people you care for."

"Aww, that's so sweet, Paulie. I love you too."

Paul launched a tissue dabbed in grease Matt's way. "Bite me."

“I’d rather bite my cheeseburger, thanks.”

Paul rolled his eyes. “You and Hunter are made for each other. You both have the dumbest come-backs ever.”

Matt’s smile faded. He took a lungful of air and breathed it out. “I decided to give up. There’s no point in hanging on for him.”

Paul nodded thoughtfully. “Life would be too easy if we could make the ones we love love us back.”

Matt asked after he regarded his friend for a few long moments, “You’re in love with someone too, right?” Paul was usually a very hard-to-read guy, but Matt remembered his expression when they’d both sang about unrequited love. At that moment, he’d felt a deep connection with Paul, because they were sharing the same pain.

Paul nodded again and gave Matt a sad smile. “It is what it is. Can’t do anything to change that. As far as I see it, either fight for it or move on. There’s no middle ground.”

“So, what about you? Are you fighting for it?”

Paul cringed. “As of now, I’m in the same boat as you. There’s no point in false hope. He’ll never see me.”

Matt wondered who Paul was talking about, but there was no time to press for answers, because Jeremy appeared from across the street and entered the bistro a minute later.

“Yo,” he saluted them with his usual contagious grin in place. There was no awkwardness as they smiled at each other, and Matt inwardly sighed in relief.

“What are you eating?” Jeremy asked as he sat down. He didn’t wait for an answer, but picked through Paul’s plate and took a piece of his half-uneaten hamburger. Paul slapped him on the fingers when he tried for a second piece.

“Buy your own.”

“Oi, you’re snappy today. Who pissed you off?” Jeremy asked, pinching Paul’s rosy cheek, a gesture all too familiar to Matt. Jeremy, just like Hunter, liked to touch a lot, and he made it a habit out of teasing Paul. Matt snickered at his own thoughts, as he watched his friends banter.

A sudden longing for Hunter stabbed him in the chest. *No. No more thinking of Hunter. It’s time to move on.*

“So, guys, are you ready for another rehearsal session?”

Jeremy nodded as he took a second to wave the waiter over and ask for a hamburger for himself.

“I was thinking of changing the arrangement for ‘Teardrops on My Guitar’ a bit. Make it a little more rock,” Paul suggested.

“Okay. It’s something we should have thought about sooner,” Matt admitted.

“That’s our Paulie. Always a genius,” Jeremy complimented Paul, as he squeezed the life out of the petite brunet. Paul’s face was beet red, but he didn’t protest as Jeremy hugged him. Instead, he sighed when Jerr took his hands away and looked with disappointment at him while Jerr obliviously fumbled through his backpack in search of his music notebook.

Holy shit, Matt thought. Why didn’t I see it before? Paul’s in love with Jerr.

Matt felt like kicking himself. He couldn’t believe he’d told Paul that Jeremy asked him out. No wonder Paul was both sad and pissed at the same time.

Poor Paul. Love sucks, he thought, as Hunter’s perfect smile flashed in his mind’s eye. Love really sucks.

4. Hunter

Hunter hadn't slept a wink for two days. He'd continued searching for apartments by himself, but he hadn't found anything as good as the last one he'd seen with Matt. He bet someone had already rented it by now, anyway.

Locked in his room, he could hear Greg and his buddies hollering in front of the TV, while their favorite baseball team scored. Stupid games reruns. He wished for the umpteenth time to have some goddamned peace. If he were living with Matty, they would have spent the time in a much different manner. He could picture them together, Hunter cooking while Matt rehearsed his songs or studied for his classes. Then they would get beer and watch the game close to each other. Of course, they would banter as they each cheered for opposing teams, just to get on each other's nerves, but it would be completely different from dealing with Greg and his small crowd of bullies.

Hunter sighed. He missed Matty already, and he hadn't seen him for two days. His fingers itched to press the call button, but he kept on looking at his phone like it was an alien object. What was stopping him? He bit his lips hard, and his finger hovered over the damn button, but he couldn't make himself press. It was ridiculous. He called Matty at least twice a day. It was like a ritual. If he didn't hear Matt's voice, it felt like his day wasn't complete. That was probably why he hadn't slept well. However, he just couldn't make himself call. A knot formed in his stomach each time he tried to do it. His hands would shake, his whole body would burn, his breath would hitch. He was acting like a teenager trying to call his first crush. As funny as the thought was, it only made him blush harder.

"Oh, fuck it," he yelled and finally pressed the call button. The minute he did it, he immediately regretted it. Thoughts that had never crossed his mind before were now at the front and center. *What if I'm bothering him? What if Matty is sleeping, or meeting with Jeremy?* He suppressed the possessive groan that accompanied the thought of Matt and Jeremy together.

He was about to end the call when a breathless Matt answered, taking Hunter by surprise. His heart galloped as soon as he heard Matt's husky voice saying hello.

"Hunter? Are you there? Is everything okay?" Matt sounded frantic when Hunter didn't immediately speak.

After forcing himself to talk, Hunter finally replied, “Hi, Matty.”

“What’s wrong? You don’t sound like yourself.”

Hunter chuckled at Matt’s perceptiveness. “Yeah, I guess I caught a cold,” he lied.

“Oh God. Are you okay? Is that why you didn’t call before?”

“Yeah,” he lied again. “Don’t worry. I’m fine.”

“I’ll come visit. Do you want me to buy something from the drugstore?”

“No, no. Don’t worry, Matty. I’m feeling much better now.”

“I’m still coming over,” Matt insisted.

“You better not. All Greg’s buddies are here.”

“Ugh, did they try something on you?”

“Nah. I locked myself in my room,” Hunter admitted, feeling embarrassed that he hadn’t wanted to face the jocks.

“Shit, Hunt, you should come over. Those guys are dangerous, especially with a few beers on board.”

Hunter was breathless at the thought of seeing Matt again. A sudden nervousness settled in the pit of his stomach, but also an excitement unlike any before.

“I guess I could come over,” he whispered.

“Hell, yeah, you should. I’ll come get you.”

“Matty...”

“I’ll call when I reach your apartment and wait for you downstairs. ’Kay?”

“Okay,” Hunter reluctantly agreed.

As soon as he ended the call, he started rummaging through his already packed bags in search of appropriate clothing. He usually never cared what he wore when he was meeting Matt, but this time it felt different. He’d never wanted to acknowledge his attraction to guys in the past, but the more time he spent with Matt, the harder it was to pretend he didn’t want to touch him in more than a friendly way. His heart beating frantically, he changed into various T-shirts before settling for a very tight one that he knew drove girls insane. He shook his head at his own antics. He shouldn’t be doing this, trying to seduce his best friend. It was a cowardly thing, something he’d never thought himself

capable of, but he wanted so badly for Matt to see him as more than just a friend.

He remembered one of their conversations not long ago when he'd asked Matt what type of guys he preferred. Matt had answered, "*Guys like you.*" It made his stomach flutter just thinking of it. He looked at himself one last time in the mirror, and combed his fingers through his hair. Would Matt like what he saw? *Do gay guys have the same tastes as women?* He strained his mind for hints on Matty's style, but all he could think of was that Matty dressed just like him: plain jeans and denim jackets, plain T-shirts. Nothing fancy except for his beautiful shoulder-length hair.

Hunter exhaled loudly. "Stop. Thinking," he told his reflection.

Just then, Hunter's cell chimed. It was a text from Matty—*I'm here.*

Hunter grinned as his stomach fluttered with millions of butterflies.

He put his cell in his jeans pocket and was out the door in a second. He barely acknowledged Greg calling out to him, "*Going for a date, sissy?*" as he practically ran out the door.

So, yeah, maybe he *was* going on a date with a guy. Maybe he *was* a sissy. Who the hell cared? Matty was waiting for him with a sweet smile on his face, and Hunter was ecstatic as soon as his eyes fell on him. But his smile fell just as quickly when he noticed Matt's hair. "You cut your hair!" he exclaimed, his hands immediately reaching over. His fingers didn't find long, soft locks, but short spiky hair instead. Hunter sighed, "Why?"

Matt shrugged. "I needed a change."

"But I loved your hair," Hunter complained.

Matt frowned, looking almost angry, but didn't say anything.

"Are you mad at me?" Hunter asked, confused.

"It's always about you, huh, Hunt? Maybe I didn't like my hair. Did you think about that?"

Hunter was taken aback by Matt's hurtful tone. "Matty..."

"I'm sorry," Matt quickly cut him off. "I guess I've been tired these days. Tonight's the gala and I'm a bit nervous, that's all. Don't mind me."

Hunter had the suspicion that Matt was lying to soften the blow. He was certain Matt was mad at him for something, but he had no idea what. He almost

called him on the lie, but thought better of it. "You look cute with your hair short too," he said instead. Matt turned beet red, to Hunter's delight.

"Thanks," Matt eventually whispered.

Hunter dared to put his hand on Matt's shoulder, and settled it there, feeling Matt's muscles move underneath his arm. The butterflies in his stomach slowly started to come down from their tumultuous flight. Now, there was just a burning heat in his chest at the thought of having Matt so close. *How come I've never noticed it before, although it's always been there?* He'd chosen to mistake it for excitement when he'd known all along it hadn't been just that.

Suddenly, Matt put his hand on Hunter's forehead, and Hunter stopped dead in his tracks, in the middle of the road.

"You do seem a bit feverish. We should stop by the drugstore."

The people milling around them, the noises of the street, the cars honking and the music coming from inside cafeterias, they all died down as Hunter gazed into Matty's eyes, just half an inch away, and lower still, to his beautiful, perfectly shaped lips. What would it feel like to kiss a man, to kiss Matty? Would his lips feel as soft as they looked?

Matt sighed, patting Hunter's cheek. "Must have been hell getting sick and trying to avoid that bastard Greg at the same time. Why didn't you call me sooner?"

Hunter shrugged. "I knew you were stressed over the event gig," he lied.

"Hunt," Matt said, regarding him seriously. "You know you come first. You always come first to me."

Hunter felt warm all over, and his legs turned to jelly. He wanted to tell Matty that he was the most important person to him too. He craved him like air. Just two days without seeing him had felt like worms crawling beneath his skin. But Matt didn't give him the chance to express his feelings. "Listen, you need to get out of that rat hole. We need to search for more apartments," he said.

Hunter didn't want to admit that he had done apartment hunting on his own. It would have meant admitting he'd lied about being sick. "It's all right. I've given up the idea. I can deal with Greg. He's not that bad."

Matt gave him a pointed look. "Sure."

"Don't worry about it, Matty."

“What about the apartment we went to before? Did you speak with that woman again? Maybe she found you a roommate.”

Hunter shook his head. “I bet she already rented it.”

“Hunt, we should at least try one more time. Here, give me your cell,” Matt demanded, waiting with his hand stretched out. Hunter, albeit reluctantly, obeyed. Matt scrolled through his contacts until he reached the woman’s name.

“Jenna,” he whispered as he waited for the woman to pick up.

In the meantime, they had reached a park, and they both sat down on a bench in silent agreement.

“Hello, Jenna. I’m Matt. I came with my friend Hunter a couple of days ago for your rent ad.”

Hunter bit his lips as Matt nodded to whatever the woman was saying. “Yes, if it’s not too much bother, can we come see it again?” They spoke some more and Matt hung up with a grin. “She said someone else only wants to rent one room, so you might reach an agreement if you like that person. Let’s hope they’re not a jerk, like Greg and his pals.”

Hunter nodded. “What would I do without you?”

Matt smiled shyly. “Are you up for seeing the place? We’ll go buy something from the drugstore for your fever, and then we can go chat with Jenna.”

“I’m feeling much better. I don’t think I need medicine.”

“Hunt, just do what I say and stop arguing. One pill won’t kill you.”

“Oh, bossy today, huh?”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Let’s move it.”

Jenna had called them back after speaking to the other person interested in the place, and said they were available in a few hours. Matt and Hunter decided to go for lunch as they waited for the mysterious possible housemate to appear. After two hours of bantering over a sandwich, followed by their customary pancakes for dessert (Hunter didn’t find them as tasty as the ones at Sally’s), they finally got the call from Jenna that the other guy had arrived. They excitedly walked the five minutes back to Jenna’s place and rang the door. Jenna was all sugar and honey the moment they entered, but their happiness

was short-lived. Lo and behold, the prospective housemate was none other than Greg, a very inebriated Greg, supported by one of his mates.

“What are you doing here, queer?”

“I should say the same,” Hunter replied. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Greg shrugged, “I’m searching for a new place.”

“Do you boys know each other?” Jenna needlessly intervened.

“We’re roommates,” they both replied, for the first time agreeing on something.

“So you finally decided to move in with your boyfriend, Reed?”

“Yeah, what’s it to you?” Hunter heatedly retorted.

“Be my guest. I guess I don’t need to search for a new place. I can just kick you out.”

“Fine,” Hunter spat. “I was leaving anyway, asshole.”

Greg and his friend left, huffing, banging the door shut behind them.

“Jesus, Hunt, how could you live with him for so long?” Matt asked in shock.

“We mainly stayed away from each other, but lately I don’t know what’s gotten into him. He’s always looking for a fight. Why do you think I kept begging you to move in with me, Matty? I hate that guy. I hate not sharing a house with my best friend, like it was supposed to happen.”

“I’m sorry,” Matt mumbled.

“Well, you two can share a house now, can you not?” Jenna asked them with a wide, money-thirsty grin.

Hunter looked at Matt, uncertain. “I guess we could,” Matt eventually agreed.

Despite his previous doubts, Hunter couldn’t help the wide grin that split open his face. He hugged Matt, squeezing him tight to his chest, and praying for that happy moment to never end.

They spent the following hour negotiating everything with Jenna, and happily went to Matt’s home to start packing his things. Two hours later, Matty would have his infamous charity concert that was eating up his nerves, and

Hunter was determined to get Matty's mind off it until the very minute he was supposed to step on stage.

5. Matt

Just two days before, he'd given up. He'd been determined to never think of Hunter in a romantic way again. He'd even cut his hair to remind himself of that decision, and, yet, here he was, held in Hunter's arms. His face was pressed to Hunter's hard pecs, and all he could think about was how much he despised having so many layers of fabric between them.

"Okay. Enough hugging. You're suffocating me," he admonished.

Hunter chuckled and let him go. "You ready?"

"As ready as I can be."

They exited Matt's room and joined Jeremy and Paul, who were waiting outside in a taxi that would drive them toward the event's location. It was a mansion of Hollywoodian proportions, belonging to the richest girl in their college, but who wasn't a snob at all. In fact, Delia was one of their dearest friends, and she said she couldn't imagine a better band playing at her charitable event. The charity was dedicated to support a center for welcoming gay homeless youth, and their band, Gay for You, fitted the whole theme to perfection.

All of them were dressed to a T. Jeremy had his customary eyebrow ring and nose ring, while Paul donned almost a dozen heavy chains around his neck with gay-friendly pendants, including his favorite rainbow-colored pony. Matt, for his part, wore his signature black eyeliner, various bracelets and chains. His rings, earrings, and tongue ring were all peace signs. Had he had his old long hair back, he'd have wrapped it in a loose bun with a fashionable bandana. But as it was, he spiked it instead. It felt weird not to have his hair long. He missed it and kept touching his head self-consciously.

"Stop that. You'll ruin it. You look pretty, Matty," Hunter admonished him, slapping his hand away just when Matt was about to bring it to his ear for the umpteenth time. Matt exhaled loudly. He noticed Jeremy throw a venomous look Hunter's way through the rearview mirror from his place in the front. *Oh, Jerr...* Then he looked at Paul beside him, trying unsuccessfully to stop gazing Jeremy's way. *Fuck, love really makes no sense.*

They were finally at the party. A few cars loomed before the front entrance like a menacing army of mecha robots, but since no guests were to arrive at that hour, they all assumed they belonged to the family members. It did nothing to settle down their nerves.

“Calm down, guys. You’ll rock their world,” Hunter encouraged them.

Matt wished he had Hunter’s courage. But Hunt wasn’t the one about to go on stage for a few hundred of the city’s most influential socialites in just a few minutes. He caught Hunter’s hand and squeezed it to gain courage. Hunter squeezed back and smiled at him reassuringly.

The next half an hour passed in a blur. They entered the mansion, saluted the host and settled on the stage that had been improvised for them in the garden. Butterflies rolled in Matt’s stomach as the guys prepped their instruments and rehearsed a few songs. Later on, they got introduced to dozens of famous people, and then they climbed back on stage to prepare for the actual concert. Matt was left standing and gazing at the crowd of guests. Chatting among themselves, drinking from crystal-clear champagne flutes, and paying him no mind. But, amongst all of them, there was one person who had eyes only for Matt. Hunter smiled at him as their gazes met, and, for a brief second, it felt like they were alone in the whole universe. A painful longing settled in Matt’s chest. He wanted so much to tell Hunter how much he loved him, how much it pained him to give up hope of them ever being together. Everything threatened to spill out of him. So instead of yelling to the whole world of how much he loved a man who would never be his, Matt poured all his feelings into the music, flying with it, getting lost in the comforting embrace of sounds and verses that always, inevitably, spoke of loving someone.

Without Matt even noticing, the hours had flown by. But Hunter never stopped looking at him, as if he knew, in his heart, that Matt was singing for him alone.

When the final song came, Matt felt drained. His voice tired, he started the slow song about giving up on love that they’d decided to keep for last. It spoke of unrequited feeling, of waiting for a sign from the other person. As he sang, Matt couldn’t help feeling the hopelessness overwhelm his heart, but then he looked up and his eyes met Hunter’s. He saw so much love there, so much trust, that it took his breath away, and he realized he didn’t want to give up. He didn’t want to ever lose sight of Hunter. No matter how long he had to wait to be seen, Hunter was the only one for him. Despite the sad song, he smiled as his voice died.

After they sang, they felt exhausted. It was all a blur of handshakes, congratulations and business cards, but all Matt could think of was how much he craved a bed to just lie down and sleep in.

Hunter was next to him the whole time, letting Matt sag against him. Many of the guests told them they made the cutest couple. Matt was too tired to

contradict them, and Hunt laughed, like him being straight was their own personal joke. However awkward he must have felt after the night he'd humped against Matt, everything seemed okay now. Hunter was his old self, always touching him, grinning at him and jokingly pretending he was gay, like it didn't bother him at all. Like usual, he felt emotionally drained.

At some point, Hunter sat him down on a chair and went in search of a bottle of water to help hydrate Matt. Matt smiled at the sweet gesture and waved Hunter off.

“Do you have time for a chat?”

He turned around to find Jeremy looking at him with a nervous expression.

“Sure, Jerr.” Matt patted the chair next to him and Jeremy took the hint and sat down.

“It was awesome, huh?”

“Hell, yeah, it was,” Matt agreed, “and equally nerve-wracking.”

Jeremy chuckled. His knees jerked in an unsettling rhythm. “I'm sorry for what I said a couple of days ago. Forget about it, okay?”

Matt sighed. “About you asking me out, you mean?”

Jeremy nodded, not meeting Matt's eyes. “I don't want to upset you. I don't want things ending up awkward between us.”

Matt nodded in agreement. “I don't want that either.”

“You like Hunter. A lot. Tonight you only had eyes for him. It was kind of a reality check for me,” Jeremy said, laughing humorlessly.

“Jerr, I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say.”

Jeremy shook his head. “Don't worry about it. We can't choose who we fall in love with.” He reached over and patted Matt's spiky hair with a wink. “You better get him, Matt.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Hunter's straight.”

Jeremy burst out laughing. “Are you sure about that?”

Matt frowned. “What's that supposed to mean?”

Jerr shrugged and cupped Matt's face. “Gimme a goodbye kiss at least.”

Before Matt had the time to react, Jeremy planted a full open mouthed kiss on his lips. He drew away with a loud smack and a snicker. “At least I know what you taste like.”

With a salute, Jeremy was off and soon lost himself in the crowd, leaving Matt dumbfounded. He was woken out of his reverie by a frowning Hunter, who handed him a bottle of water without another word.

They took a taxi, while Paul and Jeremy took a separate car. Both were silent. Matt didn't really register what was going on around him. He was getting tired again, the stress finally getting to him.

Hunter pushed Matt into the car and sat beside him. His arm went around Matt's shoulder, and Matt gratefully leaned against him. He was so tired his cock didn't even stir when Hunter pulled Matt in so tightly he was pressed against his body. The ride home was entirely too short, but Matt still managed to doze off. When he awoke, Hunter was paying the cab driver, after which he dragged Matt toward the dorm.

By the time they got inside Matt's room, Hunter was breathing hard, due to having lifted Matt more than once.

"Sorry," Matt mumbled.

"It's okay," came Hunter's whispered response, followed by his gentle caress of Matt's head. "I'll get your clothes off," he offered, as Matt slumped in bed. He only had the power to nod.

He felt Hunter's hands on his shoulder, slipping his jacket off, then traveling slowly down his back, until they reached the hem of Matt's T-shirt. Hunter rolled it up and raised his arms to help get the material off.

All of a sudden Hunter's touches took a weird turn. His fingertips lingered on Matt's skin. They traced a trail from his collarbone down his chest and to his abs, then further down until they reached Matt's belt. Hunter's hand stopped there. Matt was aware of his hardening cock and his breathing accelerating. The tension was palpable in the air. Matt stared intently at Hunter's hand on his belt buckle, willing it to move. And, finally, it did, but not lower, as Matt wished. Hunter's hand went back to caressing Matt's abs, then back up to his pecs, flicking his hardening nipples, before descending once again to his abs and back up to his chest—teasing, taunting, driving Matt insane. He didn't understand what was happening, but he thought he would lose his mind if Hunter didn't do something. Anything at all.

As if hearing his silent prayer, Hunter put both his hands on Matt's thighs and started rubbing gently, his fingertips getting dangerously close to Matt's

balls. Matt couldn't stop a whimper from escaping his lips. He unconsciously bucked his hips up, silently begging for more.

"I've always wondered how it felt," Hunter whispered, his gaze fixed on Matt's tented jeans. From the foot of the bed, where he was, his face was level with Matt's groin, only a couple of inches away. Matt's cock pulsed at the thought of Hunter getting closer.

"What?" he asked Hunter, breathlessly.

"You know, to be with a guy," Hunt clarified.

"Why now?" Matt couldn't help asking, despite his mind being fogged with tiredness, but especially with want.

"I've always wondered, even before I figured out you were gay," Hunter replied.

Matt gasped in shock at the admission. In an instant, all exhaustion dissipated and his mind became alert.

"What do you mean?"

Hunter shrugged and his hands, which had stopped their movement, resumed rubbing Matt's thighs.

"You know, when we slept over at each other's houses, I wondered how it would feel."

"Jesus," Matt whispered in confusion, all his hopes rising up again. With them came the self-loathing and the anger toward Hunter. Why did he pick then to confess something like that to Matt? Just when he was beginning to understand the hopelessness of his unrequited love.

"Will you let me?" Hunter asked, as usual unaware of Matt's feelings. A strong red tint bloomed on his cheeks as he looked from Matt's face to his groin, and back up again.

"What the hell is this, Hunt?" Matt asked angrily. Despite his own cock straining for release, he couldn't help feeling angry at what his friend was doing to him. "Let's experiment with the gay pal?"

"Matty..."

"What is wrong with you?" Matt cut him off before he got the chance to plead his case.

“I... I don't know,” Hunter admitted. His face still blushing, he lowered his gaze and bit his lips. Matt could tell he was telling the truth, and all his anger suddenly dissolved.

“What's going on?” he asked gently, rubbing Hunter's shoulders to help him relax.

“I want you. I can't stop thinking of you, that's what's going on. At first I pretended that it was just because I care for you, that it was normal, because you were my best friend. But it's not like that. Matty, whenever I look at you I want to touch you so bad.”

Hunter's admission made Matt's head spin. He'd prayed all his life to hear Hunter tell him that. He'd played almost this entire scene in his fantasies a million times before.

“Are you mad at me?” Hunter asked him, a pleading look on his usually daring face.

“Fuck, Hunt, what are you doing to me?” Matt whispered. His fingers tugged at Hunter's hair, until Hunt got the point and moved up Matt's body. Matt couldn't take it anymore. He pressed his mouth on his best friend's parted lips. They both moaned at the same time. Hunter rearranged himself until he was flush against Matt. They opened their mouths and their tongues met halfway, and rubbed against each other. The delicious friction made their bodies tremble with need.

“Oh, Matty,” Hunter moaned when they stopped for air. Matt could feel Hunt's hard cock against his thigh. The thought that he'd made Hunter hard empowered and exhilarated him. He was determined to take this as far as Hunt wanted him to, and if this night was his only chance, he would damn well take advantage of it. Without giving Hunter any opportunity to change his mind, he grabbed him by the back of his neck and pulled him down for another hungry kiss. He put all his pent-up emotions into it, and Hunter must have felt them. He moaned incessantly and rubbed against Matt until their cocks were lined up together. They both jolted as if powered by an electric shock.

“Matty, Matty, I need you,” Hunter pleaded, breathless.

Matt rolled them until he was above Hunter. He didn't stop to think that he was a virgin and his whole experience was limited to the amount of porn he watched. He simply let his instincts lead. With determined movements, he unbuckled Hunter's belt and unzipped his jeans. Hunter's boxers were wet with

precum, his huge erection threatening to rip through the thin material. Matt chuckled at the sight. He needed no more proof of his friend's willingness to explore. Hunter whined when Matt didn't make another move, making Matt chuckle again.

"Stop laughing, Matty. Do something," Hunter begged. He looked so cute, flushed and breathing hard, his clothes in disarray. Matt had dreamed of such a sight for years and years. And it was finally coming true. Part of him was convinced this was only a very lucid dream. Soon he'd wake up to find Hunter snoring next to him, oblivious to Matt's perverted fantasies. But, for now, he would savor this unexpected gift, this virtual reality in which he could have his friend in his bed and willing to do more than just hug him in a platonic way. His mind went back to the night he'd woken to find Hunter humping against his ass. Then, Hunter's hard cock and his silent whimpers had almost brought him to the brink of an orgasm in just a few seconds. Tonight though, as long as this dream lasted, he would drag out the pleasure for as long as he could.

He buried his face in Hunter's groin. Still clad in the thin cotton boxers, his friend's cock twitched and Hunter released a heavy groan. Matt inhaled his smell, musky and sweaty, and so fucking good! He started lapping like a cat, wetting the cotton and letting his teeth graze the length of Hunter's erection, enjoying immensely the reactions he produced in his straight friend. Not so straight anymore, by the look of things.

"Gorgeous," Matt whispered drinking in the features of Hunter's face, now scrunched up from painful pleasure.

"Fuck, Matty, please," Hunter begged again, grabbing Matt by the nape of his neck and pressing his face to his cock. He rubbed it against Matt's face, until Matt was left unable to breathe. Oh God, but it felt so damn good he didn't care if he died of suffocation. He wanted this moment to never end. "Please, Matt, please," Hunter kept saying, soft moans escaping his lips.

Finally, Matt took mercy on him. He grabbed both Hunter's jeans and boxers and pulled them down. Hunter's erection bobbed and slapped him in the face. Matt moaned being faced with the beauty of that hard, veiny cock. He licked his lips, overcome by sudden nervousness. He'd never sucked a cock before. Would he be capable of making this good enough for Hunter? He only had this one chance and he needed to make it right. Swallowing hard, he tentatively touched Hunter's cock. It was both hard as steel and incredibly soft in his hand.

“Matt,” Hunter whispered breathlessly.

Matt looked up and their eyes met. He was blown away by the burning desire he could see in Hunter's gaze. It was like a volcano waiting to erupt and all that stood in its way was Matt prolonging its discharge. Matt bit his lips and gave in to his own desire. He lowered his head and licked the tip of Hunter's cock. Hunter groaned and grabbed Matt's head, silently urging him to take him. Empowered, Matt covered his teeth with his lips and descended, taking in as much as he could.

Hunter screamed, “Fu-uck!”

Matt was insanely turned on. He'd always had an oral fetish and sucking Hunt's cock was something he'd dreamed about ever since he'd learned what jacking off was. Now, for the first time, he knew what it meant to have a huge, tasty cock in his mouth. Not just any cock, Hunter's. Fuck, the thought alone almost made him come in his pants. With shaky hands, Matt struggled to unzip his jeans, eventually managing to take his dick out. All it took were a few tugs and he was over the edge, his whole body jerking uncontrollably from the power of his orgasm. Matt screamed with Hunter's cock still lodged in his throat.

“Oh, Jesus, Matty!” Hunter yelled. His legs started to shake, and a fraction of a second later, Matt's throat was flooded with thick cum. He choked on it, but was too overcome by desire to care. He let Hunter feed him his hot jizz, jet after creamy jet. Eventually Hunter stopped shooting and his cock softened, escaping from Matt's mouth. Matt groaned with disappointment. He still yearned for Hunter's taste and the feel of him, hard and fat in his mouth.

“Fuck,” Hunter whispered.

Matt's head fell in Hunter's lap. He couldn't resist giving Hunter's sensitive dick a few more licks. Hunter jolted with every lick, but did nothing to stop him. He wove his fingers in Matt's too short hair and gently massaged his scalp. More than ever, Matt regretted having cut it.

“This actually happened...” Matt mused out loud. He still dreamed of himself carrying his usual long hair, not short like it was in real life. But more importantly, this had all been too real to have been just a dream.

He heard and felt Hunter chuckle, his abs moving in rhythm with the sound. “I can't believe it either. Why didn't we do this before?”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Because you're straight?” he answered sarcastically.

“Hmm...” was all Hunter provided.

Matt could feel sleep overtake him. He guessed he must have dozed off, because the next thing he remembered was Hunter tucking him beneath the covers and spooning him before he fell into a heavy, rewarding sleep.

6. Hunter

Hunter had never slept so profoundly before. He awoke with a smile on his lips and was immediately flooded with images from the previous night. He couldn't believe Matt had actually given him a blow job, and Hunter had enjoyed it immensely. It had been a thousand times better than any head any girl had given him. And it had felt a million times righter. It all dawned on him now. He'd never wanted to acknowledge that he was different, but from the moment he'd first seen Matt shyly wave at him from behind his mother's skirts, he'd known he wanted Matty to only look at him. He was different. He was gay. And, if he'd had any doubts before, this night had torn them all down.

He looked at Matt's peaceful face as he was still deeply submerged in sleep, and couldn't believe how right it felt to hold Matt in his arms with no textiles between them. Hunter's cock stirred at the sensation of Matt's soft skin. He moaned softly as he slowly rubbed his cock against his friend's ass cheek. It felt so dirty and so exciting at the same time.

Matt flinched at his movement, and his head swerved back. Eyes still foggy with sleep, he looked at Hunter, who sheepishly smiled at him. "Hunt, what are you doing?"

Hunter felt himself blush. "Morning, Matty," he said, choosing not to reply to Matt's question.

Matt gave him a long, incisive look, making Hunter squirm uncomfortably.

"We need to talk," Matt finally said. His words sounded ominous, but Hunter knew he couldn't wiggle out of it. When Matt got an idea, there was no way around it. He was as stubborn as a bull.

Hunter sighed. "Okay, I'm listening."

"No, I'm listening and you're explaining. When did you suddenly decide you were gay?"

Hunter moaned. "Can we not do this before coffee and pancakes?"

"No," Matt said obstinately.

"Matty, you know way better than I do that no one just decides to be gay," Hunter said, grabbing his pillow and covering his face with it so he wouldn't be forced to face Matt's fierce stare.

“Then explain to me what’s going on, Hunt. Since when has this been going on? Why didn’t you tell me anything about it?”

Matt sounded betrayed. Hunter felt like a jerk. His anger made total sense. He and Matty had shared everything before. Matty must have been feeling like shit. He took the pillow off his face and looked at Matt’s angelic features, distorted by anger and pain.

“I’m sorry, Matty,” he said, cupping Matt’s face and placing gentle kisses on Matt’s forehead and cheeks, then on his eyelids. Matt relaxed under his touch.

“I didn’t mean to upset you. To be honest, I didn’t really figure it out myself for a long time. And when I did, I kept denying it, telling myself I was wrong. That night when I awoke humping against you was the final straw. I realized I couldn’t keep denying it.”

“Is that why you acted so weird after?” Matt asked him after he processed everything in silence for a few agonizingly long moments.

Hunter nodded. “I think I’ve always felt attracted to guys, but I kept telling myself it was normal to admire male bodies and it was normal to pay more attention to men, since my best friend was gay. I kept convincing myself I was just paying attention to what kinds of guys you like, so I could maybe help you out. But whenever you acted like you had a crush on someone, I just felt like breaking their necks instead.”

“What are you saying?”

Hunter smiled shyly. “I don’t know, Matty. I think I honestly like you. As in... more than I should like my best friend. Last night was... like a dream come true. A dream I never knew I had.”

He sighed wistfully, at the memory of last night, images of Matty’s lips around his cock swimming through his mind. His dick was rock-hard at the thought of repeating that experience. *The sooner the better*, he thought with a wide grin, taking another appraising look at Matt’s naked body. He almost groaned out loud at the sight, but as soon as he saw Matt’s angry frown, the sound died in his throat.

“This isn’t happening,” Matt said. “You’re not telling me you like me. Not like this.”

“Huh? Why?” Hunter was confused. “Matty, why are you angry?”

Matt shook his head. His eyes looked like they were tearing up, and it brought even more confusion in Hunter's mind.

"You're straight, Hunter. You've always been straight. You can't do this to me. Stop playing around."

"But..."

"You can't just say something like this after twenty years of being straight!" Matt screamed.

He climbed out of bed and stomped toward the bathroom, shutting the door behind him with a bang. Hunter heard the lock, and water started flowing soon enough.

"What the fuck just happened?" Hunter whispered to the empty room. If he didn't know better he would have thought his friend was pissed at him for being gay. Why would a gay guy be pissed to have a gay best friend? Was it because he'd told Matty he liked him? That must have been it... Okay, it hadn't been his most brilliant moment. Usually you don't tell someone that after one sexual experience. He could get that. But they'd known each other for over sixteen years. They were best friends. It shouldn't have been this odd.

Just then, a cell chimed. The sound came from off the floor where last night's clothes still lay strewn across the carpet. Last night flashed through Hunter's mind again, but he quickly dismissed it and focused on localizing the cell. Both he and Matt had the same brand. The screen showed he had a text, but as soon as he opened it, he knew he was holding Matt's phone, not his. The text was from "Jerr" and Hunter read it before he could stop himself.

Matt I need u.

Hunter bit his lower lip as his shaky hand pressed the delete button before he even thought about the consequences of his move. *Fucking Jerr.* It was all his fault. It was obvious not just from the text, but also from the kiss he'd witnessed last night, that he and Matty were closer than they seemed. They were probably boyfriends.

"Shit, and I went and told Matt I liked him. No wonder he freaked."

Hunter didn't know what he was going to do. Matt wouldn't emerge from the bathroom, he had no place to stay but at his and Greg's apartment, and today they should have been moving out to the new apartment they'd rented together. Things would be even more awkward if that happened. Hunter had no other choice but to go back to Greg's, no matter how much that sucked.

With a loud exhale, he started putting his clothes on and then wrote a short note to Matt.

“Went back to my place. Jeremy texted you. Deleted it by mistake.”

As he walked down the street, he couldn't stop thinking of how wrong it all went. Just that night, Matt had had his cock down his throat and it had felt wonderful, and right, and so damn hot. A wave of heat overtook him just thinking of it.

But then morning had come and everything had changed. Matt proved to him that just because they'd shared a hot blow job, it didn't mean Matt liked him the way he liked Matt. In fact, Matt was most likely dating Jeremy, and knowing how honest Matt was, Hunter had probably messed things up for them. He'd been at fault for initiating everything.

Fuck, will Matt ever forgive me?

Just the thought of never talking to Matt again broke Hunter's heart into a million pieces. He was desperate. When he reached the place he shared with Greg, he didn't care about anything but throwing himself on his bed and crying his eyes dry.

“Hey, faggot, come to take your bags?”

Great. Now he had to postpone his self-pity party because of a stupid homophobic asshole. Hunter tried his best to ignore Greg's taunting and made a beeline for his bedroom, but Greg jumped in his way, blocking the entrance just as he was about to step inside.

“I was talking to you, loser.”

“And I wasn't, dumbass,” Hunter retorted.

“You fucking son of a bitch. You think you're so smart?”

Greg fisted his T-shirt as Hunter launched forward, closing his hands around Greg's throat. That was it. It was the last time he would allow this asshole to insult him.

Greg struggled to breathe under Hunter's hold. He let go of Hunter and desperately scratched his hands, trying to pry them off his throat.

“Listen carefully, motherfucker. Touch me again, talk to me again, and I'll break your legs. Do I make myself clear?”

Greg nodded, a desperate look in his bulged-out eyes. Hunter let him go before it was too late. He hoped this time Greg would really get the message.

He closed his bedroom door behind him, leaving Greg to cough his lungs out on the other side. Not even that sound made him feel happy. All he could think about was that he might have lost his best friend, the only person who really cared for him unconditionally, because of one horny night and one stupid confession that he should have kept to himself. Hunter buried his face in the pillow and cried himself to a restless sleep.

7. Matt

Matt felt the whole world collapse around him. All his life he'd grown up knowing certain things were fixed, unchangeable; like the grass being green in summer and yellowish in autumn, like the sky being blue, like the planet Earth revolving around the sun. Like Hunter being straight.

Those were supposed to be unchangeable things; things no one could do anything about; they *just were*, so one had to deal with them. He'd never expected something like that to *just not be*. But there it was, happening before his eyes.

He'd woken up with Hunter spooning against him with a humongous hard-on, and the memory of his lips around Hunter's cock the night before. And then Hunter had told him he was gay. As if it was the most normal thing in the world, as if he didn't live as a straight guy for twenty years. As if he hadn't changed Matt's whole world in an instant with only a couple of words.

Matt felt like crying, which was exactly what he did. Years and years of dreaming something he'd thought impossible. Years of cursing himself for not being able to stop loving his best friend; years of hiding this deep, painful secret that he thought would ruin the best friendship he'd ever have. And Hunter had cluelessly, like always, walked all over his feelings, making Matt feel like a ridiculous child for having tormented himself with guilt all these years.

He did feel like an idiot. He felt like the biggest loser. Hunter, brave, honest Hunter, had made him feel stupid, just like back when he'd been sixteen and he'd spent countless nights tossing and turning in his bed, wondering how to come out as gay, while Hunter had just told him he'd known all along.

"Fuck, how can I still be so blind and immature at my age?"

Self-loathing was soon replaced by anger at himself and then with anxiousness at having to see Hunter again. This was not how he should have acted when his friend came out. After his drama queen reaction, he felt like a total asshole for disappointing Hunter.

Biting his lips from anxiety, he slowly opened the door and tiptoed outside. But, lo and behold, the room was deserted. Hunter had left.

On Matt's bed, a note. Matt scurried the few steps to his bed and picked the note up with shaky hands. A short, emotionless message. Matt felt like an even

bigger asshole. He couldn't imagine how hurt Hunter must have felt by his stupid reaction.

Shit, I need to look for him now.

Hunter shouldn't have gone back to Greg's place alone. That guy was always looking for a fight and, knowing Hunter as well as he did, Matt was sure Hunter would welcome a fight if he was mad and hurt enough. He just hoped to hell that Hunter hadn't yet done anything stupid.

He was on his way to the subway when Jeremy's call came.

"Jerr, I'm sorry. I didn't get your message this morning. It got accidentally deleted," he informed his friend as he absentmindedly took the stairs down to the station.

"Matt, I need you ASAP. You have to come to my place now." Jeremy sounded frantic.

"Now? I kinda have something up, Jerr. What's wrong? Is it urgent?"

Even as he asked it, Matt realized it must have been, otherwise Jeremy wouldn't have called him.

"Paul's leaving, Matt. He's leaving the band."

Matt stopped dead in his tracks just before the subway's open doors.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Would I have called you just to pull your leg? This is serious! I can't talk him out of it, Matt. I don't know what to do," Jeremy cried. It was the first time Matt had ever heard him so desperate.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Hang on."

Matt put his cell back in his pocket with a loud exhale. Making peace with Hunter had to wait. Hunt would definitely understand.

"What's this about?" Matt asked Paul, who had finally conceded defeat and agreed to meet him alone at their usual bistro meeting place.

It had taken a whole half an hour just to settle an agitated Jeremy down. Then he'd called Paul at least five times, before he got an answer and a reluctant promise to meet up for coffee.

Paul looked sickly pale as he sipped his coffee. His hand shook slightly when he settled the cup down.

“What do you want me to say?”

Matt rolled his eyes. “For real? You’ve just decided you’re leaving the band, didn’t even have the decency to tell me, and now you act like nothing’s going on? What the fuck, Paul? I thought we were friends.”

“This has nothing to do with you, Matt.”

“The hell not!” Matt yelled.

“Lower your voice,” Paul chastised.

Matt bit his lip and continued in a lower voice, “This is my band, too. We’re all in this together—you, me, and Jeremy. Or did you forget?”

“I didn’t forget, Matt,” Paul sighed. “That’s the problem.”

Matt frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t do it anymore,” Paul replied after a loud sigh and a second sip of coffee, with the aid of an even shakier hand. “I... I need out. I need a change. I guess what you said about giving up gave me a lot to think about. And I’ve reached my decision. I need out.”

“Paul...” Matt finally realized what this was all about. He also realized his giving up idea had never really worked. So would it really work in Paul’s case? He doubted it.

“I got a lot of business cards at the party and many propositions to launch solo. We all did. Maybe it’s time we all move forward.”

Matt shook his head. “You’re wrong, Paul. We’re good together, the three of us. That party proved it. And when we play our own music we will be even better. Don’t give up on us so easily.”

Paul looked teary-eyed. “I just can’t do it anymore, Matt. I’m invisible. Can’t you see?”

Matt grabbed his hand as a fat tear rolled down Paul’s face. Paul held on for dear life, squeezing so hard Matt felt like his bones would break, but he didn’t let go.

“Paul, tell him how you feel.”

Paul shook his head. “He confessed to you. I already know there’s no hope.”

“You never know. Trust me, Paul. It’s something I’ve learned recently. You can never be sure enough. Even the impossible is possible sometimes.”

Paul kept shaking his head in denial. Matt squeezed his hand between both of his and looked him in the eye with determination.

“Paul, give it one last chance. It’s all I ask. I won’t say anything about you leaving the band again. I promise. Just tell him everything. And if he says no, then that’s it. At least you know you’ve tried.”

Paul snorted and wiped a tear from his cheek. “Pot, meet kettle.”

“Yeah, well...” Matt shrugged. “I’ve realized something very important today.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Sometimes we see only the things we want to see. I guess I never saw Hunter was gay because I was too scared of seeing it. I preferred thinking what I felt for him would forever be unrequited. Maybe that was my only way of dealing with my cowardice.”

“Whoa, time out. Hunter is gay? How? What happened since we last talked? Dude, we just saw each other last night!”

Matt laughed and started telling Paul everything. It actually felt liberating. By the end of his recount, he felt elated at the sudden realization that Hunter might actually be attracted to him.

He wasn’t naïve. Unlike Hunter, he thought his friend needed to first explore his latent attraction to men before he decided he really liked Matt, but it was still more than he could ever have hoped for. It meant his chances to someday be with Hunter were all of a sudden a lot higher.

“Wow, man, that’s amazing. What the hell are you still doing here? You should be talking things over with Hunter now.”

Matt raised an eyebrow and smiled at Paul pointedly. “Do you actually know how desperate Jerr was? He pretty much went down on his knees to beg me to talk to you.”

Paul snorted. “Well, at least I matter now.”

“Don’t be silly. You know how much Jeremy cares about you.”

Paul bit his lower lip and gave Matt a sad smile. “Jerr cares about everyone.”

Matt was exasperated. “Just promise me you’ll talk to him before making the final decision, okay? I really don’t think Gay for You can survive without you, Paul. You are a man of few words, but you are our heart and soul.”

“Brown-noser,” Paul joked, flicking him on the forehead.

“Ow!”

“Go meet Hunter, Matt. I’m fine.”

Matt shook his head no. “Not until you promise.”

“Fine! I promise.”

“You’ll tell him everything?”

Paul moaned and nodded. “I promise I’ll tell him everything.”

“Okay, call me.”

“Just go,” Paul said, emphasizing his words with a swat on Matt’s backside.

“Bye!” Matt called when he was already halfway out of the door. “Good luck!”

“You too,” Paul called back, waving goodbye.

8. Hunter

Hunter was deep asleep when the sound of loud voices jolted him awake. He blinked his eyes open and found a worrisome sight before him.

Greg and three other pals of his had managed to get inside his room somehow. He must have been so upset he'd forgotten to lock it. But the scary part was that all of them surrounded Hunter's bed. Judging by the evil grins on their faces and the way they rubbed their hands, the jocks looked ready to kick some ass. Hunter's ass, to be more precise.

"So that's what you call a fair fight, huh, Gregg?" he spit out sarcastically. They would put him in the hospital anyway. He might as well go down not looking like a pussy. Still, he couldn't keep a whimper from escaping his lips the moment one of Greg's buddy's feet connected with his stomach.

"Shut up, fairy," the guy yelled. He didn't give Hunter time to properly get up, but kicked him again and again until Hunter fell off the bed, much to their evil delight.

"You need to learn your lesson, queer," Greg shouted.

All his friends approved, chanting "yeah" and "queer" and laughing hysterically as they kicked Hunter everywhere they could.

"Wow, you're all so eloquent," Hunter managed between hard breaths. "I bet you don't even know what that means, huh?" he laughed.

In the back of his mind, he knew it was stupid to taunt these beasts further, but he couldn't help himself. Their narrow-mindedness stepped on his nerves.

As the blows kept on flying in his direction, Hunter did his best to fight back, but he was soon overpowered by their sheer strength in numbers. He simply couldn't win against four jocks, so he let them kick him and just did his best to keep them from kicking his vital organs.

After long minutes that felt like hours, the jerks stopped. It wasn't so entertaining when Hunter was nonresponsive.

"This fag is no fun," one of Greg's pals commented.

Greg insisted they keep going, but after kicking Hunter a couple more times, they decided to go have some beer instead, to Hunter's utmost relief. He held his breath until he clearly heard them leave and, only then, did he allow himself to slump on the floor and relax.

Hunter didn't know how long he lay there. He was exhausted. The pain in his back was insufferable, and nausea rose up in his throat. Not even his broken leg had hurt so damn much. He heard the doorbell ringing endlessly, but the house was dead silent. The jocks were long gone. All he could think was how much he wanted Matty with him right then. Matt would call him an idiot, for sure. Hunter chuckled imagining the scene. Jesus, even trying to laugh hurt.

Despite his foggy mind, he thought he heard a phone ring. With shaky hands he searched through his pockets and produced his cell. The ringing was even more persistent as he got it out. Hunter grimaced at the loud sound and swiftly picked up without looking at the display.

"Hunt?"

"Matty," he replied, a smile spreading on his face. He instantly felt better.

"Hunt, what happened? You sound strange. Are you mad at me?"

"Nuh-huh. Why would I be mad at you?"

"Then why do you sound so strange? Where are you?"

"Ugh." Hunter felt his face heat up, but no matter how uncool he was at the moment, he couldn't lie to Matt.

"I'm at my old place. Greg and his pals kinda did a number on me."

"*What?*"

Hunter winced at the loud scream.

"Shit, Hunt, open the door for me. I've been ringing the doorbell for half an hour, didn't you hear me? Are you all right?"

"Calm down," Hunter whispered.

"Sorry. Would you open the door though?"

Hunter moaned. "I don't think I can move right now, Matty."

To prove his point, he tried to rise up but his spine protested in earnest. He fell down with a thump and cried out.

"Shit, Hunt!"

"Shush, I'm okay."

"No, you're not okay. I'm calling the police and the ambulance. Just hang in there. I'm gonna get you out."

“Matty, there’s no need,” Hunter tried to protest, but Matt cut him off, without even listening.

“Just hang in there!” he called one more time, then hung up on Hunter.

Hunter fell into a state of semiconsciousness soon after. He could hear a lot of commotion behind the closed door, then suddenly a gust of air burst into the room and dozens of voices broke the silence at once. Hunter felt himself being touched by numerous hands and lifted up and carried. He wanted to open his eyes and tell them he was fine, but was too drowsy to really care what they did to him.

9. Matt

His cell phone rang but Matt didn't pay any attention. His gaze was fixed on Hunter's sleepy face. He'd begged to be let in, lied about being a half-brother even though no one believed him and finally a kind nurse let him slip in for a few moments, making him swear not to get her in trouble. Now he was here in the waiting room, waiting for Hunter to wake up and thanking his guardian angel for having sent him to Hunter's place in time.

"What would I do if something happened to you, huh?" he cried, caressing his best friend's pale face as tears fell from his eyes, unbidden. "I'd die without you, you know that?"

Hunter didn't move a muscle; he was as rigid as a statue. At least the nurse had told Matt he was going to be okay. His spine had suffered, his kidneys too, but he would be fine. Matt just hoped they would catch Greg and his friends and lock them away for a long time, otherwise...

His cell rang again, interrupting his vindictive plans. With a sigh, he extracted it from his pocket. He was planning on turning it off, but then he saw Paul's name.

"Hi, Paul," he replied sullenly.

"I did it! I kept my promise," Paul said instead of a greeting.

"Well, hell. Good job, man," Matt said. He was truly glad Paul hadn't backed out of it, but he couldn't make himself reply with any real enthusiasm. The worry for Hunter had eaten away all his energy.

"You okay, Matt?"

Matt felt himself tear up again. "Not really. Hunter's in the hospital."

This time he couldn't stop the flood of tears.

"Shit! What happened? You're at the Municipal Hospital?"

Matt nodded, then, realizing Paul couldn't see him, he said, "Yes."

"Hang on. We'll be there soon."

Paul and Jeremy arrived shortly thereafter. They lived only two blocks away from the hospital and Matt was so relieved when he saw them that he started crying again.

The guys enveloped him in a tight, suffocating hug, and Matt let them, feeling overwhelmed, but immensely relieved to have them there.

“What happened?” Jeremy asked, after they broke their embrace.

Matt blew his nose, took a few deep breaths and recounted everything he knew.

“Fucking assholes! We need to give them a lesson,” Jeremy muttered, his hands fisted as if he was ready to punch something right at the moment.

“Calm down. We won’t solve anything like this. Let the police deal with them. The idiots were stupid enough to beat Hunter up in his own place, then lock the door behind them,” Paul said, always the smart one. Matt smiled gratefully at his friend and sat down on an empty chair.

“I’m so glad you’re here. Hunt’s parents won’t be here until tomorrow. They’re not letting me see him even if Hunt’s mom talked to the doctors. Will you guys stay with me?” he asked, hating how weak he sounded, but fearing being left alone.

“Hell, yeah, dude. Let me go get some coffee,” Jerr said.

“One for me too?” Paul asked him. Jerr smiled and patted his head, and off he went.

“You seem to be getting along as usual. It wasn’t as bad as you feared, was it?” Matt remarked.

Paul grinned and blushed at the same time. “You were right. I’ve been scared for nothing. Jerr still likes you, you know. But he also knows you and Hunter are meant for each other. I’m willing to accept that. And he’s willing to give us a chance.” Paul sighed. “I can’t help it. I’m selfish. I don’t care how he feels as long as he’s with me. I have this naïve fantasy of making him forget everyone he’s ever liked, just with the power of my love. Cheesy, huh?”

“I don’t think it’s cheesy. You’re just a guy in love.”

Matt’s thoughts went to Hunter again. He recalled how upset he’d been when Hunter had told him about his feelings and that he was gay. Had he really said that? Maybe it had all been in Matt’s head. Either way, would Matt be willing to try a relationship, knowing that Hunter could regret it or fall in love with someone else later? Would he have the same courage Paul did?

“I don’t know,” he thought out loud.

“What?” Paul asked him.

Matt shrugged, “I just don’t know what to do...”

He felt the sudden urge to drop everything and just run. The only reason he stayed was because he knew Hunter needed him now more than ever.

Matt was grateful his friends were with him, but after several hours of waiting he sent them home and waited alone. He entered Hunter’s room on tiptoes and regarded his best friend sleeping, after a second dose of pain medication. They hadn’t allowed him to see Hunter, even after Hunt’s parents talked on the phone with the hospital staff. Hunter was too tired, he needed rest, they had said. It had all seemed fair to Matt, so he’d waited patiently, hoping to be left alone so he could sneak a peek when no one else was around.

It was dark now, and Hunter’s room was empty besides the two of them. Moonlight fell on Hunter’s pale face, making him look ghostly. Matt felt like crying again at the sight.

“I miss you,” he whispered, caressing Hunter’s white cheek, then his dry lips. His face moved of its own accord until his lips touched Hunter’s. Just a shadow of a kiss.

“I love you,” he uttered, in the silence of the room, when no one but him could hear the words. “I love you so much.”

No, no matter how many times he’d told himself to give up, he would never be able to. He knew it now more than ever. He loved Hunter for life.

10. Hunter

Hunter woke up later to the sight of a white ceiling. The beeping of machines and the smell of medicine clued him on where he was.

“Hunt, you’re up.”

Hunter smiled and tilted his head toward the voice. Matt looked tired, but also relieved, judging by the sweet smile that spread across his face. The disheveled state of his hair and the dark circles beneath his eyes indicated he’d been awake for most of the night.

“Hey, you,” Hunter whispered, his voice rough. “Man, they drugged me good. I slept like a log.”

“You scared the hell out of me,” Matt complained, hitting Hunter’s chest gently.

“Sorry, buddy. Good thing you were there, though.”

“Jesus, don’t remind me! They had to tear the door down. You were lying there unconscious.”

Matty started to tear up, and Hunter shushed him, cooing to him like to a baby.

“It’s okay, Matty. I’m fine. Hey, look at me.”

Matt furiously wiped his face and looked at Hunter.

“I’m fine, see?”

“Well, maybe not that fine,” a nurse commented as she entered none-too-discreetly. “You will urinate blood for a whole week. And you’ll have trouble standing upright. But at least you’re *all* right.”

She stopped in front of the bed and looked at Matt from beneath her glasses.

“And you, mister, what are you doing here? What part of not allowed did you not get, huh?”

Matt blushed and apologized profusely, making his way to the door. With a final wave he left, closing the door behind.

“That boy really loves you. He’s cried nonstop ever since you’ve been brought in.”

Hunter blushed, "He's my best friend."

"Um-hmmm..." she said pensively, looking at Hunter the same way she'd gazed at Matt. "I wonder if best friends have a habit of... Ah, never mind."

"Never mind what? Habit of what?"

"No, no, none of it. Let's check your vitals. The doctor will be here soon, and if you behave he'll release you tomorrow."

"No, please tell me what you meant first!" Hunter gave her his winning smile that made every girl weak at the knees. "Pretty please?"

He saw a hesitant smile bloom on the nurse's wrinkled face. "Oh, all right. What I meant to say is that best friends don't have the habit of kissing their unconscious injured friends on the lips. Now, you listen to me: whatever you feel for that young man, you better treat him right. He loves you very, very much. And I would know. In the hospital, one really sees who truly loves them."

Hunter barely heard her continued discourse. All he could concentrate on was the word kiss and the word best friend put together in the same sentence. Matt had kissed him. Matt loved him, not only as his best friend, but also... But then why did he react that way when Hunter had confessed to him? Why had he been so mad?

"Ma'am, I really need to get out of here. Are you sure the doctor can't release me today?" He tried his winning smile again. The nurse tilted her head, seeming to consider it.

"I'll be really good. Plus I have my best friend who loves me very, very much to take care of me." He batted his lashes. "Please?"

"Oh, all right," she finally relented. "I'll put in a good word to the doctor for you. But only because I trust your friend will take good care of you. You'd better thank him properly," she said with a wink.

Wow, Hunter thought, *grown-up women nowadays are kinky*. He shuddered at the thought of his own mother, who was around the same age as the nurse. And then he remembered that his parents had called him yesterday when he'd first woken up. He'd been in the hospital for two days and his parents had called incessantly until the nurses snapped and told them to stop bothering the patient. He snickered at the memory, and then thought how his parents must have driven Matt insane with phone calls after that. He felt guilty. It was time

to help his parents be at ease and get them out of Matt's hair. Then he could actually see Matt because he'd missed him yesterday when he woke up. Matt had been taking lunch just then. A nurse had drugged Hunter soon after and he hadn't been able to wake up until much later.

As soon as the nurse left to visit her other patients, Hunter dialed his mother's number and waited for the ring. She picked up almost immediately, as if she'd waited with the cell in her hand. Hunter cringed at the realization that his mother probably did just that.

"Honey, are you all right? We booked a plane for this evening. We're coming as soon as possible."

"There's no need, Mom," Hunter all but yelled. The thought of his parents ruining his time alone with Matt almost made him faint again. "The doctor released me just now," he lied. "I'm actually really good."

"Honey, but Matty said you'd been beaten to a pulp. You're not lying to us, are you?"

"You know how Matty is. Of course, I'm all right. I only had superficial bruises. Really, Mom, there's no need for you to spend money on a flight. Matty can take care of me just fine."

"But..."

"Mom," he hastily interrupted. "I'm a grown-up. How can I let my own mom take care of me? Plus, there wouldn't be enough room for you at Matty's place. Where would you stay?"

"But we've booked a hotel, honey."

He was getting exasperated. Just then, probably hearing his raising voice, Matt poked his head inside. "Wait a second, mom." He motioned for Matty and covered his cell's mouthpiece.

"You made this mess, you fix it. I don't want my parents coming here, Matty, please!" Puppy eyes. They always did the trick.

Matt sighed and took the cell from him. "Mrs. Reed, Matt here."

Hunter's mother soon launched into another speech that Hunter couldn't hear from where he was. Matt kept nodding and answering monosyllabically.

"Well, you see, Hunter is actually less injured than I thought. I was too shocked when I called you yesterday," he managed to eventually mutter.

Hunter grinned and nodded approvingly.

“I know, Mrs. Reed. You know how much I care about Hunter. He’s in good hands. I’m sure Hunter would feel really guilty if you had to fly all the way here and spend money on hotels and tickets back home.”

Oh the guilt card. Brilliant, Matty! Hunter inwardly cheered.

“Um-hm. You know how he is. He’ll worry about you spending money and about your flight being safe. Maybe it’s not the best idea to come right now. We’ll come visit for the holidays instead. It’s not too long until then.”

Hunter’s mom talked again, but her voice sounded weaker. Hunter knew Matt had won the argument.

“I promise I’ll make him call you daily. And I’ll cook him healthy food. Okay, Mrs. Reed, take care.”

Hunter took the phone back and said goodbye to his mother after she reluctantly informed him that Matt convinced her not to come.

“Don’t ever, ever make me do that again!” Matt threatened when Hunter’s cell was safely back on the little hospital nightstand.

Hunter grinned. “Come on, you were always the best liar when I did something stupid. You got us out of being grounded at least a hundred times. This is nothing new.”

“The hell it’s not, Hunt. You almost died!”

Matt started crying again. “Oh, you little crybaby,” Hunter gently admonished.

“Do you know how scared I was? Imagine how your parents feel. Jesus, I feel so bad now.”

“Don’t. You know if Mom came, she’d worry over me so much I’d get mentally sick because of her. Come on, Matty, don’t be mad. I know you’ll take much better care of me than Mom would anyway.” He winked and gave Matt a leering grin.

“What’s with that face?” Matt asked, his tears subdued, and his tone indifferent.

“What? What face?”

Matt cringed. “Never mind.”

Hunter smiled knowingly but didn't reply. They spent the next few minutes in silence, until the nurse came back and shooed Matt off again. Then the doctor appeared and checked him out, giving him a full diagnosis. Things indeed weren't too bad, but he wouldn't be able to walk from the pain in his kidneys. He would get released in the evening if no further problems arose, much to Hunter's relief.

The surprise came a couple of hours later, when two police officers showed up in his room. They informed him they'd caught Greg and his pals almost immediately after the ambulance had picked Hunter up, due to the information provided by some helpful neighbors who'd noticed the noisy gang enter a bar nearby. They were happily celebrating when the police found them. Greg's friends hadn't needed a lot of convincing to betray their pal as the instigator, and they were arrested immediately. At least Hunter now had the entire apartment to himself, though the thought of going back there was beyond nauseating. He filled in a document to formally press charges against Greg and his loyal friends and immediately felt a whole lot better.

"Ready to go?" Matt asked a few minutes after the policemen had gone.

"Really?" Hunter exclaimed.

"Yes, Mr. Reed, really," the doctor, who had entered behind Matt, replied with sarcasm. "You're free to go. Get out of here and may I never see you again."

Hunter grinned. "Amen to that, sir."

"I got a surprise for you," Matt said after they climbed inside the taxi, none-too-gracefully, thanks to Hunter's numerous injuries.

"What is it?" Hunter knew what kind of surprise he'd want: a naked Matty kissing every single bruise on his body, but he contained the moan that threatened to escape his throat, fueled by the images that flooded his mind.

"Paul and Jerr were kind enough to pick our things up from both our former places and they took them to our new apartment. They cleaned everything up for us."

"New place?" Hunter frowned. "Oh, right. Wow, with so many things going on, I had almost forgotten."

Matt grinned. "Well, now you remember. We have a new place. Completely new and usable and free of any issues. The guys were so in love with it they

immediately started practicing our songs there. They filmed themselves and sent me the video before they made themselves scarce.”

Matt took his cell out and showed Hunter the clip. Paul and Jerr were fooling around with their instruments in the middle of their new living room. “Nice home, guys!” Paul called as he was banging on his drums. Jerr’s face appeared on the screen. He made his way to Paul and put an arm around his friend’s shoulder. “Get well soon, Hunter!” he called, then made a kissy face before the video went dead.

Hunter was truly touched that they’d thought about him. Even Jeremy, with whom he had a bit of bad blood, so to speak.

“They’re good people.”

“Yes, they are,” Matt agreed.

“So, we’re going to our new place now, huh?”

“Yup.”

Hunter grinned and settled his weight against Matt’s body. “I like that.”

“I like that too,” Matt whispered. Hunter could hear the smile in his voice.

11. Matt

“Wow, they did a great job!” Matt whistled after they entered. When Matt had told them he and Hunter had rented a place together, the guys had been very enthusiastic. They offered to get it ready for them, but he didn't expect to find everything shining, including the floors. They really had done a lot of work.

Hunter hooted and hugged Matt tight from behind. “I think I need to change my opinion of Jeremy.”

“Huh? Why? Did you not like Jeremy?” Matt asked turning around to face Hunter.

His best friend blushed, lowering his head. “I thought you two were going out together. You're not, right?” He quickly asked Matt with an expectant, hopeful expression on his blushing face.

“Ummm... no? Whatever gave you that idea?”

Hunter shrugged. “Besides the way he looks at you sometimes... the fact that he kissed you the night of the gala?”

“Oh... well, that was... We're not going out.”

Hunter instantly grinned and stood taller. “Cool.” As if realizing he'd made a mistake, he quickly corrected himself. “I mean, not cool, if you like him.” It was supposed to be a statement, but it ended up sounding more like a question.

Matt frowned. “Does it matter?”

“Well, no,” Hunter replied, but the frown on his face and the serious tone in his voice said otherwise.

“I guess we have a lot to talk about, huh?” Matt asked.

Hunter smiled sadly. “I guess we do.”

Matt helped Hunter settle on their new faux leather couch, then took a seat beside him and regarded Hunter seriously.

“So, you're gay. No doubt about it?”

Hunter nodded.

“Okay. So you think you like me?”

Hunter jolted and looked at Matt with wide eyes. "I know I like you, Matty."

"More than a best friend."

"Well, yes."

"And you know that because...?" Matt pressed.

Hunter huffed and rolled his eyes. "Do I really need to spell it out for you? You know... one knows."

"Hunter, are you sure you're not just confused? I mean, you're just discovering you're gay. You can't know for sure you like someone."

Hunter gave him a pointed look. "You want to know how I know, Matty?"

Matt opened his mouth to speak, but Hunter cut him off. "I know because every time you're not with me, all I can think about is you. And when you're with me, my heart beats like crazy and I feel butterflies in my stomach. When you smile, the world stops spinning and you are all I see."

Matt gasped. His chest constricted at the realization that he was finally hearing what he'd waited for almost all his life. Well, okay, a little less cheesy would have been better, but that was Hunter for you. Now he couldn't help wondering how he'd never seen how gay Hunt was before. It made him want to snicker, but he held it in, 'cause Hunter cupped his face and he looked so deep into Matt's eyes that all laughter died off in his throat, replaced by a sudden knot of emotions.

"I want you. Only you. I don't need more time to figure it out. I know what I want. I'm not a kid."

Matt nodded and damn if his eyes didn't get a bit teary.

"Do you..." Hunter started, but for some reason, stopped.

But Matt nodded anyway and put his arms around Hunter's neck. "I do," he nodded. "Only you. Always."

Hunter exhaled loudly and smiled. "Good."

Then his hand cupped the back of Matt's head and all thoughts ran away as their lips met. Matt moaned in delight. All his senses shut down. The only thing he could feel was Hunter's luscious lips molded to his own, his tongue probing Matt's mouth with passionate strokes that sent shivers of pleasure straight to Matt's groin. Hunter's mouth tasted like coffee and pancakes, a taste so

uniquely him that Matt couldn't resist licking Hunter's lips again and again. Oh, how often he'd fantasized of tasting on Hunt's lips those infuriating pancakes Hunt loved so much. He'd wondered countless times how that maple syrup would feel combined with Hunt's own taste. And now he knew. It was better than anything Matt had ever tasted. He could get addicted to that. Easily.

When they stopped kissing, both breathless with lust, Hunter gently caressed Matt's face, and blushing he said, "I don't know anything about being with a guy. You'll have to teach me."

It was Matt's turn to blush. "I'm afraid I don't know much myself. I've never... been with a guy."

Hunter's eyes widened, then softened as he smiled. "We'll learn everything together then."

Matt nodded and resumed kissing Hunter. He couldn't get enough of him.

After they finally broke apart, he sighed contentedly and smiled at Hunt, still feeling awed by what was going on. "I'm so glad you said something. I was ready to give up on you," he admitted. It was all beginning to sink in. Everything that brought them together was starting to make sense. All those little clues that Hunter wasn't as straight as he'd thought were starting to come together like jigsaw puzzle pieces. And he hadn't been just blind. He'd been one step away from turning his back to finally having Hunter all to himself, to *this*.

Hunter buried his face in the crook of Matt's neck, inhaling his smell, and Matt almost purred in delight. They sat silently for a few seconds, getting drunk with happiness, and then Hunter gasped. "The song..."

Matt scoffed and tugged on Hunter's hair. "The song." He nodded, smiling. He'd known Hunter would figure it out eventually.

"I've been so blind," Hunter whispered, raising his head and meeting Matt's gentle gaze.

"You weren't the only one," Matt said, laughing. He brought Hunter's face closer to kiss him again. And again. Until they forgot everything else besides each other. In that instant, there was only them—only Matt and only Hunter. As it was meant to be from the start.

The End

Author Bio

Shayla made her debut in the writing world during elementary school with a heart-breaking story about how her grandma's chicks died from an unknown disease. It was published in the school newspaper, spurring a significant amount of pitiful looks directed her way. Being a stubborn Aquarius, she kept on striving, publishing cheesy love poetry, an endeavor that thankfully proved to be far more successful. Her writing life changed dramatically when she read her first yaoi manga and discovered her real calling. Imagining guys together has become her favorite pastime. Aside from writing, daydreaming about men and devouring any M/M book she can get her hands on, she also loves manga, kpop, jrock, classical music, crafts and art. An earnest romantic, she's always been convinced there's a soulmate out there, searching for her. It appears he's been lost. Maybe word hasn't gotten to him that cars are faster than white horses. In case you've seen a prince on a white horse (though a sports car would be preferable), Shayla would very much appreciate if you let her know.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Blog](#)

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THE OTHER SIDE

By MA Jackson

Photo Description

A cropped shot focusing in on two men with their hands clasped together.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Could you please write a story about two young high school boys who fall in love. Only one of the boys is out to the whole school and the other is just figuring out who he really is. I would love the story to be based on the song "The Other Side" by Jason Derulo. [Here are the lyrics.](#)

Thank you for the consideration!!

Tracy

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: high school, barely legal, coming out, first time, public sex, mechanic, family wedding, military family

Word Count: 15,207

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Author's Note

To the M/M romance group mods, CC, Elaine, Astrid and everyone else that helped to make this the best story it could be; my heartfelt thanks and gratitude are given freely and without end. Tracy, I hope you truly enjoy the tale I've spun for you.

THE OTHER SIDE

By MA Jackson

Chapter One

“Senior year,” Cameron McDonald began as he looked out over the sea of faces staring back at him. He grinned as a cheer rose up. He listened to the noise, basking in the approval and wildness. The energy from his teenage peers and a little bit of the invincible pride that came from being eighteen shined from him, just as much as the health and vitality did.

“Class of 2014!”

The applause was deafening. It was amazing what popularity and an elected office could do to an ego. Cam knew it wasn't all for him, but he was a popular kid, in spite of being out and proud in a small southern town in Texas.

Cameron held up his hands, and the noise volume rose instead of falling. His mouth curled into an even wider smile, showing off the results of his parents' hard-earned money in a straight and even smile sans the braces he'd worn for nearly all his high school years. He searched the crowd, finding the one person he knew would be paying attention to him instead of screaming like a fool.

Nathaniel Brown was shaking his head, his green eyes amused by Cameron's antics. He nodded, giving Cameron a short bow and conceding the bet Cameron had forced on him. Nate owed him now, and Cam was going to collect. He wasn't certain what assorted tortures he was going to level on his best friend, but it would be epic. Nate might have the brains, but Cam had intuition on his side.

Nathaniel had written his speech for him, adding in the information bits that were needed to get across, but Cameron had skimmed it and discarded most of the speech, stating that this close to the end of the year, no one would sit still long enough to listen. He'd plucked out the most pressing and first-to-happen details and improvised. It was what he did best, after all.

“Listen up, seniors!”

His classmates roared their approval, and Nathaniel waved a hand at Cameron.

Cameron threw back his head and laughed, the sound echoing through the microphone and drowning out the yells. He watched as Principal Ryan Mays

just shook his head, and Cameron decided he'd better wrap things up before the rest of the teachers decided the shenanigans had gone on long enough.

"Settle down," Cameron began again. "It sure would suck to end the year we ruled the school in detention." He cut his eyes over to Mays once more, and Mays arched a brow at him. He winked at Mays, and the man just shook his head again, so Cameron continued, waiting for his fellow students to quiet down enough to actually hear what he had to say.

"As senior class president, I was going to speak about going out into the world and making something of ourselves..."

The boos and hisses sounded out, and Cameron plowed through them.

"However, since I've had a bad case of Senioritis all year, we'll save it for the Baccalaureate and Commencement."

Whistles and shouts nearly drowned him out, but with his eyes on Nathaniel, who nodded at him encouragingly, Cameron continued.

"Principal Mays wants me to remind you all that the pre-events for Project Graduation begin next week. As you know, we'll be on lockdown inside the school after graduation that night. This offers a safe, sane and sober way to celebrate graduation. There's still a few chaperone positions open, so have any inquiring family members ready to donate to the cause, email Counselor Blaine."

Blaine stepped forward, waving a hand at the students, and received a cheer.

Cameron grinned at her then turned back to his audience. "The theme, Take a Gamble on Your Future, has been given a green light. The PG committee has arranged for several activities including movies, card and video game room and putt-putt golf in the corridors, as well as making certain the pool is ready for our use. Also, our breakfast will be catered in by McDonald's."

His classmates roared their approval then quieted down to listen to the rest of his spiel on the activities for Project Graduation.

"Senior fundraiser picnic for next year's graduates will be the weekend before graduation, weather permitting. We'll get an email out to all of you if something delays it, but check the Facebook page for updates, as well. Last but not least, make certain you have all submitted your contact numbers, email addresses, social media information, and student ID numbers to be included on the alumni newsletter."

He paused for effect and got another cheer. "And I think that almost concludes this senior meeting, except for one last thing..." Cameron grinned at his audience, and the noise began to rise once more.

Nathaniel shook his head, grinned that crooked smile at him, and clapped his hands together softly.

"We're going all the way!" Cameron let out a whooping sound that was echoed by several classmates. He left his spot by the podium, pumping his fist to the chant echoing in the auditorium before grinning at Nathaniel. Nathaniel's eyes widened, and he looked horrified for a second before he covered his face as Cameron cackled and leapt from the auditorium stage. He landed, feet first, in the orchestra pit to hoots and shouts and then climbed out using the railings.

Cameron could hear stamping feet and glanced back over his shoulder to see Mays, Assistant Principal Shane Black, and Senior Counselor Patsy Blaine charging the stage where he'd just been. Mays and Black looked astounded, but Blaine was shaking her head and finger at him, a huge grin on her face.

Cameron winked at her, and she laughed before turning to Black and Mays.

Several hands reached up and pulled Cameron down from the railings as the students milled about after the meeting. Cameron shouted and slapped backs, hugged friends and searched the sea of people for Nathaniel.

The soft green eyes he looked for could not be found, and Cameron pushed his way out of the crowd, looking for his longtime best friend. Nathaniel was quiet and didn't like crowds, and Cameron was certain he'd find his friend outside the room, waiting for Cameron. Nate always waited for Cam. He was reliable as the sun setting and always on time. Cam counted on Nate to be predictable, only Nate had been acting odd lately, and Cam was determined to find out what was happening with him.

The summer was coming on fast, and while Cameron had always been secure in himself, Nathaniel wasn't. However, it was do or die time now, and Cameron wasn't certain he'd survive if Nate went off to college not knowing how he, Cameron, really felt.

The auditorium doors fell shut behind him, and Cameron stood out in the hallway, looking around for Nathaniel. Class was still in session for the rest of the school, or he'd have raised his voice to shout for Nate, because Nate was nowhere to be found. He had a bad habit of disappearing like that. It had started their sophomore year, when Cam had embarrassed Nate during one of their classes.

He'd spent a month in detention for shouting in the hallways, and Nate had made certain Cam had learned the lesson well by refusing to pick him up afterwards. It brought a smile to his face to remember the incident as he walked down the hallway.

Cam had done something stupid, he couldn't even recall what it was now, but it had upset Nate. All he'd wanted to do was apologize, but Nate had taken off like a shot once the bell rang. Even with the noise of changing classes and hundreds of students in the hallways, Cameron's voice had rang out, Nate's name clear as a bell over the din.

To this day, Cameron still remembered the way Nate had cringed and shoved his way through the hall of students, trying to escape his crazy friend. Cam had continued to holler and laugh, projecting Nate's name until Assistant Principal Black parted the wave of kids and pointed at him.

"Go back to where you started and make the return trip silently. We'll speak about detention when you get back here."

Cam had sighed and turned around, heading back to the Fine Arts corridor where he found Nate waiting for him.

Nate had glared at him. "You are so walking home if you get detention this afternoon. I have to work."

Cameron nodded. "I'm sorry."

Nate chuckled. "Well, I knew that, asshole. Now, when are you going to apologize?"

Cameron grinned. "Shit-for-brains." He leaned in and kissed Nate's forehead. "I apologize to my best bro for embarrassing him."

Nate's face, red as a beet, had been warm under his lips, and Cameron knew he could unsettle Nate even further by kissing him again but hadn't just then because he really had been sorry about teasing Nate. He recalled what that teasing had been about now as he walked the same route he had then, and Cameron continued to search for Nate.

"Carolee is a bitch for dropping you like that just before the Military Ball. I would never do something like that. We can go together 'cause, you know, I won't have a date either."

"Don't, Cam. Just don't go there again. Even in jest," Nate sighed. "It's bad enough you are the poster boy for gay pride around here and popular to boot, I don't need a pity date."

Cam draped an arm over Nate's shoulders and steered him out of the hall. "Look, ditch work tonight and we'll game. Forget about the Brainless Boob Wonder, we'll find someone else to take you."

Nate pulled out from under Cam's arm and shook his head. "No, thanks though. I can't not show up. My uncle is expecting me."

Cam sighed. "Fine. You're coming over tomorrow, and we are talking. All afternoon. Danny is home on furlough, and he'll sneak us beer."

Nate laughed. "I'll think about it."

Cameron made his way outside to the front of the school, still hearing Nate's laughter in his mind, and then the deep sound rolled across the quad. Cam closed his eyes and listened to the laughter, then turned toward the sound. It called him like a guided missile, and Cam found Nate standing in a huddle with one of Cam's older brothers, Danny, and Laurie, Danny's fiancée.

Nate was laughing, his hand on his stomach as Danny chuckled, too. Laurie's head shook at whatever antics the two guys had been up to. Cameron was struck by the late spring sunshine when it glanced off Nate's blond hair. The normally platinum strands had darkened, just like they did every winter, and shone honey-colored right now in the Texas super-sun. He knew, though, it wouldn't be long before the silver white was back, looking even brighter against Nate's golden and tanned skin.

Nate turned and looked at him, and Cameron sucked in a breath. Nate's green eyes were hard and hot. He looked upset, but there was also something else underneath the anger. Cam filed the expression, contemplating and adding it to the list of other odd things involving Nate, until Nate slugged him.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"You crazy fool! You could have broken your leg."

Cameron chuckled. "Nah, been practicing bouncing off the trampoline at home." He nudged Nate, who glared at him then relaxed but not before giving a parting shot.

"I wouldn't have taken you to the ER, so it's a damned good thing Danny showed up."

Cam turned and looked right at Nate. "Yes, you would have." Nate's cheeks filled with color, only this time it wasn't anger, of that Cam was certain. "You *lurve* me too much not to."

Nate looked away from Cam, his blush rising to tint his ears pink, and *what the hell was that all about*, Cam wondered before Nate muttered, "Asshole."

Cam chuckled, then he deemed his brother worthy of acknowledgement. He inclined his head to Danny. "What are you doing, bonehead?"

"Had to make certain you didn't end up in detention and reassure Nate here, there was someone to bail your ass out."

"Jerks. I haven't been in detention in forever." Cameron slid in next to Laurie and hugged her, pressing a kiss to her cheek. Her chocolate-colored eyes danced as she grinned at him. "At least Laurie still loves me."

"Jeez, Cam." Laurie giggled at him and sighed. "You and Nate, seniors already. I remember when you started school. Gods, I'm old."

"Watch it now; you aren't too much older than we are." Nate chuckled. "Well... except Danny."

Nate ducked the swing of Danny's arm, grinning, finally, at Cam, and Cam was glad to see it. Nate's odd behavior was beginning to worry him. It was and wasn't like him. Most of the time, he was serious and stoic, but lately, Nate had been moody and secretive as well; something was going on with him, and if he didn't talk soon, Cam was going to harass him until he spilled his guts.

That Danny had seemed to put Nate at ease was the only reason Cam hadn't antagonized him more. Nate had always relaxed around his family, and it was good to see him do so now. All five of his brothers and his parents loved Nate like he was one of their own. He'd been around long enough that he could have been a sibling, and Cam was going to make certain he was going to stay that way. Nate might never return his attraction, but he was Cam's regardless. They were going to be just like Danny and Laurie; maybe not lovers but inseparable all the same.

Laurie laid a kiss on Cam's cheek, and he wrapped his arms around her, squeezing her gently. Laurie, the same age as Danny, was six years older than he and Nate and she had been part of their family as long as Nate had. "When are you gonna leave this jerk and come marry me?"

"Back off my woman!" Danny pretended offense and grabbed Laurie, dragging her closer to him as her light laugh tinkled out.

"As soon as you jump back across the fence, Cam, darling." Laurie waved at Cam as she snuggled into Danny's side.

“Never gonna happen. We like the same things.” Cam shook his head and moved over to Nate’s side, leaning against the hood of Nate’s car. He smirked at Nate, nudging him with his shoulder, and then turned back to Danny. “So, really, why are you here?”

Danny reached into his back pocket and pulled out two envelopes, passing them to Cameron. “Your life pics for the vid, and the tickets Mom and Dad promised to donate for Project Graduation.”

Cameron tucked the thick bundle of lottery tickets under his arm and withdrew the shots for the senior video. He grinned down at his four-year old self, dressed in nothing but a pair of shorts and a hunter’s orange ball cap. Nate stood next to him, an oversized hunter’s vest covering his tiny frame. Their dads stood behind them, the little .22 squirrel guns Cam and Nate had just taken out last week in the adults’ hands.

The next shot was of him and Nate, squeezed into a photo booth with Danny and Laurie. Cam recalled the shot with fondness. He’d been twelve when Danny had left for the Marine Corps, and his entire family had spent the weekend on Galveston Island, bringing Nate and Laurie along for the ride. The photo strip showed all of them making different faces as the camera flashed.

The last one was of Cameron and Danny, taken just a few days ago, both dressed in tuxes for the wedding. That night he’d missed Nate something fierce as he, Danny, and his other four brothers: Derrick, Stuart, Kelley, and Eric had all been fitted for their tuxes. Danny and Laurie were to be wed just after graduation. Nate hadn’t been able to make the fitting because he’d had to work, but he’d promised both Cam and Danny he’d be at the wedding.

The progression of the pictures showed just how much Cam had changed, and how long Nate had been part of his life. Yes, it was going to kill him when Nate left to go to A&M, and Cam still wasn’t certain where he wanted to end up. He tilted the photos, so Nate could look at them fully and was more than curious when he heard Nate’s intake of air as he looked at the last picture. Nate turned to him.

Nate’s eyes were wide, and he met Cam’s gaze, something unreadable in the fathomless green. “When was that taken?”

“Friday night at the fittings. Everyone was there.”

Nate looked away from Cam and focused on Danny. “Sorry I missed it.”

Danny shrugged. “You’ll be there on the date, and that’s all that counts.” He dug out a second set of envelopes and passed them to Nate. “Your mom sent

these for you. You should have heard them cackling like hens, then clinging to one another as they cried while they sat at the computer. I am so glad Derrick put all of the family photos on digital media.”

Nate's face flushed with color, and he held out the tickets to Cam. He took the tickets, angling his head to see which photos Nate's mother, Diane, had chosen as Nate pried open his photo envelope. The first shot was of Nate and Cam, a recent one. Both boys were laid out side by side in a hammock, grins a mile wide on their faces.

Cam laughed. “I remember that! It was just this last summer when we had a cookout before school started.”

Laurie leaned in, looked at the picture and nodded. “I remember that, too. Stuart surprised us all because he burst into the house, shouting that Kristen had gone into labor.”

Nate grinned at Laurie. “Yeah! We all trudged to the hospital to see her, and she'd already had the baby.” He turned and glanced at Cam, that odd expression on his face again. Then he grinned. Cam was hard-pressed to hold back a gasp at the punch to his gut which came from the impact of Nate's smile.

“She let us help name the baby.”

“Jason Allen McDonald,” Cam and Nate said together.

“I think it was cool that she made me an honorary uncle,” Nate offered and flipped to the next shot. He frowned, then looked up at Danny. “Really, she wants this one in the video?”

Danny nodded. “That one was the tears I told you about. Your mom insisted in spite of the fact that the reporter ambushed y'all.”

Cam looked down at the image then wrapped an arm around Nate's shoulder. In the picture, Nate and Cam stood together, both dressed in suits, a solemn look on their faces. Behind them, Diane, looking as though she was sleep deprived and dead on her feet, was tucked between Cam's parents, Brenda and Sterling. All five of them stood outside of a church, the day around them overcast and cloudy. In the top left corner of the image was a smaller inset picture of Nate's father in his uniform.

A pang of sorrow rolled through Cam's gut as he recalled the day with perfect clarity. It was the day they had buried Nate's father, and they had been

thirteen. A local paper had sent out a reporter to the funeral because Nate's dad, Forrest, had been a firefighter. His entire squad had been present, and the funeral was heavily attended. The paper had covered the services for local color and sneaked in a camera. His parents had been livid at the image when it had appeared in the paper, and Diane had been too lost in her own grief at that particular moment to do anything other than try to make it through the event. Cam hadn't realized the shot had been saved anyplace else other than the paper archives.

"He would have been proud of you both, Nate," Danny said softly.

Cam hummed, remembering the man that could have been his second father, and wondered if Forrest Brown really would have been proud of him and Nate, knowing what he'd known about Cam, and that Cam had fallen for Nate. Cam had gone to Forrest before his own parents when he realized that boys were his first choice.

After grilling him for several minutes, Forrest had finally wrapped Cam in his arms and told him he'd be honored to stand next to Cam when he talked to his mom and dad. A month later, Forrest was gone, the victim of a drunk driver, and Diane had been in the hospital. They'd just dropped Nate off for a sleepover and were going away for the weekend for their anniversary when the accident happened.

He shook off the memory and squeezed Nate to him, surprised when Nate's arm circled his waist, and his fingers dug into his side, holding on to Cam just as tightly. Cam looked at Nate and smiled to find him watching Cam's face.

"Bonehead's right. Forrest would have been proud of us both."

Nate grinned as Cam pressed a kiss to his forehead and closed his eyes. *Good man*, Cam thought. Nate didn't even blush any longer when Cam did things like that. It had only taken a year for Nate to get used to the fact that Cam tended to be touchy-feely affectionate with people he felt safe with. This was why his current bout of blushing had thrown Cam for a loop. Best to get them back on an even keel. Cam licked Nate's cheek for good measure, and Nate sputtered, pulling away and howling as he wiped his face.

"Jeez, Cameron! Keep that thing in your mouth; I *know* where it's been."

Cam wiggled his eyebrows at Nate. "I've never had a complaint yet, *Nathaniel*."

“You two get a room... later.” Danny rolled his eyes. “Hurry up and look at the last picture. Some of us have to be somewhere soon.”

Cam jerked Nate to his side and waved a hand at Danny. “Go on. I’ll catch a ride with Nate.”

“Are you certain, Nate?” Danny asked.

Nate nodded, and Cam grinned. “Of course he is. He sits back and actually lets me drive.”

Laurie giggled. “Oh, Nate. I am so sorry. Should I have some motion sickness tabs ready for when you drop Cam off later?”

Nate laughed. “Thanks, Laurie. I might need them.”

“Hey! It’s not my fault that the dog ran out into the road.”

Danny and Nate snorted.

“No, but it was your fault when you chose the ditch over running down the dog, breaking the back axle on your truck in the process. You could have just stopped instead of jerking the wheel. Your fault because it forced the rest of the family to take up being your chauffeur while Mom and Dad debate on the merits of replacing your truck.” Danny teased Cam and reached out to ruffle Cam’s hair. Nate shoved him toward Danny.

Cam backed away, ducking Danny’s fingers. He stuck his tongue out at both of them and reached out, jerking the pictures out of Nate’s hand. He turned to the last photo and sighed. “The moms did good.” He showed them the last one.

Nate and Cam, six years old, stood hand in hand in front of the elementary school. Nate’s face was screwed up as if he were going to cry, but Cam stared back at the photographer, a huge smile on his face.

Nate grinned. “Yeah, they chose well.”

Chapter Two

Nate wrestled with the Bluetooth headset in his ear, snarling a greeting when it beeped repeatedly and finally managed to get it on to receive the call. "I am trying to drive, so make it quick."

Cam's laugh was tinny in his ear, but Nate smiled. "Please tell me your mom isn't having another crisis, or the wedding is off."

"No, she's fine, and the wedding is still on," Cam answered. "Laurie is the one freaking out now. Apparently, Sheila decided it would be a good idea to accept a last minute assignment before the wedding. They went to a water park yesterday, to take pictures of a company picnic. Well, Laurie got burnt despite her cover-up, and Sheila slipped on some wet cement, fell, and dropped her camera into the wave pool..." Cam paused.

"And?" Nate asked, wondering if maybe Laurie had gone in after her and hoped neither woman was hurt. Laurie's dad, Darryl Gossage, owned Perfect Memories. Laurie worked with him, and Sheila did, too. She was also one of Laurie's bridesmaids along with Cam's sisters-in-law and Laurie's little sister Amanda. The wedding party was going to be fairly large, and if all the mishaps were anything to go by, Nate hoped everything was going to go well tomorrow night. All Diane had said, when he'd mentioned the problems before, was if the rehearsals are filled with strife, the marriage would be a good one.

Nate decided women weren't meant to be understood, and then he'd tuned her out since she'd started talking about his dad and their nuptials. He was having a hard enough time wondering how he could get the image of Cam in his tux out of his mind, without hearing about how ALL men looked good in formal wear.

Not to mention, that some of his other classmates, both female *and* male, had also started starring in some of his daydreams. It was downright embarrassing, though, that Cam was featured more than anyone. Take the senior shots for instance.

Perfect Moments had taken the senior shots, and Laurie and her girlfriends had cooed over how attractive he and Cam had looked. Nate thought they looked a little foolish, walking around in white tux jackets and red clip-on ties paired with summer shorts. He couldn't get past the fact that Cam and several

other guys had looked quite interesting as they changed clothes. He'd constantly had to fight off confused arousal the entire time the shoot ran.

Laurie had helped wrap the girls in drapes of bright red material that only covered their chests. The end result appeared like half a strapless formal gown, and they had looked even odder in full face makeup and updos, trailing long bits of cloth behind them as they walked around in flip-flops. Long legs, bouncing cleavage, and strong bodies everywhere. It was a wonder anyone graduated from high school with all the changes going on.

His hormones had pulled him in numerous directions that day while he watched, keeping back on the sidelines while Cam and his friends joked. The girls crowded together in an impenetrable cluster of giggles and squeals and tears. Not the place for a guy if he wanted to keep his masculinity in check. It had been a little piece of hell, and Nate had only ended up more confused. The shots, though, turned out great, and the school colors, scarlet and white, were brilliant in the digital images up on Perfect Moments' web site.

"You still there?"

"Yeah," Nate answered, shaking off the memories. He drove through the light at the intersection then made the turn to find the little side street that ran parallel to the highway. "So, what happened?"

"Well..."

Exasperated, Nate sighed. "Dude, just tell me. Please say Laurie is all right. Forget it; I'm pulling into the parking lot now. I see her through the window."

"Right," Cam said then rushed on. "She's gonna ask you to walk down the aisle with me because Shelia broke her leg when she fell in and is still in the hospital. Don't tell her I told you. Bye!"

Stunned, Nate parked his car then watched as Cam exited Brenda's SUV, tucking his phone into his pocket. He jogged across the parking lot, opened Nate's driver's side door and grinned at him. "Wanna share a brownie sundae with me?"

Nate glared at him as he pulled the headset from his ear and tossed it into the console between the seats. "No, I want my own damned ice cream. And you're buying it this time since I have to act surprised when Laurie springs the question on me."

Cam chuckled. "All right. What do you want?" He stepped back and allowed Nate to leave the car.

Nate stood up, moved in toe to toe with Cam and looked him right in the eye. He ordered his favorite flavor without even thinking about it. Something that Cam always teased him about, though he'd agreed the raspberry and dark chocolate was, indeed, perfect together. "Love Potion #31. The two scoop sundae, both scoops the same and with extra cherries."

Cam repeated the order with him and then licked his lips, his eyes darting over Nate's face. Nate watched him and followed the path of Cam's tongue along his mouth, waiting to see if Cam was going to say or do something to him. He'd been licked more the past week than he ever had before, and it was doing something to him on the inside. He was tempted to return the assault just to see what Cam would do.

The thought of tasting Cam's skin, to see if his cologne added bitterness to his flavor like perfume did on a woman, made his heart pound, and his body throb. Something must have showed on his face because Cam suddenly grinned and nodded. "All right. Go in and sit, and I'll get our orders. Laurie and Mom are in—"

"I saw Laurie," Nate reminded Cam before he gave into the temptation to lick his friend.

Nate tugged open the door to the ice cream shop and stepped into the air conditioned room, sighing in the coolness as Cam brushed against his back then moved over to the counter. The scent of Cam's cologne and clean sweat drifted back to him, and he breathed it in. Nate watched Cam's backside, admiring the way his ass moved under the shorts, and he noticed how much darker Cam appeared. He must have gone to the water park with Laurie, too.

Nate envied him that little vacation as he'd been stuck working in his uncle's garage. Hot, over a hundred degrees in the summer heat, in the tin-sided building as they wrestled with a transmission on an old Volkswagen van. God, he'd been miserable, but the tip the woman had given him was generous, and he'd slipped most of the money away into his college savings account. He shook his head and focused on Cam once more.

Yeah, a day spent in the sun and water with a half-naked Cam. He liked the thought of that, even though he felt his face burn. He shook it off as Cam talked with Devon Maybree from their JROTC class.

She glanced over Cam's shoulder at Nate and smiled, giving him a shy little wave. Nate wriggled his fingers at her and walked slowly to the table Brenda and Laurie were sitting at, his eyes half on his path and half on Cam.

Cam's shaggy, brown hair was tousled like he'd just gotten out of bed, and the sun was already beginning to bleach reddish highlights into the chestnut locks. Nate could see where his sunglasses had been with the white patch across the bridge of Cam's nose and the side of his face, disappearing at his temples where the arms had hooked over his ears. The lighter rings of skin under his browned arms showed through the holes in the A-shirt tucked into khaki cargo shorts. Tan lines marked his ankles where his sockless feet were strapped into the ugly sandal Crocs he wore.

Cam looked handsomely male and attractive to Nate in a familiar way, and never in a million years would he ever consider his best bud as a partner. Nate's blood ran south with that thought, and again he wondered where it had come from. Just like the other myriad of thoughts he'd been having for a while now, this one had snuck in out of nowhere and kicked him in the balls. He could only imagine what Cam would say to that. He didn't want to contemplate it for too long because he never knew what path his mind would take.

All he knew was that he was attracted to Cam and was having a bit of trouble adjusting to that. Because Cam was his friend, and because he still thought Natalie Wilson had a primo set of breasts. Could he be *just* gay or was he bi? All the different labels were confusing and honestly, did he want to go there? What happened if he went up to Cam and said, *kiss me. I need you to use your gaydar to feel me out.* Nate was certain that statement and action would do something to them. And would their friendship sink like a lead balloon, too, if he mentioned to Cam that he'd been thinking about him in a new way? Did he even want to contemplate changing his and Cam's friendship because of a *feeling*?

His heart sped up as he thought about what Cam would do or say if he thought Nate had been teasing him about his sexuality, and he wouldn't do that. Being an ass like that was just not on. Nate sank down into the bench seat next to Brenda in a daze, his thoughts still mired in his own personal angst party.

Brenda pressed a kiss to his cheek, and Nate struggled out of his shock as he returned her greeting. "Hey, Mom Two. Laurie."

"Nate," Laurie replied then tilted her head to look at him. "You okay? You look like someone hit you with a baseball bat."

"Tired, but I'm okay. Bagged a helluva—sorry, MT—tip yesterday at the garage." He grinned as Cam sauntered over to the table and set down drinks for everyone. Nate took his time in peeling off the end paper of his straw then

carefully shot it over at Cam with a puff of air. "And I just made Cam pay for my ice cream, too."

Cam shook his head, batting at the straw paper, and instead of it floating away, he knocked it right into Laurie's Diet Coke. "Cam!"

Cam pointed at Nate. "Yell at him. It was his fault."

Brenda wrapped an arm around Nate, and Nate chuckled at the expression on Cam's face. "Shame on you, Cam. Leave my other baby alone. He's been working hard."

"Mom!"

"Yeah, Cam. Be nice to Nate for once in your life."

"Laurie!"

Nate straightened at Brenda's side. "Thanks, ladies. Knew I could count on you to protect me."

Cam narrowed his eyes at Nate. "See if I buy you ice cream anymore."

Nate gave him a smug smile. "Mom Two will share with me, but you know you'll always do what I want."

Cam rolled his eyes when Brenda nodded, and Nate turned to Laurie. Just because he was feeling vindictive, Nate said, "And yes, I'll walk down the aisle with numbskull there because it's for you."

Laurie squealed and then turned and slapped Cam's arm. "You told him before I could butter him up!"

Cam rubbed his arm, growling at Nate. "Someone's got a big mouth."

Nate waited until the waitress dropped off their treats to respond. He scooped a big spoonful of ice cream and whipped topping, then plunked a cherry down on top and offered it to Cam. "You're just gonna have to wait to get your hands all over me." He winked at Laurie then waved the spoon under Cam's nose. "Wanna share my ice cream?"

Cam's mouth twitched, curving into a sensuous smile, and he leaned forward. Curling his tongue over the top, Cam stole the cherry first, sucking it inside his cheek. He then wrapped his mouth around the spoon. His eyes shut, the heat of his breath caused a bit of fog to escape from his lips as he closed them around the spoon.

Nate's throat went dry as Cam moaned with his mouth still wrapped about the pink plastic spoon. He opened his eyes, meeting Nate's, and slowly slipped the ice cream from the spoon as Nate pulled it away.

"Holy shit," Nate breathed, completely unprepared for his reaction to Cam's antics.

Perhaps he'd been wrong about Cam not wanting to tango with him, and he wasn't certain how he felt about that, but it made his jean shorts tight to think about what Cam could do to him with that evil mouth.

"Nate," Brenda warned, then narrowed her eyes at her son. "Cam. There's no need to disturb the public peace. Both of you behave like the gentlemen I know you can be."

Cam waggled the cherry on the tip of his tongue at her then pointed the cherry at Nate before sucking it back into his mouth and chewing. He smiled as he ate the fruit. "Nate, we can be naughty in private, okay?"

"Don't threaten me, Cam," Nate drawled. "We aren't friends anymore."

Cam leaned forward, licking his lips, and offered Nate a bite of the warm brownie and vanilla ice cream from his own sundae. Nate watched the chocolate sauce run down to the underside of the spoon and moved forward, licking it away.

"That's for sure," Cam whispered and brushed his leg against Nate's when he took the bite completely from the spoon, his eyes never leaving Nate's.

Piped-in music, some classical selection Nate didn't recognize, underscored the chattering of the guests as they made their way into the church. Nate could hear laughter floating over the music and up through the large church to the Sunday school rooms where they'd been given leave to get ready. He scowled at his reflection in the mirror as he tried to fold the slip of material at his throat into something that resembled a bow. "Why in the hell do I gotta wear this stupid thing?"

Diane laughed. "Come here, baby, and I'll fix it for you. Just like your father. He could never get his ties straight either. I always had to loosely knot them before any special events we attended."

Nate grinned at his mother in the mirror instead of rolling his eyes. She was almost as emotional as Cam's mom, and both women had been using

endearments more often, the closer graduation day came. He turned and crossed the room to her, letting her tsk and fuss. Diane twisted his blue bow tie into shape then she pinned the boutonniere into place at his lapel while he tried not to fidget. "Nathaniel, be still. I don't want to stab you with the stick pin."

"I'm nervous, and I can't help it. Laurie's entire church and family is out there, and I am going to be escorting a man down the aisle. No, wait... *he's* taking me to the altar since I am technically a bridesmaid."

Diane arched a brow, and her mouth twisted as she tucked the cap on the end of the stick pin. She patted her son's chest and looked into his eyes as if studying him for a moment. The stormy, gray color began to swim as she watched him, and Nate panicked for a moment. Wedding or not, there was no way he could handle tears even if she was his mom. He stuck his tongue out at her, and she sniffled as she laughed again.

"Well, let's hope you're a bridesman, otherwise you've got the wrong clothes on, baby."

Nate rolled his eyes. "Not funny. You know what I mean."

Diane shook her head. "I don't. You act as if you are making a commitment to Cam, baby. It's just a spot to be filled. I don't understand why you are so worried. Everyone knows Cam is out."

"Yeah, everyone knows Cam is out, but people in the South aren't known for their kindness to those of us that are different."

"Are you worried about people thinking you might be gay too?" Stepping back, Diane eyed Nate, and he squirmed under the scrutiny. "Is there something you want to tell me, Nate?"

"No! I don't know. Well, maybe. What if there was?" Nate bit his lip and looked away from her, his insides tied in knots.

Diane turned his face back to her. The smile she gave him made him breathe a bit easier even though he was still tense with the direction of the conversation. "Sweetheart, we had this conversation when Cam came out to your father. Remember?"

"Yes, Mom, I remember."

"Then you know that it doesn't matter what other people think. I love you. Be true to yourself, baby. Cam's always done that and you can, too."

Nate nodded. Her support of him, of them both, released the tension in his body, and he spilled out his fears to her. “Yeah, I know, but I can’t help but wonder if maybe it’s me. Maybe I’m just slower than everyone else. I haven’t had much luck with the girls lately and *Gods!* Do I ever want to be lucky again, but Cam’s been on my mind. I can hardly be around him without getting a—” He gasped when he realized what he’d been about to say and clamped his mouth shut, shocked that he’d said so much to his *mom!*

Diane laughed. “Honey, I imagine you have an inappropriate reaction every time the wind changes direction.”

“Mom!”

“Hush and let me finish. Now, despite your worries, and I don’t think you have anything to fear, really, you and Cam are friends. It’s entirely acceptable to have those thoughts because you boys are so close. You’ll know when love happens, baby. You’ll know when or who is the right one. I can’t explain it any better to you than that except to say that you’ll know when you’ve made your choice.” Diane wrapped her arms around Nate, and he breathed in her perfume, the homey scent of vanilla and lavender. Comforting mom smells that almost made him want to be a little kid again where there weren’t so many difficult choices.

“And it is a choice this time, Nate, because while you can’t help who you fall in love with, you do make the choice to love them in the first place. Whatever you decide, remember I will love you no matter what. You are my baby, sweetheart.”

Nate sighed and let her go. “Love you too, Mom.”

Diane grinned and pointed a finger at him. “Now, if I find out that you two aren’t safe about it with each other, Brenda and I both will be taking a piece of each of your hides.”

Color rose in Nate’s cheeks, and they burned as he imagined the things he and Cam could get up to, especially if they were similar to what he and Natalie Wilson had done after the Junior prom last year. He cleared his throat and sidestepped Diane, wriggling his legs as he attempted to make more room in his trousers.

“So it’s alright to like both? At least, I think I still like both.”

“Yes, baby, it’s alright. It’s a hard row to hoe, but it’s all right.” Diane laughed at him. A knock cut through her giggles, and she walked across the

room to open the door, moving out of the way to allow Cam entrance. She leaned in, once Cam had closed the door, and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Look at you two; such handsome devils."

"Thanks, Mom Two," Cam offered, leaning down to hug her, and then he turned to Nate.

Nate stared at Cam in the mirror; he'd been watching the door, Cam, and his mother the entire time but couldn't see anything other than Cam. He swallowed hard as he took in the sight of Cam in his tux and resisted the urge to adjust himself. Cam, live and in person, dressed in formal wear was better than the image he'd seen. His mother waved at him and left him alone in the room with Cam. *Shit!* He turned, facing Cam, and stuck a finger in the collar of his shirt, hoping to loosen the tightness at his Adam's apple.

"Don't do that. I can't tie the damned bow tie for shit. Danny had to do mine," Cam said and grabbed Nate's hand. He tugged Nate's fingers free, squeezing his hand gently. Nate returned the reassuring gesture, trying hard not to blush as Cam studied him for a long moment.

"You know, you could have told Laurie no if it makes you that uncomfortable to be seen on my arm."

"Just worried about the reaction, Cam."

"Whose?"

"Everyone's! Laurie's family. The guests."

"Fuck 'em."

"Cam."

"I'm serious, Nate. I can't live my life in hiding or in shame because some three-thousand-year-old book says it's wrong. Their God made me if the book is to be believed. He made me the way I am, and if people have a problem with that then they need to take it up with their God. I am not afraid to love who I want."

Nate wondered how Cam could have such conviction, especially when the daily news was full of reports about the prejudices in the world. And not just ones about the gay community either. Nate and Cam both knew homophobia and hate happened. Their town wasn't a bad place, nor had Cam ever really been a target, but still, living where they did, being different wasn't always

appreciated. And yet, each advance, each time a state approved same-sex marriage, he'd cheered with Cam. For Cam.

Nate finally realized that he could, and would, take the chance if Cam was with him. He loved Cam. Decision made. It felt good, even if he was uncertain of Cam's reaction. All he could do was try.

"I'm not either," Nate whispered.

"Not what?"

"Uncomfortable. Afraid," Nate answered finally and dropped Cam's hand. He took a deep breath and stepped closer to Cam. "Or embarrassed either, if truth be told."

"What are you doing, man?" Cam asked, his eyes wide and nervously darting from Nate's eyes to his mouth and back again.

"Making a choice." Nate reached up, placed a hand on Cam's chest and leaned closer.

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Tease me," Cam whispered. "I can take it from anyone else but you, Nate."

"And if I said I wanted to do it? Wanted you? To see if sparks fly when we kiss, what would you say?"

Cam stared at him as if Nate had struck him. It was a bit gratifying to shock Cam into silence even though it also worried him. Cam finally blinked and shook his head before giving Nate his brilliant smile. Nate felt his body relax; he hadn't even realized he was so tense waiting for Cam's answer.

"That as much as I might enjoy that, I don't want to be your experiment. Not now and not at Danny's wedding."

"I respect that," Nate said and stepped back.

Cam sighed then leaned towards Nate's face, and Nate bit his lip at the look in Cam's eye. "If we walk down this road, I play for keeps."

"You can't have it both ways, Cam. Either I get my experience with you or someone else."

Nate watched Cam consider his words, then he nodded. "I just don't want it to seem like I am pushing for something you don't want, nor do I want to be the reason you can't be around me any longer if this isn't something more to you."

Nate shook his head. "No, it won't happen that way."

"You don't know that. If this isn't what you truly want, Nate, then we won't be friends anymore."

"No," Nate said, stepping back towards Cam. "We'll be lovers and friends, like it should be. Like Danny and Laurie. Like our moms and dads."

Something flashed in Cam's eyes, and Nate swallowed again, watching Cam's face. There was something almost predatory about his expression, and Nate liked that. He liked the way it made him feel because he felt possessive about Cam too.

"Do or die, bro," Cam said.

"Death before dishonor," Nate answered.

Cam nodded and straightened. He offered his arm to Nate, smirking when Nate frowned. "We do this right, all the way, for Laurie's sake."

"Just remember, I'm not really a girl."

"No confusion on my part, Nate. I know you are all male."

With a deep breath, Nate took Cam's arm. "Let the sparks fly."

"Fourth of July, dude," Cam answered and led Nate out of the room.

"Fourth of July?"

Cam nodded as they walked down the stairs and into the waiting area for the procession. "I'm giving you until the Fourth of July to think things through and decide what you want."

"Okay," Nate answered as they stopped, and Cam opened the door. Danny and the rest of Cam's brothers, Stuart, Derrick, Kelley, and Eric, all turned to look at them. Peter, Danny's best friend and best man, grinned. "About damn time, Nate."

Nate blushed as every one of Cam's brother's gaped at him. "I..."

"Leave him alone, Pete. He's standing up for Laurie," Cam snapped. "I didn't want to leave him with a bunch of giggling girls in skirts."

Pete's face fell. "Oh. Sorry, dude, didn't mean to out you." He looked confused for a moment then spoke again. "Even though I'm not really outing you?"

Nate looked at Cam then at each of Cam's brothers. "I'm being escorted by Cam tonight. If that's outing me, then I'm out."

Cam blinked and opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something about Nate's statement. Nate waited on tenterhooks for his reaction, but Cam never got the chance to say a word as Sterling opened the door. He stared for a moment at Nate and Cam, made note of their hooked arms then shook his head. "It's time, boys."

Danny stood at the altar with the priest while the wedding party paired off behind the closed doors of the narthex. Peter and Laurie's maid of honor, Stephanie linked arms when the processional music began. Nate and Cam were the first to follow them along with Laurie's sister, Amanda on Kelley's arm, since he was the only McDonald brother not married and Amanda was Laurie's only sibling.

To make things easier, and to accommodate all of Danny's brothers, each man walked with their respective wives. Rachel, Laurie's mom, corralled the flower girl while Derrick's son, Gavin the ring-bearer held hands with his grandmother, Brenda. Behind them, Laurie waited with her father, Darryl.

The music swelled, and the doors to the nave opened. Peter and Stephanie entered on cue, and Nate and Cam stepped forward. At the signal from the wedding coordinator, Cam and Nate entered the aisle a few steps behind Peter and Stephanie.

Cam had a smile on his face, matching the one Danny shot them, and Nate heard a couple of gasps over the music. His body tensed, and Cam murmured in his ear, "Relax. I've got you."

Nate breathed deeply and exhaled, smiling when they stopped for the photographer and then nearly turned to stare at the four people he saw rise. He caught the glares they directed at him and Cam as they hustled out of the pew then made their way toward the exit.

Cam squeezed his arm. "Keep smiling and ignore the rude bastards."

Nate nodded and stepped off when the wedding coordinator waved at them.

The rest of the party entered, and when the music changed for Laurie's appearance, everyone stood. Nate watched her walk down the aisle with her father then glanced around the church. No one else, it seemed, had left, and Laurie's smile could be seen through the veil she wore.

That surprised him because the guests that left had to exit out the same door where Laurie was waiting to enter. What assholes. He wondered what Laurie and her father had done. Nate didn't dwell on them for long, however, because Laurie had made it to Danny's side.

Once Daryl had given Laurie over to Danny, the priest cleared his throat. "If anyone else feels the need to leave, please do so now before this day can continue for our happy couple. This is God's house and *ALL* his children are welcome."

The man nodded and smiled at Nate and Cam, waiting but a moment before starting again. "Dearly beloved..."

"That bitch is off my Christmas card list forever," Laurie snarled, "I can't believe they got up and walked out."

Danny patted her hand. "Forget it, babe. It's over and done with, and Father Carmichael addressed it and moved on."

Nate listened to the conversation flow around him in the car. Laurie had been livid over the ill-mannered guests and had ranted the entire ride from the church. It made Nate a bit uncomfortable until she reached over and placed a hand on his knee. "Thank you so much for putting yourself out there like that for me and for Cam."

Laurie looked like she was going to cry, and that made Nate even more uncomfortable. Danny took pity on him by kissing Laurie silent. After the display, Danny gave him a sheepish look that said he was the one to inform Laurie about what Nate had said in the narthex.

"Here, *wife*, have some champagne."

Laurie laughed, and Danny passed out small glasses to everyone in the limo.

Brenda and Sterling eyed both Nate and Cam, so they each had only one glass to toast the happy couple as the car stopped in front of the Veteran's Hall for the reception. They filed out of the stretched truck and into the building. Nate stared around at the finished product of the coordinator's work.

Danny and Laurie were going to Hawaii for their honeymoon, and so Laurie had wanted to try the traditional cuisine. The Veteran's Hall was decorated for a luau with a buffet of Hawaiian food. A DJ held court in one corner, mixing

island music with more popular hits from the radio, both country and rock. There were also areas marked off for the cakes, gift table, and dancing.

Cam patted Nate on the back and pulled him inside to eat and mingle.

Nate tried the laulau and liked the pork and chicken versions but wasn't impressed with the fish laulau. He also enjoyed the kalua pig and some rice. There were glistening pineapple chunks, bananas, limes, lychees, mangoes, papayas, and several other fruits he didn't recognize but decided to try. However, Nate wasn't going near the poi.

Cam kept offering him some of the purple-gray pudding-like substance, but he wasn't having any of it. It reminded him too much of baby food, and other things that weren't considered polite dinner conversation. Not even when Cam had put some lomi-lomi salmon on it to add taste and texture, did he relent from his stance.

"Laurie, honey, dance with me."

Danny's words pulled Nate out of his thoughts, and he turned to watch them. Laurie smiled at Danny and placed her hand into his outstretched palm. Danny pulled her to her feet and kissed her gently. Their open affection made him a bit uncomfortable, like watching your parents be sweet to one another, but Nate supposed they were entitled to be gushy. He wondered if the same thing would happen at a reception for two men and if he'd ever get to see that event. Glancing over at Cam, seeing the same embarrassed but pleased reaction on his face, made Nate grin.

Laurie's dress flowed out behind her as Danny led her toward the dance area. The lights in the hall dimmed, and Danny and Laurie were spotlighted as they reached the floor. He spun her around then took her in his arms as the music swelled from the speakers.

They danced alone for a moment or two before Peter and Stephanie joined them. Nate watched, shoveling pineapple and rice into his mouth, then nearly choked when Cam spoke, "Dance with me."

Nate grabbed the bottle of Hapa Brown Ale and drank down a large swallow to clear his throat. "What did you say?"

Cam smiled and stood up, offering his hand to Nate as Danny had done to Laurie. "Dance with me, Nate. Everyone else is out on the floor except us."

Nate turned his head toward the dance floor and saw that not only was the entire wedding party out on the floor, but Sterling and Brenda and Rachel and

Darryl were dancing, too. Even his mom was out there and having fun. Nate nearly choked again as he watched her laugh and be twirled around by some relation of Laurie's.

Nate looked back up at Cam and blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. "When two men dance, who leads?"

Cam laughed. "I do because I asked." He grinned and reached down to take Nate's hand. "And because I'm taller."

Nate stood, scowling at Cam. "I already told you I'm not a girl, Cam."

"I know, Nate. Believe me, I know."

Nate followed Cam to the dance floor, their hands entwined, and Nate, though nervous, didn't feel that it was out of place. Cam circled him around as Danny had done with Laurie, and he nearly opened his mouth again to protest at being the girl. Then Cam gripped his hip.

That one gesture felt more right than when he'd held Natalie during the dances at the prom. Strong fingers held him securely, and Nate automatically reached up and placed his hand on Cam's shoulder. Nate knew what to do as he'd danced before, but it was a bit different being on the other side.

Cam pulled him closer and whispered in his ear, "Just relax and follow me."

Nate shivered and nodded then stepped back as Cam stepped forward. The music stopped almost immediately after they started, but it swelled again. A sultrier, slower tune than before floated across the room, and Cam pulled Nate even closer.

Nate wrapped his arm around Cam's waist as Cam's arm encircled Nate's back. Their steps shortened, and Nate sucked in a breath as his hips aligned with Cam's. It felt odd being nestled next to Cam but good. Right. He willed his cock to behave and looked up at Cam.

"Relax and let me drive," Cam whispered.

Nate sighed. "Lay on, Macduff."

Cam chuckled. "I've wanted to do this since we went to the Military Ball."

"Sgt. Major Arwin would have had our asses."

"True, but can you imagine the expression on everyone's face to see us dancing together in our uniforms?"

Nate rested his head on Cam's shoulder and laughed. "Oh hell. I'd forgotten about that. We went together but not together. And then when Carolee showed up with the captain of the football team from Kingdale, I thought everyone in the room was going to boot them both."

Cam hummed and ran his hand down Nate's back. "Yes, she was a stupid bitch."

Nate adjusted his hold on Cam to look up at him. "You've always been there for me, Cam."

Cam nodded, staring into Nate's green eyes. Nate continued to look back at him. "You've always been there for me too, Nate."

Nate bit his lip then leaned in and whispered in Cam's ear. "I don't need to wait until the Fourth, Cam."

Nate grinned as he heard a small sound escape from Cam, and Cam's fingers tightened against his back.

"You bastard," Cam whispered.

Nate chuckled and rested his head on Cam's shoulder once more. "Wasn't my idea to wait so long to kiss."

"You wanted fireworks, you'll get fireworks. We wait, so you can think."

"Whatever you say, dude."

Cam laughed and twirled Nate around the dance floor again. Nate held on for the ride, letting Cam lead and ignoring the indulgent looks the mothers sent their way.

Chapter Three

Cam hauled out bags and bags of hot dog and hamburger buns to his dad's truck. The sun was high in the sky, the heat of summer beating down on the grass and ground. Thankfully, a water ban hadn't been instituted yet. It was still in the realm of possibility, though. May had been a really hot and dry month, and so had June. But several thunderstorms in late June had paved the way to allowing fireworks. Even their graduation ceremonies had taken place during the evening because the weather had been so bad. In fact, the Project Graduation committee had postponed this fundraiser for next year's seniors until the break in the heat wave had occurred.

Cam had checked just this morning to make certain the city hadn't canceled the planned fireworks display when one of the moms on the PG committee had called to see if they were still on despite the holiday and weather. A few more calls confirmed it, and the preparations began.

July Fourth, his deadline to Nate and the day of the Senior Barbeque. The date had been marked on his calendar for longer than he could remember even if the reasons behind it had changed. Somehow, the fact that Nate had made a decision about what he wanted seemed to make the time stretch. It would have been nice if Nate had even bothered to call him after the wedding.

Granted, they had both been busy, but it had been the longest time Cam and Nate hadn't spoken on a daily basis since the summer before Nate's dad was killed. The Browns had gone on a camping vacation in West Texas. Nate's mom had banned phone calls, and Cam thought this time was actually much worse than before. The past three weeks had been extra hard on him because he had wanted to give Nate time to change his mind. He hadn't wanted to pressure Nate to make a decision.

He thought back to the wedding, and how he and Nate had danced. Just the reminder of Nate pressed flush against him made his body ache pleasantly. Too bad Nate hadn't been around to enjoy the sensations with him. More carnal thoughts invaded his memories, and Cam reined his emotions in when he heard the house door open.

"This stuff isn't going to load itself, Cam. Get a move on," Sterling shouted as he exited the house, a huge bag of charcoal under each arm.

“Slave driver,” Cam murmured and trudged back into the house. He found his mother icing another of the hundreds of cupcakes she’d baked for the barbeque.

Brenda looked up and smiled at Cam when he grabbed a stack of bakery boxes. “Careful, Cam. Please don’t drop those. I don’t have time to bake new ones.”

Cam sighed. “I thought I’d just toss them out on the lawn, Mom. Yell at Dad to go long and use them for target practice on his face.”

Brenda frowned at him. “Don’t get lippy with me, young man. You aren’t too big to end up with a boot across your ass or missing out on the event entirely for your smart mouth.”

“I think I know better than to drop the damned cupcakes.”

“Cam, what did I tell you about your mouth?”

Cam rolled his eyes, missing Sterling coming back into the kitchen. Cam gave her a long look, his blue eyes shining with insincere contrition. “If you can’t say anything nice...”

Sterling smacked Cam on the back of the head. “You’ll still get an ass whipping once I find out what the hell it was you said to your mother.”

“Ow! Dad!”

Brenda shook her head at them. “Take it outside, Sterling. I really don’t have time to referee today.”

Sterling nodded and took half the bakery boxes from Cam. “March, soldier, now.”

Cam sighed and took the boxes out the door to the truck, Sterling right behind him after he stopped to give Brenda a kiss.

Cam placed the boxes on the truck’s tailgate then gently pushed them into the bed. He climbed up on the truck and scooted the boxes next to the bags of buns. He began to rearrange the boxes of chips and condiments, coolers, and lawn chairs they were taking to the park where the barbeque was being held.

Sterling settled his load of boxes onto the truck bed and looked up at Cam, shading his eyes with one hand. “You want to tell me about the bug that crawled up your ass and died?”

“No bug, sir,” Cam answered. He paused then turned to look at Sterling. “Dad... never mind.”

Cam felt Sterling's eyes on him as he continued to fiddle with the items in the back of the truck.

“Is this about you and Nate?”

Cam spun around and sat down on the largest cooler. “He hasn't spent much time with me since graduation, and we haven't even spoken since the wedding.”

Sterling arched a brow. “That's where you are going with this?” Cam just continued to stare at his dad. Sterling sighed. “All right. Cam, you and Nate are extremely busy right now. You are finishing up the senior year activities, and Nate's working for college.”

“I know!” Sterling glared at Cam, and Cam tried to calm down. “I know that, Dad,” Cam answered in a more controlled voice when Sterling gave him another look. “But he said nothing was going to change.”

“Cam, you know better than that. Life is change, bud, you can't stop it. It happens on a daily basis. Besides, I'm not quite certain the time apart won't do you good.”

Cam looked up at Sterling, shock clear on his face. “You don't approve?”

Sterling sat on the tailgate. “I didn't say that. I said the time apart was good for you both.”

Frowning, Cam nudged one of the coolers with his foot. “What's that supposed to mean?”

Sterling reached out and ruffled Cam's hair, and Cam pulled away from him, glaring at Sterling. Sterling chuckled and patted Cam's arm. “It means you are young, and that's all, Cam. You and Nate have been attached to one another for so long. You're good friends, and a bit of time to evaluate what you want is good for both of you.”

Cam just stared at Sterling, not knowing what to say. He supposed it was the same things he said to Nate that night. Only it sounded like a load of bullshit from his perspective now, and he wondered if Nate had thought the same thing.

Cam had been happy admiring Nate from afar, and despite his conviction that he and Nate would be inseparable, he knew, realistically, most people

didn't just turn gay. He also knew that some people had a hard time reconciling with a part of themselves that wasn't the accepted norm. He'd never had the cause to be... fearful, he supposed was the right term, but he knew it could be a frightening thing to decide to be true to yourself when you were different.

Nate had done that all in one night. Cam never even had the time to properly explain his feelings to Nate. All he'd had to say was a stunned yes. He should have expected Nate would need some time to himself to sort everything out, even if it did make him nervous to think that Nate would change his mind. Especially since he'd done nothing but brood about this situation since then.

Except having Nate to himself at the wedding—the way they'd danced, and how Nate had held his hand through the reception—had seemed like a dream come true. His dream come true, in fact, and he hadn't considered what that might mean for Nate.

It wasn't as if Nate had had an older brother he could confide in. One that took him out to a gay club for the first time, nor one that had been there for him when Cam had snuck out to go back to said club to rid himself of his "condition". Kelley had held him as he had gotten sick from drinking too much as well as when he'd realized what he'd done in the back alley beside the club.

As much as they had talked about their sexual experience, Cam had tuned out much of Nate's story about his night with Natalie Wilson. He was certain Nate had done the same thing with the story about the twink Cam had sucked off.

Finally, Cam pulled his thoughts together to speak. "You think he's confused?" He frowned. "Or that he's using me?"

"No, I don't think he'd use you." Sterling shook his head. "I don't actually know what Nate's thinking. I've never been in his position. Or yours for that matter, but it can't be all that different when lust is involved."

"I love Nate, Dad." And as if saying the words made them true, Cam realized he did love him and was *in* love with Nate. He'd loved him for a long time as a friend, and that had grown into a romantic love. It wasn't the instantaneous love of the stories, but a slow, warm, and lingering affection that ran deeply through him. He knew Nate inside and out. Knew he was surly in the mornings if he didn't get his full night's rest, just as Nate knew Cam was a morning lark and cheerful.

Cam had been there for Nate when Forrest had died, and Nate had been there when Cam had come out. They supported one another in just about every

aspect of their lives. He knew he was right about the fact that he was in love with Nate, his age be damned.

Their relationship had evolved into something more than just friendship. Something he had to try and find out if it would work.

“I know you think you do, Cam, but like I said, y’all are young. So very young and you are trying to grow up so fast. It’s a scary world out there, nowadays. All I know is that I care about both of you, and I don’t want either one of you hurt if the equation changes. That’s all.”

Cam crossed his arms over his chest. “You could be happy for us, you know.”

Sterling chuckled. “Who said I’m not? I just want you safe as well as happy, Cam.”

Cam took a deep breath, threading his hands together and looking away from Sterling’s face. His thoughts on gay rights, safety, and sex wasn’t something he’d ever discussed with his father. His mother, on the other hand, knew about Cam’s fears and desires. She was a huge supporter of both him and their local PFLAG group. However, other than coming out, Cam had never really broached this subject specifically with Sterling and was wary of his reaction.

His father was a former Army Ranger, and one of the reasons Cam had stuck with JROTC. He felt it had been one way to return the love and support he’d had during the time when he’d announced his sexuality. He knew he wouldn’t be welcomed in the service regardless of the DADT recall, but it gave him something firm and structured as well as something in common with his father besides going hunting.

Despite all that, there had been a sort of distance between him and his father for quite some time, and now it was coming to a head, and Cam had to deal with it. Cam supposed that was the reason his mother had forced this conversation on the two of them; that or she was getting tired of Cam moping about the house. He sighed because, dammit, he knew it was time for this conversation. He hated when he realized he was making adult decisions, and his mother had shown him the way again without ever saying a word. Growing up really rather sucked, and not in any fun way that he could see at this particular moment in time.

Lifting his head, Cam looked right at Sterling. "Is a straight relationship a guarantee of safety, Dad? 'Normal' people marry and divorce every day, and yet it's a cultural taboo for two men or two women to attempt the same thing."

He held up a hand to forestall anything Sterling might have said until he was finished. "I'm not saying this to start a battle, but like you told me, change happens, and if I am going to get anywhere in life, I need to see this through. It's not like I can put up a sign and say 'Marry me. We'll love and live together forever', because even straight people can't say that, Dad. I have to take a chance to find out if Nate does love me in that way, and we can attempt to make a go of a relationship."

Cam smiled. "I'm going to be hurt. In fact, I already have been, but that's neither here nor there. But the rewards, Dad, the rewards I will get from trying with Nate more than make up for any pain inflicted in trying to find love. Or so I believe, and in today's society I need to believe in that. Nate will be there for me because I love him, am *in* love with him, and I'm certain he feels the same way about me."

Spreading his hands, he came to the right conclusion all on his own as he finished speaking to his father. "Nate just needs a bit more time to connect the pieces."

Sterling stared at him for a long moment, and Cam wondered whether or not he'd said too much. "Dammit, Cam. You've gone and grown up to be a helluva man on me when I wasn't looking." Then Sterling chuckled. "Your mother was right when she told me I should just listen to you. That I was going to be..." He shook his head. "I *am* so proud of you."

Cam smirked, feeling as if a weight had been lifted from his chest in spite of his father's surprise. "Well, don't tell her that, she's already got a big head. I think she gets up in the morning and puts on the top of her to-do list that she will be right about everything."

Sterling threw his head back and laughed out loud. The rolling, rumbling sound made Cam grin even wider, and he joined in because, inevitably, Mom was *always* right no matter how her men tried to make things difficult for her.

"Are you two finished? Please tell me there's no blood to clean up." Brenda stood in the doorway, shielding her eyes as she looked out into the yard for them. Cam felt a rush of love and appreciation for both of his parents right then and hoped like hell Nate had been right in saying that their relationship would be just like their moms and dads'.

“I still have things that need to be in the truck before we leave and don’t have time to hose the two of you down.” Brenda smiled and waved at them, turned to go back into the house then dragged out another box full of things she’d deemed necessary to burn meat at the park. “I’ve got more cupcakes done too, gentlemen. Let’s get this show on the road since you played nice and all.”

Cam groaned, and Sterling laughed even harder as he stood. “I’d say it’s the men’s job to be bossed by the women, but things are a bit different in your situation. At least Nate will be able to pull his own weight when it comes to killing the bugs and taking out the trash.”

Standing, Cam glared at him. “That’s right, Dad, because Nate’s a dude. There are no girls in a gay relationship.” He grinned. “And because I’m going to make him kill all the bugs.”

Cam swore he’d never worked as hard as he had today. He’d hauled coolers, bags, and totes. Boxes, chairs, and towels. He’d lit grills, pulled tabs on cans, and opened bottles, and after all that he still wasn’t done.

Cam greeted the parents of the PG committee, waved to friends and helped set up game booths. Marshmallows, chocolate placed in coolers to prevent melting, and a thousand graham crackers. The sights, smells, and sounds of summer burst into the air with greetings, yells, and the ever present air horns.

In spite of the blazing Texas summer sun, sparklers crackled. Black Cats exploded with the *rat-tat-tat-tat* like gun fire, and sulfur filled the air with colored smoke from the round bombs tossed about like balls.

Water guns, girls screaming about being targets while sunning, and the scent of smoked meat joined in the fun of the day of celebrating. Through all of the chaos, Cam looked for Nate. He saw many people, but not the one he truly wanted to see. Once he saw Diane with principals Mays and Black. Counselor Blaine chatted with his mom and dad and several other parents. But still no Nate.

In fact, it was late in the day before he caught a glimpse of Nate. Cam found him at a booth with Natalie Wilson and Kurt Hudson, tossing large softballs at a target, trying to dunk the head football coach of the varsity team. Cam left them to it as he made his rounds through the booths area though Nate had caught his eye and smiled at him.

Crushing down the jealousy he felt, Cam watched Natalie throw her arms around Nate when she tossed the winning ball to knock Coach Sheets down from his pedestal. His heart ached at the sight, but he was gratified when Nate pried her loose and draped her over Kurt. Nate turned and met his gaze again and smiled at him. Cam lost sight of him again after that and decided to wait for Nate to come to him.

Cam slapped at a mosquito then snarled as more seemed to spring up from out of nowhere. He stopped by their chairs and dug through the bag his mother had prepared, looking for something to fight back the insect horde. He already had a bug bracelet wrapped around one wrist and a second around his ankle, but the scorching heat proved no match for the “state bird” of Texas. Finding the bug wipes and taking a deep breath, he scrubbed his face then down his arms. The scent of citronella and chemicals blossomed around him and mixed with the coconut smell of the sunscreen like a wayward cologne. He coughed, making a face and sticking out his tongue at the inhaled taste, and then turned when he heard laughter.

“Sexy, Cam. Redneck sexy.” Nate grinned at him, looked around then held out a hand to him.

Cam hesitated only for a second then took Nate’s hand, twining their fingers. He squeezed Nate’s hands and grinned at the returned affection before letting him go. “About time you showed.”

Nate cocked his head. “You told me to think, Cam. Did you actually think I wouldn’t do so?”

Cam opened his mouth then shut it. “No, I didn’t. You said you didn’t need to think any more.”

Nate rubbed the back of his head with his hand. “Yeah, that was my dick talking, and really how often do you listen to it?”

Cam laughed. “Not as often as you might think.”

Nate nodded. “Can we talk?”

Cam looked around. Almost their entire class had turned out for the barbeque in spite of the holiday. There were other parents and siblings running around, grandparents and toddlers all over the park. He turned back to Nate. “Let’s mingle some, keep it low, and play some games. Once it gets dark would be a better time. It’ll cover anything you don’t want seen.”

“Cam, I don’t care if anyone sees,” Nate said and stepped closer. “I won’t force you back into the closet when you never hid before.”

Cam swallowed. He’d known Nate would be considerate, and after his conversation with his father he was trying to be the same for Nate. “Thank you.”

Nate reached for Cam’s hand, sliding their palms together once more and holding onto him tightly. It made Cam’s heart race to do this right in the park in front of all their peers and family, but he pulled Nate close and wrapped his arm around his shoulder.

Nate’s arm encircled his back, and Cam felt every one of Nate’s fingers dig into his shirt as Nate clung to him.

Both of them ignored the cheers that rose up around them while they stood wrapped up in each other.

The fireworks continued to launch, the booms, whistles, crashes, and pops a background to the intimate embrace Nate was wrapped in. Cam sat at his back, their legs stretched out in front of them as they watched the colors and designs burst upon the purple-black darkness.

Many times he’d been this close to Cam, but none of them had made him aware of Cam like tonight’s hold did. He could feel the heat of Cam’s groin against his ass and snuggled closer to Cam despite the warm night.

“You’ll want to quit that if you want to finish watching the show,” Cam murmured in his ear.

Nate shivered, turning his head to look at Cam’s face. “And if I’ve had enough of these kinds of fireworks?”

The slow smile that appeared on Cam’s face stirred something in his gut. He leaned in and pressed his mouth to Cam’s. It was a hard mash of their faces, and Nate backed off and tried again, this time closing in slower and softer. He nibbled at Cam’s lip, silently hoping he’d not screwed it up.

Cam gasped, and Nate took advantage of that, quickly sliding his tongue inside Cam’s mouth. A quick taste of sweetness, and Cam caught up with him. He grabbed Nate’s head, fingers curling into his hair and holding him in place as Cam took over the kiss.

As first kisses go, the mash was nothing. The next instant, though, redefined Nate's life. Nips of teeth and lips pulled at him, tugged on his heart, stomach, and groin. More tongue and wetness and heat. Delicious, extremely distracting heat. Now he knew why some people did this all the time.

Cam groaned, and Nate understood what the words "swallowing sound" meant. The vibrations he'd taken from Cam traveled down his throat and into his belly. He tasted the soda and sweets Cam had eaten, and then underneath all of that was Cam. Nate squirmed, trying to turn around to face Cam fully.

Cam drew back long enough to help Nate straddle his lap, their hands fumbling. "Easy," Cam whispered. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I know," Nate breathed. "But I have to touch you."

Cam moaned. "You don't know how long I've waited to hear you say that."

Nate chuckled and leaned in to kiss him again. "Show me. Take me to the other side."

Cam wrapped his arms around Nate and drew in a deep breath, the hold pressing them tightly together. "We'll get there. Just slow down, I want to do this right."

Nate slid his hands down Cam's back and slipped his hands into Cam's pockets, squeezing him hard and thrusting against his stomach. "Still wanna do this slowly?"

"Not really but I don't want to scare you off either."

Nate glared at Cam in the darkness. "I'm not a girl."

"I know!"

"Then show me what to do."

Cam took another breath and leaned away. "Out here in public?"

"No one's watching the 'us' show, they're looking at the fireworks." Nate closed his eyes as Cam's hand brushed against his cock. He arched into Cam. "Just show me how."

Cam laughed and bent to lick Nate's throat. "It's a cock, man. Touch me like you touch yourself, and we'll adjust." His palm brushed over the outline of Nate's prick once more then dipped inside the waistband of his jeans. The tips of his fingers glanced over the top of Nate's prick, forcing a shudder to shake Nate's body and soul.

“Jesus, fuck. I didn’t know you were a cock tease,” Nate breathed as he leaned closer to Cam’s face.

“Bite me,” Cam whispered, his other hand soon joining in the battle with Nate’s jeans.

Nate gasped when Cam pulled his shorts and briefs out of the way. The night air around them was still warm and humid from the sun, but the difference between that and Cam’s fingers encircling his cock was like the blast of a furnace. He bucked up into Cam’s grip as he laid his head on Cam’s shoulder, and he sank his teeth into the juncture of throat and shoulder.

Cam writhed under Nate and let go of his prick. With a moan of frustration, Nate pulled away, looking down to see Cam undoing his own jeans. Cam’s cock spilled out of the zip, full and firm. Cam met Nate’s eyes, and Nate watched as Cam pressed both of their dicks together, his hand cradling them close. He squeezed, and Nate thought he just might die from the sensation alone—until Cam stroked his hand up the length. Friction-induced heat skated up his prick, causing Nate to buck and shudder at the same time. Cam’s thumb grazed over the head of his cock then over onto Nate’s, spreading the fluid around. Never had Nate felt anything so fantastic. Not with Natalie Wilson, nor when he pulled one off on his own. He wanted more, and he wanted it now.

“Oh, God,” Nate breathed, and Cam laughed before he tugged Nate close again. Closing his mouth over Nate’s, Cam moved his fist faster, and all Nate could do was hold on for the ride as Cam drove them toward completion.

Nate clenched his fingers in Cam’s shirt, twisting the material between his knuckles as he nipped and bit at Cam’s mouth. He canted his hips, rubbing up against Cam’s dick and his fingers as best as he could.

Nate closed his eyes, the cracks and bangs of the fireworks continued in the background, hiding their pants and grunts. Cam’s moans and groans came to Nate through the distraction, and he drank them down, committing them to memory.

Cam’s other hand pried one of his from Cam’s shoulder and guided it between them. Nate circled his hand around Cam’s, the heat of his movements rubbing at his sensitive skin.

“With me,” Cam murmured against his mouth before kissing him again, and Nate twined their fingers, tugging on their cocks.

The sensation was too much, and Nate gasped, coming in hard, fast spurts. Cam chuckled then bit his lip, adding to the mess Nate was making. Nate rested his head against Cam's, sharing breaths with him.

Grimacing as the warmth of their release cooled rapidly on their skin and became sticky, Nate drew back. The lights from the fireworks highlighted Cam enough, so Nate could see him as he wiped away their release with the ends of his T-shirt and straightened their clothing.

"Hey," Nate whispered, but Cam didn't answer.

Nate had a moment of panic that Cam hadn't felt the same things he had, and that's why he wouldn't look at him. "Look at me."

Nate watched Cam swallow. His Adam's apple bobbed, and the panic nearly threatened to boil over and out of him. "Please look at me."

"I don't want to ruin anything," Cam whispered, finally looking up at him. His bottom lip, swollen from Nate's kisses, was held between his teeth, apprehension apparent in every line of his body.

Nate smiled at him then gently pulled Cam's lip free. "You didn't. *We* didn't."

Cam breathed out a sigh and closed his eyes.

"Never imagined it would be you, but I am damn glad we went all the way."

Cam nodded.

"So what happens now?" Nate asked.

Cam opened his eyes watching him for a long moment before laughing. "You go off to college and meet someone new."

Nate shook his head. "Never gonna happen."

Cam arched a brow. "You won't ever meet anyone else again?"

"Smartass."

"I'm serious."

Nate narrowed his eyes at Cam, watching for the moment that Cam would break and grin at him. He didn't, so Nate shook his head. "I'm not going off to college to find a boyfriend—God, that sounds so weird—because I have you."

Cam did smile then, and Nate returned it. "Galveston isn't all that far away, and, you know, we could get an apartment or something there. Together while

you decide on what you want to do next, be it college or just a job.” He felt his cheeks fill with heat as Cam’s eyes widened. “Or not.”

Cam leaned in and kissed him. Nate pressed hard against his mouth, desperate for any kind of reaction from Cam that would let him know everything was going to be fine between them. That Nate hadn’t screwed up by asking too soon or needing reassurance.

“Yes,” Cam breathed against Nate’s mouth. His arms pulled Nate against him tightly, and Nate finally relaxed as Cam spoke again. “Yes.”

The End

Author Bio

MA Jackson has written speculative, fantasy fanfiction under the nom de plume unbroken_halo for almost ten years and is now working toward publishing her original works. She likes to try and focus on realism in her stories as well as spinning a yarn.

A career in homemaking led her to the brink of insanity. Or—depending on whom you ask: her best friend, her husband, or her daughter—past the brink. Her hobbies include violating the rules of good writing and grammar simply because she can, playing games on her tablet, and telling strangers to chill the hell out. Please deposit an additional twenty-five cents for more bio.

Contact & Media Info

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OVERKILL

By Elizabeth Daniels

Photo Description

Two men in a pool, in an eyes closed blissful embrace. A man has his arms wrapped around the other from behind, pulling his back to his chest. His large hand gently tips the other man's head to the side and he licks the shell of his ear. The man in front is slack jawed in ecstasy.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two have been playing together for years (you choose the type of music & whether it's a hobby or profession), and finally the UST became unbearable and something had to give. Luckily for both, it was their resistance. I'd love to watch a bunch of that UST, and the moment when it all falls away.

Time/place/heat level is yours to decide just please no BDSM, GFY (bisexuality is cool though!), or shifters.

Thanks!

Sincerely,

Charley

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: musicians/rock stars, slow burn/UST, sweet/no sex, sexual tension, homophobia, deception

Word Count: 39,115

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To Susan; who cheered me on and reminded me that no matter what, I have taste.

To my three sons – thank you for dealing with me as I got lost in my own world. I am sorry you had to ask me more than five times to get my answer. Yes, we will walk the three dogs in the evenings again like we used to.

To my husband – thank you for trying to understand what you don't but being there for me regardless. Your love for me creates the love I give to my characters. I don't want you to be like the boys in my books, I want the boys in my books to be like you.

OVERKILL

By Elizabeth Daniels

Prologue

~September~

This would be the last night of the tour. The last night for Declan Morrison and the boys to play their hearts out to the home town crowds of Los Angeles. Six months on the road, traveling on a bus, sleeping in motels, eating at random hole-in-the-wall restaurants, and playing to massive crowds as the opening act for Balthazar, one of the biggest hard rock bands on the scene. The boys of Station Zero were paying their dues. Tonight, they would be playing at the famous Whisky a Go Go—this would be *their* show, one night of just the boys on stage. No opening for Balthazar; just Declan, Chuck, Keith, and Tate as Station Zero, playing to their fans. Their manager was in talks with an A&R representative from a new label. The meeting with the new label rep was riding on this gig—rock it and they'd get the meeting, but bomb and it was back to being nothing but an opening act. They'd worked too hard and had come too far to settle for second best.

Declan leaned his head against the cold window watching the early morning and landscape change as the bus headed south toward Los Angeles through Bakersfield. The drive through this part of California made him homesick. Declan hadn't grown up in the mountains surrounded by towering windmills, but every trip his family took to their cabin, the windmills always meant they were almost home.

The band played in Southern California the night before but added this show up north at the last minute. A few hours on the road was worth it to feed off the energy of the crowd from last night. They were having the time of their lives on this tour and thanked their lucky stars they were asked to come along on the last leg. They were especially lucky to have Tate on drums after Slater bailed on them suddenly. Tate Newman, *where the fuck did he come from?* Just as the thought passed, Tate strolled from the back of the bus and sat across the table from him, cradling a cup of coffee.

“Hey, you okay?” Tate asked.

Declan took in the sight before him. Tate was dressed in a pair of faded jeans—the ones he claimed were lucky, and not because of the label said they were—along with a charcoal-gray wool sweater with a V-neck and a white T-shirt underneath. Declan flushed as he focused on Tate's revealed collarbones.

His fetish for collarbones began when he met Tate; the man brought out things in him he never dreamed he would like or want. Tate was also wearing his signature Chuck Taylors; unless he was playing the drums barefoot, dressed for his day job, or out on a run, he never went anywhere without them on his feet. It made Declan smile knowing Tate's habits.

Tate's hair was still damp from his shower; his new close-cropped haircut was different, and it showed off his blue eyes. The blue appeared darkened by the rim of his glasses, it was rare to see him wearing them lately. The more they toured and did interviews, press junkets, and fan-based events, the less he wore them. Declan loved the way Tate looked in glasses—they transformed his face and made him seem vulnerable under the piercing blue gaze when he turned it full force on you. The man was a collection of contradictions, and Declan was only beginning to figure them out. Tate became someone whom Declan cared about, more than cared about, but he was told he couldn't have him.

"Hey, yeah. I'm good." Declan gave a fake, wide smile, using his forefingers to pull his mouth up at an unnatural angle to prove his point. "Just reflecting, you know? Thinking of where we were when this all started and where we might be headed."

Tate sipped his coffee, looking over the rim of his cup at Declan. "That's a lot of thought for so early in the morning." Tate's right eyebrow pulled up in a way he swore was a natural reaction, but it didn't matter if it was done on purpose or not, Declan found it sexy as hell.

"Early bird gets the worm, right?" Declan responded.

"Or the responsibility of a band's future?" Tate tilted his head in question.

Declan slunk into the bench seat, tonight's gig heavily weighing on his shoulders. The gig was a massive weight and so was his attraction to his drummer. Tate and Declan were dancing around this thing between them; their chemistry was like nothing he experienced before. There were too many close calls where Declan was so gone he longed for nothing more than to grab the taller man, bend him over the nearest surface, and sink into him. The thought alone made Declan's dick start to swell, and he couldn't help but shift in his seat. Tate caught the movement and winked.

"Screw you, Newman," Declan huffed.

Tate set his cup down and nodded. "Ah, we're screwing now and not fucking? Okay, Declan, but remember this is what we use as our dining table."

“This is your fault.” Declan pouted. He sounded like he was twelve years old again. *What the hell was wrong with him?*

“You’re going to play it that way, are you? Fine, Dec. It’s my fault you can’t stop thinking about me. It’s my fault every time you’re in the room with me, your thoughts turn to the moments we’ve had together. The moments where if we gave an inch, if we gave in to this thing between us, we could find something we both want and need. It’s my fault there have been too many times...”

Declan stared at Tate, realizing his ramblings of fault weren’t about him, they were about himself. *Could he actually? Could he?*

“Your fault, what... Tate?” Declan prompted the man who he’d barely spoken to in months to spill his guts.

“It’s my fault too many times have passed without me taking what I want regardless of the consequence.” Tate took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. Declan sat up straight in his seat, as this was what he had been waiting for—a sign he still had a chance with Tate after all they’d been through. They could work out the details with the band and management later.

No! Fuck management. They couldn’t tell him who he could be with.

“What is it you want, Tate?” Declan breathed in deep and held his breath waiting for his answer.

Tate replaced his glasses and raised his eyes. The want and desperation in them stilled any movement Declan could have willingly provided.

“You, Declan. I want you.”

Chapter 1

~February, Seven months earlier~

“*You what?*” Declan stared at his now former drummer.

“I quit.” Slater MacAlister stared at the ground as he delivered the news, ripping the rug out from under the three remaining members of Station Zero.

“What the fuck, Slater?” Declan looked at Chuck, the band’s guitarist. With his fists clenched, he looked like he wanted to throw a punch or five, using Slater’s face as the target.

“Look, guys, I’m sorry. I have to.” Slater looked up and at each of the bandmates. “I have to.”

“Why *now?*” Keith, the band’s bassist, the stoic member of the band, whispered the question.

“I know my timing sucks...” Slater paused.

“You could say that ten times fast with my fist down your throat!” Chuck yelled.

“Chuck! Down, boy.” Declan knew Chuck was on the edge of losing his cool and needed to calm him down before things got physical.

“Fuck, Dec! What are we supposed to do without a drummer? Get one of those stupid machines from the eighties?” The sound of a vintage lighter being opened and closed let Declan know Chuck was trying to cool down. Anytime Chuck got overwhelmed, he used the lighter to ground him.

“Okay, look. Let’s all calm down and let Slater tell us why he’s bailing on us when we leave on tour with Balthazar in three weeks.” Declan looked at Slater, raised his eyebrows and swept his hand as an invitation for Slater to start explaining. “And Chuck, no drum machines, I promise. You’re still safe from New Wave.”

Chuck blew out a breath and shook his head. “That shit ain’t right, man. It’s just not right.” Declan bit back a laugh and clapped Chuck on the shoulder.

“I know, man. I know.” Declan regarded Slater again who was fidgeting with his drumsticks. “Spill, Mac.”

Slater looked up and took a deep breath. His stool creaked as he sat and started to talk. "I'm sorry, guys. *I am*. You have no idea how sorry I am, but Becky's pregnant." A smile crept over Slater's face and the joy he felt at being a father was palpable. "And I know you're going to say I don't have to quit because we're having a baby," his smile quickly faded, "but Becky's been having problems..."

"Why didn't you say something?" Keith asked.

"Becky didn't want me to before we were sure what was wrong. But she has gestational diabetes and I can't leave her, I can't leave either of them now."

Declan felt his heart drop to his feet and the blood pound in his ears. He took a few deep breaths in attempt to calm himself down.

"That's rough, man. I'm sorry. So what are you going to do?" Declan asked.

"The only thing I can do is suck up to my parents, move back home with Becky, and finish my Engineering degree."

Declan nodded, as he absorbed the new information. Slater was done with the band. They were minus a drummer and they were leaving on a six-month North American Tour with Balthazar in three weeks. What were they going to do? Declan caught the nervousness in Slater, which wasn't normal for the guy; his self-esteem was greater than the four of them combined and drunk on *Jägermeister*. What was up with him?

"Mac?" Declan asked.

"Yeah?" Slater responded.

"When are you going back to school?"

Slater looked at Declan with pleading eyes and shook his head.

"You're registered for the summer semester, *aren't you?*"

"Declan..." Slater hesitated.

"You knew for how long, Mac?" Declan was losing his patience.

"I knew last month but I didn't want..." Slater answered, his gaze firmly on the floor.

Chuck flew across the room and grabbed Slater by the front of his shirt, yanking him up and yelled in his face. "We are supposed to be brothers. To

have each other's back, Mac! What fucking games are you playing? This is our lives!"

Slater clutched Chuck's hands as they wrestled.

"Let him go!" the quiet tension of Keith Raines exploded. Chuck released Slater.

"Thank you," Slater said to Keith, straightening out his disheveled shirt. But Keith lunged at Slater to unleash his own fury. Pretty soon it was a free for all.

Declan watched as his band slowly fell apart.

Declan stared at the back of Slater's truck pulling out of the parking lot of the warehouse they'd converted into their rehearsal space. Slater had made it pretty clear that Beck and the baby came first, and they should. The band left for a US tour with Balthazar in three weeks and they needed a drummer or they were screwed. There was no way he was going to call Max, the lead singer of Balthazar, and tell them they were going to cancel. They needed this tour.

Declan walked to Slater's drum set, and sat down on the stool. His urge to fidget took over, and he started to lightly press the drum pedal against the bass as he figured out what to do next.

Declan had been the band's unsung and unofficial leader from the first day they'd decided they were a band. There had never been a vote, it just was. So now this fell on his shoulders, but how the hell was he going to fix this mess? Declan rested both feet on the ground, and turned the stool from side to side in a rocking motion. *Think, Morrison!* He couldn't; his head was locked into his heart with this, and he didn't want the responsibility. There was no choice in the matter.

"What are we going to do, Dec?" Chuck sat on the couch diagonal from the drum set. "I gave notice at the shop already, I can't go back."

"I gave my notice too, Declan," Keith chimed in, slumped next to Chuck. The change in mood since the fight between bandmates was obvious.

Declan looked at them both, knowing the fate of Station Zero, and their careers, was in his hands. He stopped the motion of the stool and rested his elbows against his knees. Lacing his fingers together he found the pressure

point between his thumb and first finger which would help ease the raging headache forming behind his eyes.

“No one has to go back to their day job. Just...” Declan released his hands and lowered his head. Running his hands through his hair, he tugged on the roots, hoping the pain would clear his mind. He looked at the last two remaining members of his band and sighed. “Just give me a day all right? Give me a day to figure this shit out. I promise, I’ll fix this.”

“Okay, man. Okay.” Chuck stood, flicking the top of the lighter again. “Just, let us know when you do.”

No pressure there, Charles. Chuck was a kick-ass guitarist, but the guy wasn’t the first one Declan would turn to in a crisis. There was a reason Declan was the one who made the big decisions in the band. It was always a group effort between the four of them, but when it came down to getting dirty and making the hard decisions, those always fell to Declan.

“Declan. If you need any help, you know I’ll do whatever you need,” Keith added. Yeah, Declan knew if he needed some form of OCD errand run, Keith would be who he turned to.

“Thanks, Keith. I’ll let you know if I need you. Right now I think we all need to leave this place, forget what just happened, and come back to this mess tomorrow.” Declan attempted to sound assertive with his suggestion. He hated ordering the band around like a drill sergeant, but it was the only way to deal with this. “Go home, do some last minute packing, spend time with your families or just stare at the wall. Whatever you do, don’t think about this. I got it.” Declan stood and put his fist out for the two men to give their signature “hand shake.” Keith and Chuck stepped forward and they shook hands.

Declan turned and grabbed the drumsticks lying across the tom toms in the middle of the drum set and pointed them at the men. “Now go. I don’t want to see either of you until tomorrow. And not early or I’ll beat you with Slater’s drumsticks.” Declan slapped the sticks across his palm with a grin and cocked his eyebrows.

“You got it, boss,” Chuck returned with a mock salute and his best Johnny Utah “surfer dude” voice. “See ya mañana, mi amigo.”

Declan watched as the second band member walked away from him today. At least this one would return.

“I meant what I said, Declan.” Keith stared at him. The man could stare down a wild cat trying to eat him alive. The way his eyes could focus on a person was scary. There was no wonder Keith was a top associate at the law firm under one of the most influential lawyers in town. Declan always wondered why he would give up something he was so good at to play bass in a band. Keith was not only the stoic member of the band, but the most private. Declan respected that fact about him and never pushed for more information than Keith wanted to give.

“I did too, Keith. Trust me. Tomorrow. We will deal with this tomorrow. Now get the fuck out of here.” Declan flashed his toothy, fake grin at his bassist. “I need to go punch out this crap Slater has dumped on me at the gym and not on you.” Keith only nodded, turned and walked out of the small warehouse.

Once alone, Declan flopped onto the couch and covered his eyes with his left arm. *What am I going to do?* He was in shock Slater could do this to them. Not in shock over Slater choosing the health, safety, and wellbeing of his future wife and unborn child, but that he would know about this and wait until the last minute to drop it on them. *He knew* and still came to practice, to rehearsal and played shows with them knowing he was betraying their trust the entire time. Declan didn't want to throw Becky into the same group as Yoko, but why was there always some chick who broke bands up? Declan grinned, knowing a girl would never come between him and the band. He didn't swing that way.

Declan had known from his teen years he was gay, but running in the circles he did, it was impossible to be out and be safe. So he played the part of the jock, the ladies' man and dated numerous girls, most of whom weren't from his hometown, which was done on purpose. He came out at his seventeenth birthday party to his cousin and his best friend Lisa, who said she always suspected he was gay. From that day on, his sexuality became their secret, and Lisa would wrangle her friends, who people at his school didn't know, and they would pretend to be his girlfriend. Declan kept up the charade with everyone, including his parents, until the night before he was leaving for college.

Declan sat with his parents in the family room the night before he left, Lisa on one side of him and his “girlfriend” Chloe on the other. He told his parents he and Chloe weren't together, that they couldn't ever be together. Declan struggled and choked on the words as he strained to get them out. In his head, he could hear the words coming from his mouth proud and strong, but he couldn't speak. His mouth went dry as he sat in front of his parents, knowing he

was crushing their hopes and dreams of becoming grandparents, of his father having someone to carry on the family name, of his mother being able to wear pink on his wedding day as Emily Post dictated, to show she was gaining a daughter.

Declan watched as the confusion and worry played across their faces. He had an entire speech prepared to handle the news of his coming out, delicately, but instead he blurted, “Chloe and I aren’t together because I like dick.”

His mother gasped and put her small hands over her mouth, the horror showing in her eyes.

“Ah, crap! Mom. I’m sorry. I’m gay, okay. I’m gay. Dad...” Declan remembered the look on his father’s face, the fury never before seen and there were plenty of times Declan deserved it, but not now. Declan knew without asking his father, this was not acceptable. He heard the phone conversations between his father and grandfather, which usually included the word “faggot” being used a handful of times. Like saying the word wasn’t a derogatory statement against another human being, but something they could use to show they weren’t manly enough. He never understood how neither man thought they were doing anything wrong.

“Mom, please say something. Please?” Declan pleaded with his mother. She was always the one who was empathetic to all those in need, but the look she gave her son was one of ice. She was cold, immovable, and there was no longer love in her eyes for her only child. “You aren’t serious? Mom? Come on. It’s still me. I’m still your son.”

Declan’s mother reached out and grabbed his father’s hand, a show of solidarity, and he knew this was the end. Words, not the ones he’d planned to say began falling from his lips. “I never wanted to hurt you—either of you but I didn’t expect you to hurt me either. I’m still your son. You raised me to be honest and I’m telling you my truth. I’m gay, this is who I am and who I have been for as long as I can remember. I’ve never liked girls, I faked dating them to fit in and not cause trouble. But I couldn’t lie anymore. It was tearing me apart from the inside out and my heart hurt every time I denied who I was. I hoped you could see past what you believe to be right and wrong and see me, your son. I guess I hoped for too much.”

His father stood and tugged his mother to her feet, staring down at Declan. He spoke the four words that gutted Declan, tore his heart out and turned him into the self-reliant man he was today. “We have no son.”

Declan could feel the pain in his heart, even today, seven years after that night. The feelings never let up.

Declan swung his legs off the couch and sat up straight. He wanted to escape the memory before he did what he always did when he remembered—called home. He couldn't count how many times he'd called his mother's cell phone just to hear her voice. She always knew when it was him; she'd whisper his name, *Declan Matthew*, once, and then break into sobs. She never hung up, just cried as if her heart was breaking each time, and Declan would clutch the phone until he couldn't take anymore. He would *not* go there today. The memory was enough. He needed to deal with this shit storm Slater had dropped into his lap. He had to keep his band together and get them on this tour. The plane was scheduled to leave for New York in three weeks, where they would start off the tour with a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden. The whole tour was set: six months of opening for Balthazar and getting their music heard by a bigger audience was worth more than his mother's rejection over the phone.

Declan stood and looked at the drumsticks in his hands; he wanted to break them into pieces. This drama with Slater would blow over, but it would take time. The boys were more than bandmates or friends, they were brothers. Declan threw the sticks onto the couch with force and grabbed his keys off the table as he walked out of the warehouse. He pulled the large door shut and turned the lock. He needed to get these emotions out. He had two options: either find a hot and willing ass to fuck, or go to the gym and take his frustration out fighting in a cage. Sex would be his best solution, but Declan didn't have time for the complications of a blowjob in the bathroom at a bar.

Getting behind the wheel of his car, he made his way toward the gym, ready to blow off steam, clear his head and be done with this day. Tomorrow would come and he'd have to face it, but right now, all he wanted was to fight some poor dude into submission to make himself feel better.

Chapter 2

Declan grimaced, listening to what felt like the one hundredth drummer they'd auditioned today. He had come up with the idea while in the cage, fighting the newest wanna-be MMA fighter at the gym. While having his opponent in a rear naked choke hold, making it impossible for him to move, the simple idea of auditions came to mind. When his opponent tapped out like the loser he was, Declan had jumped up, shook his hand and ran out of the gym to get the flyers made to get the word out they required a new drummer.

Declan had avoided the texts from Max about the auditions. He knew he was being a coward but he didn't want to say anything to the front man until they were certain which way their asses would be headed. Declan, Chuck, and Keith had been to Los Angeles and Hollywood, posting flyers and handing them out at the local hard rock shows, even the punk ones. If they could find themselves a decent drummer who could handle their music and leave last minute to go on a six-month tour, they didn't care what kinds of shows the guy frequented.

The assault of sound coming from across the room came to an end. Declan stood and walked to the drum set, Slater's drum set—he'd talked the former drummer into letting them hold it hostage for the auditions. There was no argument on Slater's end, and Declan was relieved. The latest victim certainly dressed for the part—ripped jeans, sleeveless T-shirt and enough piercings that Declan was sure he would never pass through metal detectors without setting them off and requiring a full cavity search.

“James. Thanks for the audition man.” He shook the man's hand and slapped him on the back a few times. James wasn't a bad drummer, but his song choice left much to be desired and the three band members made faces at each other during the audition. Station Zero had a particular sound to their music; their sound fell on the side of hard rock, though sometimes a softer side to it emerged. They even played a ballad Chuck had written drunk one night while longing for his college girlfriend who, to this day, wouldn't give him a second look. When Keith first found the lyric sheet, he'd sat and began a bass line to the words, but Chuck wouldn't let this one be turned into a jam. He'd asserted the song was about love and love must be done acoustically. It was the only way for the emotions to come across, just him and his beloved vintage

Gibson. An heirloom passed down from his uncle who was rumored to once have played with Neil Young. Declan couldn't, and wouldn't, begrudge his friend's wants for the song. Playing it acoustic worked and was the standard way Station Zero would close their show or play into the encore.

"We'll let you know, when we've made a decision." Declan walked James to the large door of the warehouse, hoping he wouldn't jump into a long list of questions. "So don't call us, you know, we'll call you and that rock-and-roll bullshit." Declan gave James a final handshake and watched as the man slung his bag over his shoulder and walked off.

"Declan, this sucks ass, dude." Chuck's voice bounced off the walls of the warehouse as Declan walked back inside, the echo was one reason they chose the rehearsal space. The bare-bones price was another, but not as important as the authentic sound, similar to a live show without the normal interference of feedback they usually would get while recording as independent artists. They not only rehearsed there, they also cut their first EP to sell at shows.

"How many did we see today?" Keith sat on the rug next to his microphone. The boys were worn out from the day. They began auditioning at 10:00 a.m. and they still didn't have anyone suitable to fill Slater's spot. There was the one girl with a YouTube channel, but she still wasn't a good fit for them. It was going to be hard to fill Slater's shoes on drums, as Station Zero had played together for three years and knew how to read one another without words.

"We've seen exactly..." Declan scanned the sheet full of names and numbers of each person who auditioned in the last eight hours. "Sixteen, no, seventeen drummers including the guy who puked thirty seconds into his 'originally composed song' and ran out before we could get his number."

Declan shrugged and tossed the clipboard containing the sheet on the couch, following it with a thump as he plopped down. "This is not going well, guys. I thought it would. Everything appeared to be so easy."

"What do we do if we can't find a drummer, Dec?" Chuck started to sound panicky, which was never a good sign.

"It's only been one day, Chuck. We still have the weekend before we have to make any major decisions. Most musicians won't see the flyers until this weekend anyway. Assuming they go to shows or check the boards." Declan was trying to convince himself, as well as Chuck, that this thing would work itself out. The idea seemed basic and simple—post flyers about needing a

drummer, one comes, they're a perfect fit, the sound remains the same and they get to go on tour and have their careers set. This day of auditions with not one possible prospect was not what Declan thought would happen.

“So we do this again tomorrow and then what?” Chuck would not let this go. Declan sighed, for he lacked a definitive answer to give him.

“We wait, Chuck. Patience have you must, young Padawan, hmm yes?”

Chuck made a face at Declan. “Anyone tell you that your Yoda is terrible, boss?”

Declan gave a mock show of shock to his guitarist. “They have, but never in bed.” Declan waggled his eyebrows at Chuck and blew him a kiss.

Chuck smacked the air as if the kiss were flying toward him. “Okay, cool the sexual harassment, Dec. Way too much information even for a guy who loves you like a brother, as much as I do.”

“Oh, Chuck. Ouch. You wound me.” Declan grabbed at his heart as if hurt and rolled off the couch to the floor only to come face to face with a pair of extremely shiny, and extremely expensive, black dress shoes. *Hello. Where did you come from?*

Declan inspected the shoes and let his gaze follow them up to a pair of dark blue slacks, fitted and tapered to fit the legs they encased. His gaze continued up along the inseam to a crotch which left a bit to the imagination but outlined enough to know the possibilities of what was underneath. Declan grinned at the thought and propped himself up on his elbow to get a better look at what was attached to this pair of sexy legs. The slacks were part of a three-piece suit. Declan found this out when a pair of strong, large hands swept the sides of the blazer back to rest on slim hips. The immaculate fit of the vest under the blazer drew his gaze up to a dark patterned tie in a full Windsor knot, causing his mouth to water. Ties were among Declan's fetishes; they could be proper and formal, very useful in bed, or simply a way to drag a lover around to get them to do what you wanted. The tie led to an Adam's apple begging to be licked, sucked, and bitten. Declan brought his right leg up to hide his growing erection. Damn, this was one tall drink of water, and Declan wanted to flip over and wag his ass in the air, begging the man for attention.

Oh, but that face left Declan breathless. The myths of men who could be placed among the ruins of Greece, godlike men with chiseled features, long noses, and high cheekbones. This man had it all. Declan traced each line of the

man's face with his eyes until they came to rest on his. *Damn!* The guy wore dark-rimmed glasses, and glasses were more of a turn on than ties for Declan. When he looked up, the eyes behind the glasses were staring down into his. Declan fought the urge to rise to his knees, feel the material of those slacks beneath his hands and see what was hiding behind his zipper. He grinned instead, noticing the only response from this man was a raise of his right eyebrow, having more effect on his hard-on than a room full of naked men at a bath house. Thinking of a room full of naked men at a bath house was not where his mind should be going at that moment, but this man was sex on legs with bedroom eyes and a mop of curly blond hair just the perfect length to tug...

“Are the auditions over?” the suited man asked. *Oh fuck me, please?* Declan had never reacted to someone this strong or this fast before. The guy was more than likely straight and Declan was down on the floor wanting to be mounted. If he was close to coming from hearing the man's voice, what would he do if he touched him?

“Hey, man! No they aren't over. You just made it.” Declan heard Chuck's voice, made out the words he was saying, but he couldn't tear his eyes off the man above him. The man grinned and turned toward Chuck, breaking the spell and forcing Declan to remember where he was and what he was doing. He rolled to his back, pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes in an attempt to erase the erotic thoughts from his mind and to will his dick to calm down. This was neither the time nor the place for his dick to rule his brain; he needed to get his band a new drummer.

Declan used a move he learned in the cages and flipped to his feet. Straightening his button down shirt and wiping the floor off his ass, he watched the man walk, no, strut across the room to Chuck. There was no way this sex-god in a suit was going to play the drums. He must be waiting for someone, holding their place while they parked the car or something.

Declan walked over and stuck out his hand. “Hey. Hi. Declan Morrison, front man of Station Zero. I apologize for the odd meeting, we were messing around.” The man grinned, again, and the blood rushed to Declan's dick, again. This needed to stop or he would pass out from lack of blood-flow to the brain. The man put his hand in Declan's.

A shock passed through Declan with the simple touch. The man's hands were huge. His long fingers reached Declan's wrist where they lightly caressed

their way down to his palm. The touch was subtle, yet Declan hoped it was deliberate.

“Tate, Tate Newman. I hope I’m not too late. I rushed straight over from work.”

Declan reluctantly released Tate’s hand, looking him up and down. “You play the drums?”

Tate removed a black canvas messenger bag back from his shoulders, dropped the bag to the floor and straightened his glasses. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t. I saw the flyer at The Roxy last night. Shame you lost Slater, the man was talented.”

“So you’ve heard of us?” Declan was skeptical of the man. The slick suit and the way he spoke, with a deep timbre which vibrated off the walls and down to his groin, he was sure this guy was going to bust out with a song from AC/DC. Great band but the drumming was too easy for what they required.

“Heard of you, yes. Seen you live, more than once.” Tate grinned and did the eyebrow thing again. *Does he practice that look in the mirror?* “Even watched a show in a Greek Community fundraiser at USC. Not the type of music for Kappa Kappa Gamma, if I remember right?”

“Hot chicks in sororities like hard rock too!” Chuck became defensive when their past college shows were brought up. Tate raised his hand in defense and placated Chuck.

Declan was now impressed. The hot guy in the suit showed excellent taste in music. He just needed to be gay and he would fulfill all of Declan’s wet dreams. He would fill all his fantasies if he could actually play the drums.

“Hi, Tate.” Keith’s voice sounded from behind Declan. “Keith Raines, bass player.” Tate nodded and shook Keith’s hand.

“Um... hellooo. Remember me?” Chuck waved as he bounced up and down, his anxiety getting the best of him. They either played some good music fast or they needed to get the guy on a trampoline to get his energy depleted. “Chuck King, and before you ask—King is my real last name, but it does mean what it implies.” Tate shook Chuck’s hand, and Declan gave him an Italian mother’s love tap across the back of his head.

“Enough, Chuck.” Declan eyed Chuck as he rubbed the back of his head and gave him a dirty look. Declan pursed his lips in a kiss for Chuck once again

before he turned his attention back to Tate. "Sorry about him. Too much of anything makes him antsy."

"It's what makes his sound original. His energy flows through him to the guitar. It shows. It works." Tate nodded toward Chuck as he delivered his affirmation of his skills.

"See, I told you!" Chuck pointed at Declan; his validation from a complete stranger obviously meant more than the constructive criticism given him over the years.

"Yeah, you did." He raised his hand, made a duck face and nodded at Chuck. "So Tate, we have Slater's set if it will work for your audition."

Tate turned and eyed the drums sitting in the middle of the room. "They're fine, but I'll use my own sticks."

Declan was impressed, again, the guy brought his own sticks. To him, that showed dedication. He watched as Tate removed his blazer and laid it over the back of the couch. He unbuttoned his vest, loosened his tie and the first two buttons of this shirt, and then did something that made Declan and "little Declan" take notice. Tate undid the buttons of his cuffs and started rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt. Every roll of the sleeve revealed tanned skin, light hair dusting his forearms and an insane view of vein porn that left Declan panting. *This guy can't be real. I must have hit my head when I rolled off the couch.* Tate left his shirt tucked in and grabbed his sticks from the messenger bag on the floor. Declan leaned over to get a view of Tate's ass when he bent over, watching the material of the slacks pull tight across a set of firm cheeks which deserved to be pulled apart and have fingers, tongues, and his dick slide between them. Tate looked behind him and winked at Declan before he stood up. *Shit. He was caught. Was he flirting?* Tate walked to the drums, adjusted the stool, grabbed the material of his pants, pulled them up, and sat.

Tate grinned at Declan. "How do you want to do this?"

Declan cleared his throat. This wasn't a game. Well, he would play many games with Tate, but his band was not something he would play at.

Declan waved his hand in dismissal and feigned being uninterested. "So, what are *you* going to play for *us*?"

Tate turned his body toward the drums, placing his feet on the double bass pedals and tapped out a simple four beat rhythm. He twirled his sticks in each

hand and looked at the members of Station Zero, his gaze lingering last and longest on Declan.

“Let’s play name that tune and see if you can guess right.” Tate struck the cymbal with this stick, reaching out to stop it and the sound produced. “And if you do, let’s see if you,” Tate pointed the drum stick in his right hand at Declan, “can keep up.”

Declan shook his head at Tate’s audacity. The guy had a big set of balls, he would give him that.

Declan waited to see what Tate would come up with. He didn’t wait long. Tate tapped the bass pedal one time before he began drumming full force on the set with a moderate but fierce tempo reaching out and silencing the cymbal for a span of four seconds, then Tate turned into a flurry of arm/hand wielding drum sticks as he played out one of Declan’s favorite songs.

Holy shit. This guy can play!

Declan was too stunned to react, realizing Tate was playing System of a Down’s “B.Y.O.B.” He turned to judge the reaction of Keith and Chuck, but both men were on their way to retrieve their instruments off the stands, each wearing a huge grin on their face. Tate stopped drumming and counted back in with a *two, three, four*, count of hitting his sticks against each other. The count gave Chuck the final push; he joined in on guitar with Tate, nodding at the drummer, their sound blending well, but not as well as when Keith came in with the wicked bass line of the song and they sounded... like a band. Tate’s style of drumming was similar to Slater’s and yet had a flare of its own. His skill on the double pedals was faster than Slater’s; songs they wanted to try with Slater but couldn’t, they could now. *Now?* Was Declan already thinking of the future with this guy on drums before a four-minute audition was over?

The seamless sound of the music being played flowed through Declan, as his bandmates and this stranger jammed effortlessly together, like they’d been in a band for years and not for less than two minutes on a single song. Declan smiled and shook his head as he realized this man in the fuck-hot suit, tie, and glasses could be the perfect fit, the one they waited and hoped for. Declan wasn’t one for yelling his lyrics, but the urge to join in was overwhelming. He picked up his microphone, turned on his amp and joined in with the last chorus, singing both lead parts.

Declan sang about having a good time, looking at his bandmates and knowing they were doing just that.

Declan watched Tate play, admiring the bounce to his body when he played the slower tempo, showing he felt the music and drumming wasn't just a series of motions to complete a song. The band played the song to its end. Declan watched Tate as he closed his eyes and played the last few beats, ending the song with two hard hits to the snare drum.

The warehouse stilled to silence and each of the four men simply stared at each other. Chuck was the first to break the silence, of course, breaking out in to the riff from his favorite eighties movie, pumping his fist in the air and yelling, "I'm Ted Theodore Logan and we're Station Zero!"

The band, yeah the band, erupted in laughter. Declan walked over to Tate and nodded at the drums. "Nice choice for a song. "B.Y.O.B." is one of my favorites."

Tate solemnly nodded. "Mine too."

"So, you can rock System of a Down and you claim to know our sound."

Again, Tate nodded. Declan made a motion to Chuck as he raised two fingers of his right hand in the air, spun them in a circle three times and pointed.

"Let's see if *you* can keep up with this." Declan turned and walked away from Tate before the adrenaline, the emotions he was feeling about this entire audition, caught up with him and he did something stupid.

Chuck started playing the opening riff to one of their newly released tracks, "Dark Forever". The riff ended, turned into picking on the strings and right on time, the bass pedals sounded, better than ever, coming from the drums and Tate. Declan gripped the microphone and sang the intro verse, Keith's bass flooding the room and the four men played the song. This started a game of who can play what and out-play whom. Ten songs and less than two hours later, the sun hidden behind the Hollywood Hills, Station Zero was back in business.

The boys finished packing up their instruments, and Declan pulled his cell phone from his pocket and checked the time, 10:00 p.m., early for a Thursday night in Los Angeles. The adrenaline high he was on demanded an outlet.

He wanted to have a quick band meeting to ask Chuck and Keith if they were feeling the same way about Tate as he was, that he *was* their new drummer. He motioned from them to come over, letting Tate gather his things

and fix his clothes. Declan did not watch as he did, since he'd perved out on the guy enough in the last few hours. He had a bad case of lust for someone he knew nothing about. Declan refused to pine after someone who was straight, hoping they would see him and turn gay simply for him. That kind of thing only happened in the books his cousin Lisa read. He swore the girl read more gay sex and watched more gay porn than he did.

"So." Declan looked to Keith and Chuck. "What do you think of the suit?"

"Dude!" Chuck gave a stage whisper. "He rocked. I say he's in. He knows how to play and he knows our songs."

"What if he can't leave in three weeks?" Keith asked.

"Most jobs require two weeks' notice to quit. I guess if we're sure, we need to let him know now."

Declan glanced at Tate. He had removed his tie, taken off his vest and left his sleeves rolled up. The man did have incredibly sexy forearms.

"Are you both sure about this?" Declan knew he was, but he wanted his bandmates input too.

"Fuck yeah!" Chuck bellowed with a fist pump.

Keith nodded. "Yeah, Declan. He's good, really good. It's like we have been playing with him forever."

"I got that feeling too." Declan looked over his shoulder to see Tate sitting on the couch, waiting. He walked over with Chuck and Keith beside him. "Tate?"

Tate looked up. "Yes?"

"We really enjoyed playing with you tonight," Declan told Tate.

"I did too, with you. It was great."

"We talked it over and we want to know..." Declan was hit with the full force of what he was about to say. It was surreal that Slater had bailed on them. That they had to go through auditions and scramble to find someone to fill his position. But they had and that was what he would focus on.

"We want to know if you'd like to join us, as the new drummer for Station Zero and go on a six month North American Tour?" Declan held his breath for all of ten seconds waiting for Tate's answer.

“You bet your sweet ass I do!” Tate smiled, and Chuck let out a battle cry.

The new bandmates shook hands. “So you have to give notice to work right?” Keith asked.

“No.”

“No? Why is that?” Declan was worried they may have jumped the gun.

“I gave notice before I left today.” Tate clasped his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels, smiling wide.

“You’re one cocky son of a bitch aren’t you?” Declan stared at the man as he rocked back and forth.

“Nah, I just know I’m good.” Tate smirked.

Declan was so in lust with the guy, he’d have to call Lisa and ask how they turn the straight boys gay in her books.

“Well, Tate Newman, welcome to Station Zero. I don’t know about you guys, but I need to blow off some fucking steam. Who’s up for a game of pool and drinks?” Declan looked to the three men in front of him.

“I’ll fly if you buy?” Chuck offered.

“Chuck, you never fly or buy. You can’t drive if you drink asshat,” Declan teased his friend. “And I’m buying. First round’s on me.” He turned to Tate. “How ’bout it Newman? You up for some fun since you don’t have work in the morning?”

“Sure, sounds like...” A noise from Tate’s bag interrupted him. “Excuse me.” He walked over to the couch and pulled out his cell phone. He swiped at the screen and made a face that was not pleasant.

“Oh, the old ball and chain after you, dude?” Chuck loved the drama of relationships. It was too bad he couldn’t stay in one himself.

“Not really. Just the ex who never leaves.” Tate was typing out a reply on this phone. He finished and shoved the cell phone in his front pocket.

“Chicks be crazy man. Sorry you have a psycho ex-girlfriend,” Chuck replied in a singsong voice.

“Boyfriend, more mental than psycho.” Tate nodded.

“Did you just call me your boyfriend?” Chuck asked.

“No Chuck, I was correcting you. You said ex-girlfriend and I don’t have one. I have an ex-boyfriend.”

Declan’s head snapped around to look at Tate. The smarmy bastard stood there without a care in the world announcing to three total strangers that he was gay. Declan’s world began spinning. There was no way this guy—with a body like a Greek god and the hands that were blessed by rock angels on the drums—was gay. The odds of that happening would never be in Declan’s favor.

“Seriously? So now we are a rock band with two gay dudes? You know I love ya, Dec, but isn’t that going to fuck with our image?”

“Two gay dudes?” Tate asked.

“Thanks for outing me, Chuck.” Declan leaned his head back and took a deep breath. He loved Chuck but the man was pushing his luck with this.

“Since when are you in the closet, boss?” Chuck shrugged.

“I’m not, but I usually like to be the one to express my sexuality to new people on my own terms,” Declan grumbled through clenched teeth and punched Chuck in the arm.

“Ow! Shit, sorry Dec. It just caught me off guard.”

“Don’t worry about it now. Fairies are all out of the closet now, aren’t they?” Declan stood on his tiptoes and fluttered his hands like wings. “So let’s go get those drinks and play some pool.”

Declan glanced at Tate. “Hey you want to walk with me?” he asked.

“I have my car here,” Tate stated.

“I know, the bar is just a few blocks away and”—Declan pointed to the floor above them—“I live in the loft above the warehouse. You can leave it here and we can come back for it later.”

“Is this your way to seduce me, Morrison? A walk with just us gay dudes to the bar?” Tate waggled his eyebrows and grinned. “Liquor me up and take me back to your place to ‘get my car’?”

“I’m not seducing you, Newman. You aren’t my type,” Declan lied.

“That’s not what your dick was saying when you were on the ground checking me out.” Tate tilted his head and gave Declan a challenging look.

Declan was screwed. Not only was he physically attracted to the guy, but Tate had a sharp wit on him that turned Declan on.

“Let’s go,” Declan grumbled, glaring at Tate as they walked side by side out of the warehouse. Declan closed and locked the door and nodded to Tate.

“Ready?” Declan asked.

“Where is the bar?” Tate inquired.

“Just up the street, three straight blocks,” Declan said.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“After you, Newbie.” Declan bowed, waving his arm for Tate to walk ahead.

“Are you making me walk in front so you can check out my ass again?” Tate teased and walked off as Declan did just that. Tate stopped, looked over his shoulder, and winked at Declan.

He was so screwed.

Chapter 3

~March~

The crowd was loud for Balthazar's encore at Madison Square Garden. Declan was busy setting up the merchandise table for the rush after the show. He looked across the foyer to see Chuck in a cluster of girls asking him to sign numerous body parts. He was amazed the guy could attract anyone with his attitude. Chuck was fun but the fun usually borderlined on over the top, at least 99 percent of the time.

Declan had a love/hate relationship with this part of being in the band. He knew they had to do a lot for themselves before they made it, and being your own grunt man sucked, but he loved the interaction with fans. He liked talking to the new fans who only discovered them through them being an opening act, and the fans who came just for them. Declan loved being a musician, being a singer and being a part of Station Zero. He just wished he had the chance to have fun while he was doing what he loved.

It wasn't that he never had fun, he just shouldered more responsibility, though self-imposed, when it came to the band. If Declan went off and had fun like Chuck did, there wouldn't be a band to love.

Declan straightened shirts and hoodies on the table and made sure the postcards with their webpage were front and center. The small amount of CDs were lined up at the front of the table for those who went old school with their music. The CDs sold, though not as well as the digital downloads off their site. Declan managed their website too, and now the hats he wore for the band were starting to get heavier than he'd planned.

A hand on his back made him jump; Declan spun around and relaxed when he saw it was Tate. The man stood there with a wide grin on his face, a grin that was sexier than Declan would have liked.

"A bit jumpy, Declan?"

"No, I was just getting some extra cardio in after our set. You know, build up the lung expansion and all." Declan blew out a breath and turned back to the table, eyeing their merchandise and deciding he and the table were ready for business.

“Funny guy, I see.” Tate walked around the front of the table, fingering the shirts before stopping and giving Declan a nod. “Nice set up. I didn’t know you did this.”

“Someone has to.” Declan shrugged.

“What about the others? Do Keith and Chuck help?” Tate looked over his shoulder in the direction of Chuck and his girl posse. “They don’t help?”

“We all have our jobs.” Declan waved his arm over the table and bowed.

“*We* being you?” Tate did his damn eyebrow raise with his question.

“It’s always been like this.” Declan didn’t want to go into the off-balance dynamics of the band. He knew he did more than the others, but it felt too late to change now. He had his ways of doing things and delegation was never his strong suit. It was easier to do things himself and not have to watch over Chuck, making sure he charged the hot girl for her T-shirt before he signed her breast, or hoping Keith was talkative enough to engage the casual person into buying something, or at least taking a post card. It wasn’t what Declan wanted to do after a show but it was what he’d always done.

“Speaking of jobs.” Declan was determined to change the subject. “What is it you do, or did, again, Tate?”

“I’m, um... I was an actuary.”

“A what?”

“An actuary.”

“What the hell does an actuary do?”

“Funny you should ask, we’re experts in risk management.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, don’t start. I get the irony.” Tate laughed.

Declan made a zipping motion with his fingers across his lips and tossed the imaginary key over his shoulder. He smiled closed-mouthed at Tate and waggled his eyebrows.

“Funny *and* charming, I see. What else will I learn about you, Declan?” Tate came close and looked over Declan’s shoulder. “You can’t talk with locked lips.” Tate grinned at him. “Where is that key?”

Declan mumbled his response. His hand was so close to Tate's shoulder—if he moved it a half inch it would rest on the spot where the skin shown above his shirt collar...

The roar of the crowd as the music stopped brought Declan out of his daydream. Max's voice came out loud and clear, "New York! We are Balthazar! Thank you for spending the night with us..." The crowd's cheers grew louder. "Good night!"

"Duty calls. Time to feed the masses our merchandise." Declan grabbed the keys out of the front pocket of his jeans and pulled the cash box from under the table. He unlocked the box and readied himself for the next job of the night. He turned when he heard the scrape of a chair against the foyer floor. Tate was pulling a stool from behind and up to the table.

"Can I help you?" Declan wasn't sure what Tate's game plan was.

"No, but I can help you." Tate sat on the stool. "You shouldn't have to do everything, alone, Declan."

Declan knew he resembled a fish with Tate's response. He couldn't seem to form words, and his mouth was becoming dry the longer it hung open. Tate's finger crooked under Declan's jaw and lightly pushed his mouth closed.

"Easy, Declan. We don't want the wrong kind of business with your mouth as advertisement." Tate grinned and patted Declan's cheek.

Advertisement?

Declan stared at Tate as he talked shop with the first customer at the table. He was a natural at this. Declan was sure someone who spent their day job alone in an office would be awkward at small talk with strangers. He should have known better.

Declan was fast learning Tate was capable of almost anything.

Their bus drove into Pittsburgh, the next stop on the tour. Declan responded to a text from Rick, their manager, about a radio interview before the show. He was pleased they were making a name for themselves on the tour, and a local radio wanted them on the air. This would be their first interview like this, and Declan would be lying if he said he wasn't nervous.

Press was not something he looked forward to. The interviewers loved to focus on his sexuality. They found the idea that he liked to take a dick up the

ass more worthy of their time than what direction the band was taking next. Declan was short lipped on his answers, but he refused to hide he was gay. He'd done it long enough as a teen, and besides, being a gay front man of a hard rock band wasn't unheard of. He wasn't in full leather like Rob Halford of Judas Priest, but he wasn't hiding it for years either.

Declan understood now why people in the public eye hid their sexuality. He never imagined admitting he was a gay man would become a focus for Station Zero. It was one of the reasons he worked so hard for the band and shouldered the base of all the responsibility. He didn't want them to be stereotyped in any way because of who he chose to love.

Declan wanted to talk to Tate before this interview and let him know how things would go. Tate mentioned he was out to his friends and family but preferred he not be outed on the tour. Declan respected the man's wishes; he just wanted him to be prepared for the things he would hear when they were interviewed. Declan was fine with jokes, but there was the possibility the interviewer would cross the line into homophobia.

Pulling up the GPS on his phone, Declan saw they were less than thirty minutes away from the radio station. Declan needed to talk to Tate now and prepare his bandmate for whatever they might encounter.

Declan walked to the back of the bus and knocked on the door to the private suite. It opened moments later to present a shirtless Tate in a pair of low-hung gray sweats using a towel to dry his hair. Declan closed his eyes, and tried to find something he could think about so he would not get a hard on in front of Tate. Jacking off to thoughts of him in his suit playing drums was one thing, but he didn't need to offer Tate further ammunition to tease him. Their initial meeting was quite enough, and Tate still liked to poke fun.

"You need something, Declan?" Tate asked as he looped the towel around his neck and gripped the ends.

"What?" Declan looked up to find a grin on Tate's face. The man was slowly getting under his skin, and he didn't know what to make of it. Declan was used to the hook-ups; the one night stands that never held a promise of another night. He liked it that way. Relationships were messy and his life couldn't handle a mess right now.

"Oh yeah." Declan shook his head to get his brain out of his dick. "I wanted to give you a heads up about the radio interview."

“What about it? Will there be a pop quiz on historical Pittsburgh?” Tate asked.

“No, but DJ’s can get out of hand during interviews.” Declan said.

“How so?” Tate inquired.

“Some like to focus on me...”

“Which is understandable. You’re the front man,” Tate offered.

“No, Tate. They like to focus on who I’m fucking,” Declan stated.

Tate cleared his throat at Declan’s blunt admission. “I see, and you think this will be a problem?”

“I don’t know if it will or not. I wanted to let you know; we are a band of good-looking young guys...”

“You think I’m good looking, Declan?”

Declan groaned. “Not the point, Newman. They will pry into our personal lives. They go straight to our love lives. Chuck has his reputation and so does Keith and I’m known as the queer front man.”

Tate moved to lean against the door frame. The towel hanging around his neck swayed as he rocked back and forth. “Okay. I get it. You don’t want me to say I’m gay?”

“I thought you were keeping quiet?”

“I was. I mean, I am. I don’t know.” Tate faltered. “I guess I will just play it by ear when we get there.”

The look on Tate’s face made Declan want to gather him in his arms and hold him. This line of thinking was unusual for Declan; his firm rules on personal space outside of fucking included no hugging unless it was for dogs or kids he happened to like. This was odd.

“It’s up to you, Tate. I just want you to be prepared.” Declan forced a smile. “The jokes they think are funny can piss you off if you aren’t ready for them. Hell, they piss me off when I’m ready or not. Just be careful with what you say if you don’t want to be outed.”

Tate shoved off from the door frame and gave Declan a thumbs up. “You got it, boss.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Sorry, Declan. Should I call you sir instead?” Tate batted his eyelashes at Declan and pursed his lips.

Declan wanted to push the man inside the suite and jump him. He didn't care who was on top, Declan was versatile and would take Tate in any way in every position. Those lips would look better with something shoved between them, like his dick. He would show Tate how many names he could call him and how many times he would scream his name as he begged for it. *Cool it, Morrison.*

Declan took a step away from the door and pulled his phone out of his front pocket. “We are almost there.” He gave Tate's bare skin and now slightly tented sweats a once over from head to toe. Declan bit the inside of his cheek to stifle a groan seeing Tate's aroused state. “Be ready.”

Declan turned and walked back to the common area of the bus before Tate could do or say anything else. Having Tate Newman as his drummer was turning out to be the best and worst decision Declan made yet.

“Top of the mornin' to ya, Pittsburgh. It's the Jed and Jamie show in the morning and today we have some special guests. Station Zero is in the studio with us, stopping in while on tour with Balthazar. Welcome to Pittsburgh, boys.”

Declan, Keith, Tate and Chuck all gave their hellos back. Declan's knee was bouncing with the anxiety flowing through his veins. This would be a short interview, shorter than planned as the radio station pushed them back for actual news which just broke. Declan was fine with that, because exposure was good, but he hated this part of the job.

“Morning, Jed and Jamie. Thanks for having us.” Declan was the unofficial spokesperson of the band of course, so he made sure to speak up before the others had a chance.

“Declan Morrison, how *is* the tour going?” Jed asked.

“It's going great, thanks. We're playing to sold-out crowds and having a blast on the road with Balthazar,” Declan answered.

“And how is your new drummer working out?” Jamie asked. She turned her body toward Tate and gave him a small wave with her question.

“Tate’s been great. We were lucky to find someone so quick after Slater left,” Declan answered as Jamie scooted her chair closer to Tate.

“Mmm hmm,” Jamie purred. “You’re lucky indeed.” She rolled her chair right next to Tate, crossed her legs, rested her elbow on her knee and put her chin in her hands. Her ample cleavage was proudly displayed in this position. “How have the boys been treating you, Tate?” She placed her free hand on Tate’s leg, drumming her fingers on his thigh.

Tate looked over at Declan with wide eyes at Jamie’s bold gesture. Declan could only shrug and give him an “I told you so” look and hope Tate could handle this.

“They’ve been amazing, Jamie.” Tate subtly slid his chair back to dislodge her hand. “Thanks for asking.”

Declan grinned when Jamie realized quickly Tate wasn’t interested in flirting with her. She was notorious for being aggressive when she wanted someone, and Declan was unsure how she was going to take the immediate rejection.

Declan nodded at Tate in approval, and he noticed a blush creep up Tate’s neck; the man’s poker face was worse than his. Declan glanced at Jamie and hoped she hadn’t noticed the exchange between them.

The band answered a number of organized and traditional questions: how long was the tour, where are they most excited about playing, where they plan to go from here with their careers et cetera. It was almost time to end the interview when Jamie decided to play games with Declan.

“So, Declan. Enjoying Pittsburgh?” Jamie asked.

“Not yet. We just got in this morning,” Declan returned.

“Oh. Planning on doing some sight-seeing?” Jamie probed.

“If we have time. We always like to check out local places as well as the tourist attractions.” Declan did not like the tone of her voice—he didn’t like where this could be going.

Jamie reached into a folder in front of her and pulled out a stack of stapled papers. “I took the liberty of printing out a few places you might want to check out.” She handed the papers to Jed who glanced at them and then at Jamie with a scowl but handed them off to Declan.

“Maybe your drummer would like to tag along?” Jamie bent her wrist and wiggled it back and forth at Tate.

Shut up, Tate. Don't say a word.

Declan hoped Tate developed the power of telepathy and could hear him. When he glanced over, Tate was frozen in his chair, silent and staring straight at Jamie.

Declan looked at the papers and back at Jamie. *Figures*. “You know, Jamie. You really are amazing with your insight into my gay life.” Declan looked at Jamie as the fake grin fell from her face.

“How did you know I wanted to see the *real* Liberty Avenue?” Declan spoke in a higher tone and exaggerated his words and waved his arms around. “Wow. *Queer as Folk* was my favorite show. It showed the world how my people really are.”

Declan actually couldn't stand the show but watched every episode of it with Lisa. She was convinced one day he would find his own Brian Kinney. She would get a kick out of this blast from Jamie before she went to her bosses at the firm, where she was a paralegal, and asked them to sue Jamie's ass and the radio station pro bono.

Jamie's face turned red, and she looked around the room for help and coming up empty. Jed wasn't going to bail her out of this one, not this time.

“I'm glad I could help, Declan.” Her words came out sounding choked. “Just let me know if I can help and oh...” She pulled a brochure out of the folder sliding it across the table to Declan. “Here is a hotel voucher for you and the boys. No need to sleep on the bus tonight.”

Declan noticed her hands were now shaking. Such bravado shot down so quickly. It was a shame she didn't put up more of a fight, the small exchange made Declan's nerves downshift.

He raised the brochure and vouchers to her in mock salute. “Oh, thank you so much, Jamie. How can we ever repay you?” He gave her a bright and wide smile. Declan made a noise he hoped resembled a squeal and placed his hand over his open mouth. “Would you like to come with me to Donny's Place? Don't they have a leather basement? What's it called...?” Declan tapped his fingers against his chin. “Ooh Leather Central and I hear it's amazing!”

Jamie gasped and covered her microphone. Her face flushed red, and she was obviously irritated. Good. She deserved it.

“Jed, I need a minute.” Jamie stood, knocking her chair over and stomped out of the room. Declan gave an apologetic shrug to Jed who shook his head and gave a tight smile back.

Jed cleared his throat. “About time. Nicely done, son. Nicely done.” Jed put his hand out and Declan grasped it in a firm handshake.

Declan glanced over at his bandmates; Chuck was busy playing with the knobs on the board in front of him, Keith was silent and simply nodded at Declan and then there was Tate. Tate who looked at Declan with what could only be admiration in his eyes and it made Declan’s stomach do flips.

“So Jed, have you heard the story of what our band was almost named?” Declan steered the last of the interview back to the band where it belonged.

“It was just a suggestion, dude. I didn’t mean it!” Chuck was finally able to join in the interview.

“You mean you didn’t want to name us Citizen Dick?” Keith chimed in.

“Hey! Citizen Dick was a classic band made up of kick-ass grunge artists!” Chuck spun his chair around and played air guitar. ““Touch me I’m Dick’ would have been a great song to record.”

Jed laughed at Chuck and his whining about the name. “Sure it would have been Chuck, but Declan here doesn’t resemble Matt Dillon so you might not have the same appeal.”

Declan couldn’t help but laugh. Chuck would be the only person to think naming a band after his favorite body part would be a good choice.

The interview carried on and ended on a good note. Declan thanked Jed and returned the vouchers for the hotel. He didn’t want anything from a station who employed someone like Jamie. The boys would pout and he would endure it for the night, but he stood up for himself. And now he stood up for Tate whether he was out or not.

Declan boarded the bus with his bandmates and went to the mini fridge to grab them all a bottle of water. It was too early for beer even if they were supposed rock stars who partied 24/7. If fans really knew what they did on tour, they would be bored.

Declan handed them each a bottle and raised his in a toast.

“To our first nonlocal radio interview!”

His bandmates raised their bottles and repeated his words back to him.

“To Declan, kicking ass with the succubus at the station who should be fired!” Chuck stood and pumped his fist in the air with his toast.

“Chuck, do you know what a succubus is?” Keith asked.

“Um, yeah. I watch Buffy you know,” Chuck answered and took a swig of his water.

“It was nothing, Chuck. Shit happens.” Declan shrugged and his neck twitched in pain. He’d been shrugging a lot lately.

“But it shouldn’t, Declan. Not like that,” Tate responded. His brow was wrinkled with worry lines. What Declan wouldn’t give to sit next to him and smooth them away?

What’s stopping you?

“It’s okay, Tate. What she did was mild, trust me.” Declan drank his water and tossed the empty bottle in the recycling bin.

“Let’s focus on tonight’s show and move on with the tour,” Declan proposed.

The members of Station Zero agreed, and Declan sat at the table and watched as the buildings passed him by. He didn’t lie to Tate, what happened with Jamie at the radio station *was* mild. He hoped he wouldn’t have to deal with anything more for the rest of the tour.

Chapter 4

~June~

Declan walked to the front of the stage and wrapped his arms around his bandmates' shoulders as the stage lights came up, blinding them as they took their final bow. The crowd cheered and the boys turned to each other and smiled. San Antonio was one hell of a show, but Declan was beat. He'd been working nonstop with Rick on different ideas and where they could take the band. He deserved a night off.

Declan waved to the crowd one last time, nodded to his bandmates and made his way offstage. He was congratulated for a good show with handshakes and pats of the back from the numerous people backstage. He felt great after their set, yet found it hard to genuinely smile at everyone. Walking into the green room, he met the band members of Balthazar as they were preparing to take the stage.

"Great show tonight, boys!" Max shook his hand and moved onto the rest of the band. "Way to warm up the crowd for us, they're going to be hungry when we get out there."

Declan smiled and felt the honesty in Max's words. The man was a rarity in the land of the music business, at least the people Declan came in contact with. Max was old school—he paid it forward and gave back to those who were on the bottom of the musical totem pole. Max knew what it was like to be where Declan and Station Zero were right now and he did what he could to help.

"They love you no matter who opens for you, Max." Declan gave Max a brotherly smack on the back. "But thanks for letting it be us."

"No problem, Declan. Hey, you gonna stay and watch tonight's show? The pyro guy has some new tricks he's trying out."

"Actually, no. I thought about heading out and attempting normalcy for a night."

"Why would you want to do that, boss?" Chuck's mumble around whatever he had stuffed in his mouth came from over Declan's shoulder.

"It's what us grown-ups do, Charles." Declan patted Chuck's stuffed cheek. "You stay and have fun. But try to behave when there are cameras around, okay?"

Chuck swallowed and nodded. "Got it, boss. Only be the bad boy in private."

"And make sure she isn't a hooker..." Declan warned.

"That only happened once! Who knew she ran a site and hoarded a big black book like Gene Simmons."

"Be good, Chuck." Declan squeezed Chuck's bicep as he pouted and went back to the craft table.

"Max, have a good show." Declan shook the front man's hand once again. He nodded to each musician in the room, eyeing Keith as he huddled on the couch with the same girl from their show in New Orleans and noticed Tate was missing.

"Has anyone seen Tate?"

"I'm here." Declan turned at the sound of Tate's voice as he walked through the door. "There was an issue with my bass pedal and I wanted to speak to the tech about it. What's up?"

"Nothing, just letting you know I wasn't staying for Balthazar's show tonight."

Tate did the thing with his eyebrow that was fast becoming one of Declan's favorites about him in a long list of favorite things about him. Declan scanned the man's face as he slowly wiped a small towel over it and down his neck and chest.

"Oh, really? Want some company?" Declan's gaze met Tate's, and the man just grinned, as he waited for his answer.

"Not sure what I'm doing yet. I was looking for a night of normal to do..."

"I can do normal."

"Oh look, the boys are planning a date," Chuck teased and began to sing. "Declan and Tate, making a match, who's gonna pitch and who's gonna..."

"Shut up, Chuck!" Declan and Tate yelled simultaneously.

Chuck laughed. "Use protection boys, and Declan, *don't* do anything I wouldn't do!"

Tate balled up his towel and threw it at Chuck. He turned back to Declan.

"I understand if you don't want company."

“No. I don’t... I mean, company would be nice, actually.” Declan smiled at Tate’s surprised expression. “I’m going to hit the shower...”

“You take the bus, I’ll shower here,” Tate insisted.

“Deal,” Declan agreed. “Meet me at the bus in twenty?”

Tate nodded, walked toward Declan and whispered as he passed, “It’s a date.”

It’s a date.

Yeah, it’s what Declan wanted this to be all right. From the moment Tate Newman walked into their studio warehouse in Los Angeles and into his life, the man got under his skin. Declan wanted Tate’s skin, wanted to lick every inch of it, bury his nose in it and inhale his scent. Tate drove him to distraction. Maybe hanging out with only him for a night would exorcise Declan’s lust. Was it just lust? He liked being around Tate, the guy had a sense of humor and he was smart as hell. He knew Tate was an actuary and he didn’t exactly love his job—but Declan wanted to know more about him—and not just why he played the drums barefoot. It wasn’t so unusual for a drummer to play in such a way though, Declan wondered if there was more behind it.

Declan grabbed his faded red shirt out of the rumpled pile, which was his suitcase, and slipped it over his head. He buttoned up the fly on his vintage Levi’s and spun around looking for his shoes. Declan had the reputation of looking like he shopped out of vintage clothing stores, and he did, just not the trendy ones littering Melrose Avenue or anywhere close. Since he left home Declan made sure to spend his money frugally and thrift stores were as frugal as he could go. He also liked the hunt for the perfect piece of clothing and imagining the history of who wore it and why it ended up on the rack. Each piece has a story that took on a commonality of angst with a happily ever after, the once loved piece of clothing no longer unwanted and forgotten.

Finding his shoes and sliding them on, he checked himself in the mirror. Declan knew he was good looking, it was what got him into a lot of places, but he wasn’t vain. His hair could do with a cut and the dark circles under his eyes weren’t attractive, but he was tired and his body wasn’t good at hiding the effects.

Declan grabbed his wallet. Shoving it in the back pocket of his jeans, he walked toward the stairs when he caught sight of Tate leaning against one of

the smaller passenger vans. His blond hair caught the light of the sun as it began its descent for the night and cast a warm glow over the man. Declan raked his eyes over Tate's form; he wore a pair of tan pants and a black polo shirt, with the ever present Chuck Taylors on his feet. A simple outfit as the one Tate was wearing shouldn't be a turn-on, but Declan and his dick thought otherwise. The pants hugged Tate in all the right places, the material clung to his strong thighs and tapered off at the knee. The polo shirt was fitted enough to catch the outline of Tate's chest and the elastic around the sleeves strained against his biceps. Tate wasn't a huge man, but he was built from exercise and playing the drums. Declan eyed Tate's forearms and those delectable veins down to his watch with the leather band.

Declan broke off his eye-fuck of Tate, walked down the stairs and off the bus. Tate turned as the door made a sound as it closed. He smiled, nodded and made his way to Declan. They met in the middle of the parking lot, silently taking in the sight of one another—alone for the first time since they met and started this journey together. The music of Balthazar's set and the sounds from the crowds provided background noise; neither of them talked at first.

Declan cleared his throat. "So, you ready to go?"

Tate nodded, rocked back on his heels and fidgeted with his watch. "Have any ideas what you want to do?"

"Not one, I thought we'd play it by ear."

Tate ducked his head and looked up through his lashes. "I looked up a few places around town while you took your shower. San Antonio has some cool touristy places to check out if you're up to it?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"There is a place, San Antonio River Walk. From what I found online it looks pretty cool. Relaxing and all with decent places to eat or..." Tate trailed off.

"The River Walk sounds good. I've heard about it before. You want to grab something to eat first?"

Tate patted his stomach and nodded. "Yeah, I kinda looked up a place to eat too, if you're okay with eating at a bar."

"You're quite the planner aren't you, Tate?" Declan was impressed with Tate's forethought for their evening.

“Sorry, force of habit. I like organization. It calms me down to have things worked out. I’m not a fan of chaos,” Tate blustered.

“And yet you’re on a tour with crazy musicians?”

“Organized chaos is a gray area.” Tate shrugged at the omission.

“Where’s this bar?” Declan looked over his shoulder and across the parking lot to the line of waiting black town cars.

“It’s on the River Walk, called The Esquire Tavern. It has history and from what I read, killer beer and burgers.”

“Sounds good to me, let’s grab a ride and go.”

Tate smiled, and for all the flirting he did with Declan, this smile was innocent and sweet. Declan thought the flirting was going to kill him until he saw this smile.

For the umpteenth time since he met Tate Newman, Declan thought about how screwed he was and how much he was starting not to care.

Declan slid into the leather-backed booth of The Esquire Tavern and looked over the menu he’d grabbed on the way in. He watched as one of the female servers walked past their table and gave Tate a flirtatious look.

“She was checking you out,” Declan told him.

“Who?” Tate looked over his shoulder.

“The server that just walked by.” Declan chuckled. “You didn’t feel her eyes on you?”

Tate shook his head. “No, I guess I don’t pay attention as much as I should.”

Declan studied Tate as he glanced over the menu. Tate called this a date, and Declan wanted to pretend it was... didn’t he? He liked Tate, he wanted to try for more with Tate, but Declan was unsure how to navigate a romance or a relationship. *Romance?* Tate made him think crazy thoughts, and he was beginning to like it.

“You ready to order?” Tate asked, bringing Declan out of his thoughts.

“Sure? I’ll go place the order if you want?”

Tate nodded and gave Declan his order. Declan took their menus and walked to the counter. There were a few people in front of him, and while he waited he let his mind wander again, straight to Tate. There was something brewing between them that had been there from their first meeting at Tate's audition. Declan believed in lust at first sight, but it wasn't straight lust with Tate. He *liked* being around him day in and day out as a bandmate, a friend and more. The thing he didn't like was being lost with how to deal with his feelings.

Declan looked over his shoulder to catch Tate watching him. He felt the heat rise from his neck to his face. *The man makes me blush*. Declan chuckled and winked at Tate before he returned to the counter and placed their order. He paid for their meals, grabbed their mugs of beer and walked back to the table.

"I was told these were the best local beers they had," Declan said, sitting across from Tate and sliding him a mug.

"Yeah?" Tate pursed his lips. "Let's see."

Tate tipped his mug and took a sip of his beer. He pulled the mug away from his mouth, and the foam had left a moustache on his top lip.

Declan pointed at Tate's face. "You, um have some..." He tapped his finger against his mouth.

"What?" Tate asked. "My lips?" Tate grinned, and Declan watched as he ran his tongue over his top lip, cleaning it of the foam.

"Jesus, Tate," Declan muttered. This was going to be a long night if Tate kept doing things like that with his mouth.

"Is there a problem Declan?" Tate raised his eyebrows and grinned. "I just like good head"—Tate winked—"on my beer, that is."

"Oh yeah..." Declan stopped as they were interrupted.

"Hi, boys." The server who was checking Tate out earlier arrived with their food. "Who had the Bison Burger?"

They sorted out their burgers, fries, and Tate's crazy assortment of condiments and were ready to eat.

"Dinner's served." Declan bowed his head and waved his arm over the table. He had no plans to continue the banter with Tate and his opinions on good head.

“Thanks, this looks good.” Tate grabbed his burger, looked up and into Declan’s eyes as he took a bite.

Declan cleared his throat, attempting not to stare at Tate’s mouth as he ate. Declan lost his self-control, though, and couldn’t help but watch the way Tate’s long fingers gripped the thin fries, his mouth wrapping around each one, his cheeks slightly hollowing as he sucked off the ketchup. Declan imagined it wrapped around other areas, preferably his dick, and his dick obviously agreed as it swelled.

Declan coughed and choked on his burger.

“You okay there, Declan?” Tate asked with concern.

“Yeah.” Declan swallowed and took a long drink of his beer.

“So, what do you have planned after this?” Declan wanted to steer the conversation toward something that would make his dick behave. Being on this non-date with Tate was making it hard to focus.

The San Antonio River Walk was beautiful, and the name implied exactly what it was: five miles of a river lined with shops, restaurants, and an outdoor venue for shows with plenty of available space for walking. Declan had heard of this place before Tate suggested it for their... *it's not a date Morrison*. He knew Tate called it one, but Declan needed to think of this as non-date to settle his emotions.

Declan walked alongside Tate, the silence comfortable between them. Anyone could hold a conversation with you, but it was a true gift to be silent with someone. He glanced at Tate, taking in the quiet strength that was radiating off him and drawing Declan closer. As much as Declan liked the silence, he wanted to talk before he got lost in his head and started to daydream of actual dates with Tate.

“So...?” Declan asked as they walked next to the tables with brightly colored rainbow umbrellas eating their beer-flavored ice cream.

“So?” Tate asked.

“Tell me something about you?” Declan wanted to learn anything he could about Tate. They chatted here and there, while on the bus or in rehearsals, but they were more superficial than deeply informative. Declan would have tied

Tate to a chair and gone over a checklist of questions if his brain would have stayed on the questions and not what he could do *to* Tate tied to a chair.

“What do you want to know?” Tate asked.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Declan went with a safe question since dirty thoughts were plenty when he was with Tate. “Who were you in high school?”

“You’re going to make me think that far back?” Tate laughed and bumped his shoulder with Declan’s. “Making an old man work, are ya?”

“You’re not old Tate,” Declan promised.

“Older than you,” Tate replied. “I was in the marching band in high school.”

“You were?” Declan liked the idea of Tate being a band geek. “Playing drums?”

“Yup. Drums or the tuba were the fat kid’s choice back then.”

Declan choked on his ice cream. “You were fat?”

“A bit. You and I could’ve fit in my marching band uniform.” Tate shrugged and licked his melting ice cream. Declan stifled a groan as he watched Tate’s tongue delve into the soft serve and swipe along his bottom lip to catch the bit that dribbled. “What about you, Declan? Who were you in high school?”

“I was the jock.” Declan waited for the obvious response he got when people learned he played sports.

“Football?” Tate asked.

“Baseball,” Declan stated.

“Nice. Were you out then?” Tate’s question took Declan back to his high school days, and though he wanted to talk to Tate, to get to know him, thinking about those times brought back conflicting memories.

“No, but I knew I was gay when I was twelve.” Declan snuck a look at Tate from under his lashes. Tate was focused on Declan as they talked when not busy navigating the walk around other pedestrians.

“How was that, being a gay jock?”

“It wasn’t anything. My cousin Lisa used to get girls from her school—she lived in a different town—to pose as my girlfriends.” The memory made Declan smile. “It was easier to pretend.”

“Did it work?”

“For a while, but it didn’t feel right lying to everyone *and* me,” Declan answered honestly.

“When did you come out?”

“When I was eighteen.” Declan gripped his ice cream cone tight. “The night before I left for college.”

“I didn’t know you went to college?”

“I didn’t actually,” he admitted.

Tate grunted. “How did the coming out go?”

“Let’s say not well. I haven’t talked to my parents since then.” Saying those words hurt worse than Declan thought it would. He hoped letting his skeletons out of the proverbial closet would prove to be cathartic.

“Wow, Declan. I’m sorry.” Tate’s sincerity was clear.

“So you’ve heard my short story, what’s yours?” Declan was more than ready to change the subject, to move on and away from his past.

“Let me make a long, boring, drama-filled story short: I came out when I was twenty-one, when my best friend with benefits decided he’d turn my life upside down, which in turn created a lot of stress with my family.”

“Sounds intense.” Declan grimaced.

“It was. The guy wasn’t the best decision I made in my life, but you learn from mistakes and move on, right?”

“Yeah, I guess. How did your parents take it?”

“My dad wasn’t thrilled, being the stereotypical macho man he is. My mom—she went overboard with her involvement.” Tate’s gruff response hit a chord with Declan.

“Involvement?”

They stopped at the bridge and watched a boat full of tourists travel along the river. Declan shoved his hands into his back pockets and waited for Tate’s answer.

“She joined every group she could to support her gay son. She sends me selfies from her PFLAG meetings with the other moms in the background. It’s nice she wants to be a part of it, but it gets overwhelming most of the time.”

“At least she tries, though.” Declan would give his left nut to have his parents acknowledge his presence. Having a parent support you, even if it was over the top, was something he would never know.

“Yeah, she does. She already lost one child and she vowed she would do whatever was in her power not to lose another.”

“You have siblings?”

“Had,” Tate sighed. “I had a sister. She died when I was thirteen.” Tate’s voice turned melancholy as he related this new bit of information.

“How... if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I don’t. It’s fine. She was born with Type 1 Diabetes and lost her sight when she was eight. She adapted better than anyone thought to being blind.” Tate turned to Declan and the smile spread across his face showed his love for his late sister. “You know how I play barefoot?”

“Yeah,” Declan responded.

“I do it in honor of her, because of Louise. She used to say the greatest thing in the world was touch because without it she couldn’t see...”

Declan’s next question was swallowed by a tap on his shoulder. Declan spun around as Tate delivered a surprisingly unmanly scream, and he found himself face to face with a mime.

Turning back, he managed to catch Tate as he teetered on the edge of the bridge. Laughter erupted from him at Tate’s freak-out when he saw the mime.

Declan pulled Tate back onto the bridge, shaking his head as Tate’s eyes widened as he looked over his shoulder.

“Tate, buddy, you okay?” Declan righted Tate and made sure he was solid on his feet.

“Mime.” Tate pointed over his shoulder. “There’s a mime behind you, Declan.”

Declan searched Tate’s face and the fear plainly written across it. He reached out and patted Tate’s stomach as he turned toward the mime standing behind them, wearing black pants, a white loose fitting V-necked T-shirt and black suspenders under a black cardigan. His face was painted white with black markings and the tip of his nose painted red. His smile was mischievous, and he waved slowly at him and Tate. Declan waved back.

“Hi.” Declan’s simple two lettered greeting made the mime grin wider and pull a balloon out from behind his back. He held it next to his face and twirled it around so the words written on it were visible, *My name is Mikael*, he pointed to the balloon and pointed to his chest with a nod.

“Nice to meet you, Mikael.” Declan chuckled at the mime but when he turned to look at Tate he laughed outright at the look on his face.

“Tate, *are* you okay?” Declan lost his balance as Tate stepped forward and grasped at his shirt and latching on with a fierce grip. Declan placed his hand over Tate’s, leaned in close and whispered, “Hey, it’s okay, I’m here.” Tate’s reaction was comical, but it sparked a protective vibe in Declan he noticed surfaced whenever Tate was near.

Tate nodded, his head turned so his nose rubbed against Declan’s temple as he took a deep inhale and exhale.

Mikael prodded Declan’s shoulder; he was making a motion with his hands like he was holding a camera, and pushing the shutter button to take their picture. Declan waved his hand in dismissal. “No thanks, we’re good.”

Mikael pouted.

“Dude, mimes are not cool.” Declan felt Tate’s whisper against his neck as he released his hold on Declan’s shirt and moved to hold his bicep. “They’re worse than clowns.”

“Mental note,” Declan whispered back to Tate. “Don’t watch the movie *IT* with Tate.”

“Do it and you’ll never get in my pants, Morrison...”

Declan’s felt the statement down to his dick. “Is that where you want me, Tate?”

“Get rid of the mime and I’ll answer the question.” Tate was gripping Declan’s arm and tugging him in the opposite direction of Mikael.

Right... your mission, Agent Morrison, should you choose to accept it: ditch the mime and get into Tate’s pants.

Declan tugged Tate back to his side and attempted to give him a stern look which he failed to execute as he grinned at the man’s obvious discomfort. How could someone like Tate be afraid of a mime?

“Sorry, Mikael. My friend here doesn’t want our picture taken.” Declan pointed to the crowd starting to gather to watch Mikael do whatever it was mimes actually did. “Maybe one of them would like you to take theirs?”

Mikael crossed his arms over his chest and tapped his foot on the ground. He walked toward them and touched Tate’s arm; Tate flinched at the touch.

“Easy boy,” Declan chided Mikael with his directive and attempted to calm Tate.

Mikael’s face softened under his white makeup as he looked at Tate; the mime’s expression was amplified by the black smearing of fake tears which ran from his eyes down his cheeks. He stepped away from Tate, and turned to touch Declan’s shoulder lightly. The smile he gave Declan reached his eyes, and he patted Declan’s cheek. Mikael walked a few feet away and proceeded to “mime” himself into a box. Mikael boxed himself in with movements of his hands and crouched down then pulled the imaginary box closed. He stayed in position for a few seconds before he jumped to his feet and out of the box. Tate’s hold on Declan’s arm loosened as Mikael walked back to the “box” opened it and jumped back as if something popped up, Jack-in-the-box style. He pulled what Declan thought was a rope out of his pockets, made a loop and tossed it around what came out of the box. Mikael started to pull on the rope with determined yanks.

Declan looked up at Tate to judge his reaction; his hand has fallen from Declan’s arm and he stared slack jawed at Mikael. It was the most relaxed he’d been since they were approached by the mime. Declan found it amazing and disturbing Mikael read their situation, or lack of one, in less than five minutes of meeting them in a public place. The realization hit Declan full force and made him sway on his feet.

Yeah, Declan was stuck inside a box of responsibility with Tate trying to pull him out, even if he wasn’t conscious of doing so.

Thank you, Mikael, for pointing that out.

Declan clapped for the mime, hoping it would signal he was finished with his performance. Mikael looked over at Declan and turned his mouth into a frown. Declan was done with being judged by a street performer who didn’t know him from Adam. He elbowed Tate to get his attention.

“You ready?” Declan asked.

Tate tore his gaze away from the mime and nodded to Declan. “Damn straight! Let’s go.”

Declan put his hand on the small of Tate’s back and led them away. He looked over his shoulder to see Mikael holding a cluster of black and red balloons, with a burning cigarette hanging from his mouth. Declan decided he would agree with Tate and his opinions of mimes.

The warm night air floated around Declan and Tate as they walked across the parking lot of the amphitheater to the tour bus. Their non-date was nothing like Declan expected. After the odd performance of Mikael the mime, he and Tate found a quiet table to have a drink and talk. Declan couldn’t remember a time when he’d talked as freely as he did with Tate.

He’d learned a lot about Tate tonight. Declan knew the man was more than a pretty face, he didn’t have to be with him more than five minutes to realize that, but the things Tate shared with Declan tonight, they brought on a deeper meaning that made him feel closer to his drummer.

Declan knew if he ever came face-to-face with Tate’s ex-boyfriend, he would probably go to jail for letting his fist talk some sense into the man. The way he treated Tate and his family was unbelievable. Tate was more of a man than Declan was. He wouldn’t give the two-timing, lying son of a bitch the time of day if he was hanging off a cliff by a nail, let alone talk to him more than once a week. Jealousy and rage like Declan had never known sprung up inside him as Tate told his story about his ex.

Tate told him about his sister, and it had torn Declan’s heart out. The thought that someone so young, beautiful, and full of life could end up in a coma on life support just because, like a million teenagers, she’d gone to a party. Tate told him how Louise snuck out of the house with her boyfriend and played beer pong with her classmates. Louise wasn’t like others though and a few drinks too many left her in a coma. The knowledge Tate was there when they pulled the plug was humbling. Losing Louise and knowing her loss of sight and life was why Tate played barefoot made Declan look at his drummer in a new light. Sure, Tate was snarky and flirty, but he was emotionally connected to those he cared about.

Declan shared as much as he could with Tate—he told him about Lisa, his parents, and his lack of relationships... ever. Tate gave him a shocked look at

his admission. It almost matched the look Declan gave Tate when he learned it had been just under two years since Tate had sex. *Two years?* Declan hadn't gone longer than a few months without sex. Come to think of it, this tour was the longest he'd been without a hook-up.

These numerous thoughts running through his mind were giving him a migraine.

He glanced at Tate and admired the confident way he walked head up, back straight, his gait even and full of purpose. Declan could sometimes fool himself better than a magician on Las Vegas Boulevard, but he was into Tate, and he wanted him. *Not* simply for a hook-up. The thought terrified him.

"You coming, Declan?" He looked up to find Tate several paces ahead of him. *When did he stop walking?*

"Yeah, sorry. Got lost in my head." He walked faster to catch up with Tate.

"I notice you do that a lot," Tate volunteered.

"Do what?" Declan asked.

"Get lost in your thoughts."

"Bad habit of being an only child with absent parents." Declan shrugged. "There was no one around to talk to so I kept to myself."

"It would have been nice for you, if Lisa had lived closer?"

"Yeah, it would, but she's always been a phone call away."

Declan stopped walking when they reached the tour bus. The night and their non-date was coming to an end. A feeling of grief washed over him at the realization. It wasn't as if he wouldn't see Tate every day for the remainder of the tour, but this day, this day that could be the best of his life was coming to an end.

"Tate, I..." Declan felt Tate behind him. He took a deep breath and turned around, meeting the intense stare of Tate Newman head on.

"You what... Declan?" Tate moved forward, and the slight movement caused his hand to brush against Declan's. "God, I love saying your name."

Declan moaned with Tate's words, imagining how many ways he could make Tate say his name.

“Say it again.” Declan’s voice quivered with his request. Tate moved his hand against Declan’s, his fingers sliding along his palm, against his wrist and up to his forearm where it vacated to settle on his hip.

Declan’s body leaned into Tate’s touch, as he shifted his hip, making Tate tighten his grip and move closer. Declan gazed into Tate’s eyes, watching the color darken to a deep blue like the sky before a storm. Tate’s free hand found its way to Declan’s neck, and Tate was rubbing his thumb firmly along Declan’s throat.

Declan tore his eyes away from Tate’s to settle on his mouth. Tate’s tongue darted out and touched his top lip before he spoke. “Declan.” The slow way he drawled out his name made Declan’s cock throb against the button fly of his jeans. His back arched at the same time Tate’s grip on his hip and neck pulled him closer.

“You want an answer to that question, Declan?”

Declan couldn’t remember what question he wanted the answer to, but if it kept Tate this close and his hands on him he would take whatever Tate offered.

He nodded his response.

Tate ran his thumb over Declan’s bottom lip and he opened his mouth. Tate took the opening as opportunity and slid his finger inside—instinct took over as Declan licked the pad of his thumb before closing his lips around the finger and sucked.

“Fuck,” Tate groaned. “That’s sexy.”

Declan hummed around Tate’s finger and swirled his tongue, lavishing attention to his finger to mimic what he wanted to do to Tate’s dick.

Tate began thrusting his thumb in and out of Declan’s mouth, and Declan was lost in the sexual haze that engulfed them. He clutched at Tate, grabbing the front of his shirt and bringing them chest to chest and groin to groin. He gasped at the contact, and Tate’s thumb fell from his wet mouth. Tate’s rock-hard erection was pressed against his, and he could think of nothing but wrapping his leg around Tate’s waist and riding him right there in the parking lot.

“Tate...” His name fell from Declan’s lips in a mixture of question and desperation.

Tate gripped Declan's face in his hands. "Say it, Declan. Say it and I'm yours."

Say what?

Declan wracked his brain for the words Tate wanted when the door to the bus slammed open and Chuck's boisterous voice bounced off the pavement.

"Whoa! Dudes what the fuck?" Chuck obviously spotted them.

"Leave it, Chuck." Declan stared at Tate, neither of them taking their eyes off each other though the presence of Chuck dampened the sexual tension building between them.

"You said no sex on the bus, boss," Chuck whined.

"We aren't on the bus and we aren't having sex," Declan pointed out.

Tate grinned. "Yet."

Declan's dick responded to Tate's answer before his mouth could. *Yet*. What was he doing? He laid down rules for the band and he was going to break every one of them for what? To get into Tate's pants? Yeah, he remembered the fucking question now.

Declan reached up to grab Tate's hands on his face, he held Tate's gaze as he pulled them away and lowered them to his sides. He shook his head at Tate and felt the freedom and hope from their day slip away. He didn't try to catch it.

"Tate, we can't."

The confusion on Tate's face turned to anger and then hurt as he swept his arms wide on either side of him.

"Have it *your* way, Declan." Tate walked away from Declan, taking his warmth and want with him and met Chuck on the stairs to the bus.

"What's up, Chuck?" Tate pushed at Chuck to turn him around and walk up the stairs. Chuck's low mumble response was inaudible.

Declan closed his eyes and heard the door close. He banged his head against the side of the bus and turned to lay his hot cheek against the cold metal, slapping his hand against it in frustration. This business with Tate was getting complicated and he screwed up tonight something good.

He was going to fix this, but he couldn't do it now. Tomorrow—the best thing about tomorrow—he got a fresh start, a do over, and Declan sure could use one.

Chapter 5

The bus swayed as it rolled down the highway. The highways all started to look the same and, after three months on the road, the romanticism of traveling was wearing off. The shows were the best part, the part that kept Declan going. The miles put on the bus, the band, and his conscience were going to need a long vacation when they were done with this tour. If he could take a vacation after this.

Declan sat at the table staring at his laptop. He'd finally found the time to reply to emails sent from Rick, their manager, informing them of a new start-up label that might be interested in Station Zero. Declan began research on the label the minute he finished Rick's email. He learned the CEO was a former vice president of a major label who was tired of the auto-tuned teenagers they were cranking out like chocolates running wild on Lucille Ball. That one fact alone gave Declan a good feeling about them. He was glad Rick sent the label articles of the band on tour with Balthazar and a few of the videos from the press conferences and interviews. Media they could use to visualize how they wanted to package the band.

Two words were currently freaking Declan the fuck out: package and media. There was another email from Rick marked "urgent" and came with the subject line of READ ME!!! Declan attempted to calm his nerves before he opened it, thinking the big bold letters and the three exclamation points could be Rick doing internet jazz hands. Declan sighed, bit the bullet and clicked on the email. Inside, four attachments showed two photos, a scan of an article and a screen shot of a Station Zero fan site. Declan could see in the thumbnails of the photos they were of him and Tate on the River Walk with the mime. The body of the text was simple and to the point, "Not good Declan. You know better. Call me when you get this."

They hadn't done anything wrong. They hadn't done anything at all. Not that he didn't want to. The night was amazing, romantic even, and Declan was not the romantic kind of guy, but the night was... perfect. He rarely held a conversation with another man longer than a few minutes without having to fake interest, but there was no faking with Tate. They could talk about anything and everything and Tate got him. He laughed when Declan made a joke, and it wasn't the type of fake laugh to get laid, it was genuine. After years of hook-

ups, Declan could spot the difference. Tate laughed with him, and at him when his ego needed to be brought down a few notches.

Declan clicked on the pictures in the email and watched as they opened. He sat back against the seat and just stared at the screen. He couldn't lie to himself, he and Tate looked like a couple. The first showed them ordering the beer ice cream from a small shop they'd stumbled across. They were swapping cones because the young girl at the window was flustered by Tate, and got their order mixed up. The smile on Tate's face was beautiful, it was tender and looked like one a man would give to his lover. Declan couldn't tear his gaze away from Tate's face on the screen. The second picture was one Declan wanted framed and put on multiple surfaces that could hold a snap shot. This must have been taken from the bridge when they met Mikael the mime; he made Tate jump and Declan quickly grabbed him before he fell into the river. Declan's arms were around Tate, pulling him into his body and away from the water, and Tate's left hand was on Declan's bicep and his right on his neck holding on. The laughter and ease on their faces, this picture captured a moment neither of them were prepared for and it showed so much. They used to say a camera would steal your soul if your picture was taken, and Declan would sell his soul to have moments like this every day.

He tore his eyes away from the picture and clicked on the article next. It was a piece in a small San Antonio newspaper in the music section. It was a review of their show, a positive one that glossed over the boys' talent. Declan scanned over the typical jargon of a live show review and took a deep breath when he got to the last paragraph.

The bandmates of Station Zero have made plenty of room for their new member, Tate Newman. The unheard of drummer not only filled the shoes of Slater MacAlister, but he removed them and tossed those bad boys offstage. The six four, blond barefooted man has made himself at home with the likes of Keith Raines, Chuck King, and after last night, it looks like he might be playing house with front man, Declan Morrison. Spotted around the tourist attraction of The San Antonio River Walk, the men spent the night wrapped in each other in a romantic stroll along the river and playing the clowns, or with a clown on their walk. Are these two more than bandmates? We know which team Declan bats for, but is Tate Newman on deck?

This was some sort of gossip rag posing as a respectable piece. *Music review my ass!* After reading the article, Declan was sure he didn't want to see what was on the fan site. He loved the fans, their support was why they played and he knew they wouldn't be anywhere without them, but some of these sites didn't know what boundaries were. Declan knew being a public figure came with social responsibility, but what was the big deal seeing him buying toilet paper at the local Walgreens? It never made sense to him.

Declan heard sounds coming from the back of the bus, so he hurried and clicked on the link to the fan site to get this over with before the band was up and about. *Oh! For fuck's sake!* This was sure to be the worst site out there, it ranked up there with the boy band sites who shipped bandmates hoping to see any sign of attraction or something passing off as more than friendship. These type of bloggers were rabid, and once they latched on they were not letting go. There were not only the pictures posted along with the gossip article, but some grainy video taken off someone's cell phone of them with the mime. Just fucking great.

Declan knew he was going to have to do damage control with Rick and smooth this all over. He wasn't looking forward to explaining what was going on, and he was not going to out Tate to anyone—that was Tate's decision. The band knew he was gay, but his reasons were his own for keeping part of his life private and Declan would not betray the man's trust. He would explain about the pictures; what happened before they were taken with the mime and what they *weren't* revealing, fast. Rick wasn't exactly a sleazy type of manager, but this was his business and there was never a false pretense—managing Station Zero was first and foremost about the money.

Declan scrolled through the posts and comments on the fan site/blog, the girls were already asking for fan fiction on the pictures. Talk about the dark side of fame, even the small amount they claimed could turn into this. Declan didn't want Tate to see the emails. This could go bad fast and he couldn't lose Tate now. The band couldn't lose him. What Declan wanted wasn't figured into the business plan, the plan was to get Station Zero signed with a label and record their first full-length album.

Keith came out and sat down at the table with Declan. His calm attitude could usually bleed into Declan and change his mood, but this time it wasn't working.

“You okay, boss?” Keith gave him a questioning look.

“Yeah. Just working on a few business things. You know, boring stuff.” Declan felt his blood pressure rise. He never knew what the feeling was before he hooked up with a surgical intern. The nights they shared together in the fall taught him many things about himself. Feeling his heart beat in his ears was not a song begging for home, it was his blood pressure rising, and right now it was rising fast.

Declan closed the laptop and got up from the table. Keith was still giving him an odd look, but he needed to put out the latest fire for the band. Too bad he was in the middle of it.

“Hey, I have to do some stuff. Private stuff, so I’m going to use the back room. You all clear in there?” It was Keith’s week of luxury using the full bed in the private suite of the bus. They’d decided each of them would get a week to stretch out in a normal bed when not in hotels and not have to be cramped in the bunks. The bunks weren’t all bad, a guy could release a bit of tension in there with the right twist of his body and utilizing more wrist movement than the full arm. Declan knew how to use a small space to get full results.

“Sure Declan. I’ll just grab something to eat. Take your time.” Keith eyed him again. Declan knew he was stalling as he fidgeted with the edge of the laptop. He began composing the email back to Rick in his head, and hoped he could get out of a phone conversation with him. Stretching the truth was easier with the written word, the one you were lying to couldn’t hear the tremor in your voice as you did it.

“Thanks, Keith. I won’t be long.” Declan walked down the narrow hallway toward the door to the suite. He almost made it inside without incident when the bathroom door opened with a ghost of steam revealing Tate. *Jesus!* Did the man have to smell so good? Tate didn’t wear cologne, but used some organic bodywash made of oranges and sandalwood. Mixed with his natural scent, it was like an aphrodisiac to Declan. The urge to lean toward Tate and bury his nose in his neck and just inhale was overwhelming. Declan needed to get himself under control.

“Oh, hey,” Tate said as he took a step back. The smile on his face was tight, and his eyes were shining. “Hi, Dec.”

Oh God. Did he have to use a nickname now? Three months of calling him Morrison or Declan and today, this morning when he has to sever the feelings and time spent with Tate, he pulls a nickname on him?

Declan examined the laptop in his hands. *Look anywhere but at Tate. DO NOT look at Tate.*

“Hey, Tate. What’s up? Sleep well?” Declan sounded like an ass or some sort of assistant at a bed and breakfast. Just where his thoughts needed to go: bed, breakfast, and Tate. Breakfast in bed ON Tate. *Ah help!*

Tate reached out and laid his large hand on Declan’s, which was busy messing with the USB port for the wireless mouse.

“Dec?” Tate whispered his name. “Declan, are you okay?”

“Would everyone stop asking me that?” He was getting frustrated standing in the small, crowded space of the hallway. Tate took up too much room, too much space physically and emotionally. Declan needed to get away.

“Hey, it’s okay. I was just asking. Um, I wanted to tell you...” Declan looked up at Tate, noticing a blush creeping up his neck to his face which was supporting a good amount of scruff. Declan’s thoughts were heading to the south side of dirty, thinking of the places he would love to feel Tate’s scruff against his naked skin. Tate’s head was tilted to the side, his curly hair hanging over his left eye as he rubbed at his neck with the same hand that had just touched Declan.

Tate was in a pair of his running shorts that showed off his long, muscular legs. Tate’s thighs were a thing of beauty. There wasn’t a part of the man that wasn’t gorgeous, though, from the sun-kissed locks on his head down to those bare feet that made magic on the bass pedals. Declan found it sexy when Tate played drums barefoot; he knew a good amount of drummers did, but he found it extremely sexy to watch Tate’s feet as they moved. *Feet? Sexy?* Declan was slowly losing it over this guy.

“Tell me what, Tate? I’m busy. I don’t have time. Someone needs to lead this band and get our careers going!” Declan didn’t want to sound harsh, but his sexual frustration was taking over and making him insane. His mind kept drifting back to last night and what almost happened.

“Sorry, Dec. I just wanted to say I had a nice time last night.” Tate shrugged. “Even how the night ended.” Tate smiled. The smile reached his eyes and made the corners crinkle. “I don’t think I have had a night like that in... well ever. So, um thanks.” Tate’s admission was almost Declan’s undoing. What he wouldn’t give to say the words back to Tate—to tell him yesterday on the river was one of the best days of his life—and he would kill to drag Tate

into the suite, toss him on the bed and show him how perfect he could make the morning.

“Yeah, Tate. It was fun.” Declan was trying to get away. But getting away from Tate was the last thing he wanted to do.

“Hey.” Tate reached out and gripped Declan’s bicep. It wasn’t a hard grip, but Tate’s hand was hot on his arm and it stung. It felt like the burn of heat on frozen skin. Declan was trying to be cold, to shut Tate out, but his warmth was melting him.

Declan looked up into a pair of dark blue, searching eyes. Tate was asking wordless questions Declan didn’t have answers to. Last night may not have been a date but whatever it was shifted who they were, and tilted their relationship to its “off limits” axis and forcing it on a new course.

“Hey. It’s just me.” When did Tate get this close? “Dec, it’s just me.” Declan would feel Tate’s breathe against his cheek as he exhaled. It would take less than a foot to lean forward and press his lips against Tate’s. It was what he wanted to do. Hell, it’s what he wanted to do four months ago when he was at the man’s feet and didn’t know his name.

Declan took a step back, as much as he could in the hallway, and away from Tate. “Tate, I have shit to do. I told you, I don’t have time.” Declan turned and walked into the suite. He slammed the laptop on the bed with a muffled string of curse words. He went to shut the door and was met with the view of Tate, the questions written on his face and in his body language. Declan shook his head, and kicked the door shut with his foot.

He threw himself onto the bed, willing his emotions to calm down. There was no way this was going to end the way he wanted. Declan knew choices would have to be made, he’d been making them for the band the last four years. He just never knew that one day, the biggest decision would come with his sacrifice.

Declan read the email for the sixth and final time before hitting send. He did what he had to do and whatever Rick said after this would have to wait. The suite was becoming claustrophobic and he needed to get air, fast. He opened the door and heard the laughter and voices of his bandmates. They were having a great time out there, without him. How many times would that be the case? Keith, Chuck, and Slater were the ones to go out after the shows, never

concerned with the merchandise booth or anything other than the meet and greets with fans. It was always Declan left to count the T-shirts, CDs, stickers, and the other paraphernalia they sold at shows. Lately, Tate helped after shows, but it still felt like it was his second job to take care of the little things.

Declan walked quietly down the hall, not wanting to disturb his bandmates as they bonded on the bus. Times like this were crucial, times to get to know one another on a deeper level. The stage was the place they conformed to solidarity and functionality, but a band was like a marriage, they had to get along behind the scenes or the production would fall apart. Squabbling only worked with the brothers in Oasis.

Declan hung back and listened while they discussed music.

“Hey, I know more music than just rock!” Chuck protested when the teasing began.

“Prove it Princess Charles,” Tate tossed at him.

“The name is Chuck, Tater Nuts,” Chuck returned.

Tate smirked. “Keep calling me Tater Nuts, Princess Charles. I can last longer than you can.”

Chuck glared at Tate in response.

“That’s what she said!” Keith offered as he sat on the couch next to Chuck and high fived Tate across the small space in the common area of the bus.

“Fine, what other music do you know?” Tate started to fiddle with the harmonica on the table.

“I know the blues, I *am* the blues,” Chuck declared and Tate coughed to cover his laugh.

“Nobody leaves without singing the blues.” Tate grinned. “Play me something Princess Charles.”

Chuck grumbled and grabbed his Gibson. He settled the guitar on his lap, and his hands began picking on the strings to a Bee Gees song.

Tate laughed and bent over on the table, slapping his hand on top three times. He sat up and tore a sheet of paper out of his journal, wadded it and threw it Chuck, hitting him in the head. “You don’t know the blues. You know Jive... Turkey!”

Keith gave Tate another high five, then grabbed Chuck in a headlock, playfully rubbing his head.

“Get the fuck off, will ya?” Chuck struggled against Keith until he was free.

“He’s got you there, Chuck,” Declan spoke and avoided Tate as he turned in his seat toward him.

“Hey boss! Didn’t hear you come out. Playing ninja today?” Chuck fiddled with the tuning pegs on the head of his guitar.

“Nope, just enjoying the show. It’s not often I get to watch and not be the ring leader.” Declan winked at Chuck.

“You have a kinky side to you don’t ya boss?” Chuck was in his normal mood of playing the fool. “You know, ring leader? Whips? The circus?” Chuck raised his hand and shook his head. “No one gets my jokes.”

“That’s because your jokes aren’t funny, Princess.” Declan looked at Tate then, and their eyes met. Tate slid over on the bench seat behind the table and patted the empty space next to him. “Have a seat and join us, Declan.” Tate smiled. “Take off your shoes and stay awhile. We were just discussing Chuck’s lack of musical knowledge.”

Declan was surprised Tate was being so cordial after he slammed the door in his face. They couldn’t discuss what happened in front of Keith and Chuck, but there was no choice but to sit at the table, next to Tate.

“I told you, I know music.” Chuck was on the defensive. This would go one of two ways, bad with Chuck getting his feelings hurt, or a great way to learn about each other. Declan hoped it was the latter because an emo Chuck was not fun to be around.

“Princess. You just called The Bee Gees the blues, they are disco, darling.” Tate’s new way of talking to Chuck was comical. It was obviously done with good-natured intentions, and the way Chuck took to the teasing, Declan was sure he was playing along. For now.

“Then why did you call me a ‘Jive Turkey’?” Chuck’s brow wrinkled in confusion.

“I was teasing you, Princess, and you were playing the riff to their song ‘Jive Talkin’.”

“Huh? I thought I played ‘Tragedy’?” Chuck was beyond confused.

“Stop while you’re ahead, Chuck.” Declan laughed at his guitarist. “So how did this conversation start?” He looked at Keith when he asked the question, still trying to avoid Tate.

“Chuck asked Tate what he listened to on his mp3 player. He was shocked when it wasn’t hard rock or speed metal.” Keith shrugged and got up to get a bottle of water from the mini fridge. He turned and raised one in Declan’s direction. Declan nodded and put his hand up to catch the cold bottle when Keith tossed it at him. He opened the bottle and took a long drink, needing the moisture—sitting this close to Tate was making his mouth dry.

“Yeah, and what is on his mp3 player?” Declan again asked Keith and not Tate.

Tate cleared his throat. “Why don’t you ask *him* what is on it, Declan.”

Declan gave in and turned to look at Tate. Big mistake. The emotion in Tate’s eyes was palpable and, Declan couldn’t look away. The corner of Tate’s mouth twitched into a small smile, and Declan did what he wanted, at least for now, and smiled back.

“So, what’s on it then, Newman?” Declan tipped his bottle of water toward Tate in salute.

“What isn’t on it would be the better question. I’m a bit of a music nerd.” Tate shrugged as he flipped through his mp3 player. Declan wanted to know every song on it to dissect the man. Shakespeare was right when he compared music to the food of love. He could tell more about a person through the music they held close and listened to, than anything else.

“Okay. So what are you listening to now?” Declan was more than curious at the answer.

Tate showed the screen of his mp3 player to Declan. “Iron and Wine? Really? I wouldn’t have pegged you for a Sam Beam kind of guy.”

Tate met Declan’s eyes again and smiled. “Why am I not surprised you know who they are?” He shook his head and smiled wider.

“Dude, Dec lived for that Rock and Roll Jeopardy show. He knows way too much about music, even for a guy who is in the music business. He could beat the long-haired dude from Megadeth, or the guy with the band who did a decent cover of “Stand & Deliver”, though the rest of their songs sucked ass.”

“Dave Mustaine and Mark McGrath of Sugar Ray.” Tate answered before Declan could. The goofy grin was impossible to stop as it spread across his face and something incredible happened inside his chest. He looked at Tate, and he was smiling too. Declan felt a light touch on the outside of this thigh. When he looked down and Tate’s knuckle was pressed against his leg, lightly stroking it. Declan felt the blood flow to his dick, making it swell.

“Oh, great. What is this? The meeting of the gay music nerd association?” Chuck put his guitar down, crossed his arms over his chest and pouted like a little boy.

Tate responded without looking at Chuck. “You’re just jealous, Princess.”

Declan watched Chuck dig the lighter out of his pocket at Tate’s last jab. It was time to intervene.

“Okay, boys. I’m calling a time out.” Tate’s eyes flicked to Declan’s and over to Chuck. He nodded to Declan with understanding.

“Let’s play a round of ‘get to know you’ instead? How ’bout that?” Declan offered.

“Sounds good to me.” Keith opened the “game” with the first question. “Favorite female singer?”

“Tori Amos,” Tate answered and Declan looked at him with wide eyes. Tate shrugged and the feeling of his knuckle still stroking his leg disappeared. Declan relished the feeling more than he should have considering the circumstances and the news he would deliver to Tate. News he wished he could forget.

“Sheryl Crow,” Declan answered. He was still staring at Tate, his eyes traveling to the set of full lips, watching them move as he replied.

“Nice. Singer songwriters are always a favorite of mine,” Tate said.

Declan cleared his throat to break the pull Tate was having over every part of his body. His pants were painfully tight, he couldn’t shift in his seat to adjust himself incognito anymore and if he grabbed his crotch to physically adjust, he would come in his pants. How did Tate get under his skin so quickly? The grin would not leave Tate’s face.

Declan took a drink of water and nearly choked; Tate’s hand came back to say hello, it slid over and down his thigh and squeezed right above his knee.

Declan groaned at the touch. He was sure he was going to embarrass himself if this went any further.

It was vital Declan tell Tate the news, he would use the same words he wrote to Rick: they would stay away from each other, no more outings with just the two of them, no sitting, standing, flying, or any other adjective within ten feet of each other. They would be more than hands off, they would be nothing more than bandmates to each other for the next three months of the tour.

Declan could do this. He would do it for the band. There was a record deal at stake.

Declan stood quickly from the table, dislodging Tate's hand and banging his knee in the process. Three pairs of eyes looked at him as if he lost his mind. *Fuck!*

"Tate?"

"Yeah, Dec?"

"I need to talk to you." Tate gave Declan the sexiest grin suggesting they would do more than talk, as if Declan was speaking in code.

This was not going to be easy.

Chapter 6

~September~

Declan paid for his coffee and walked along the empty morning streets of Pomona. He'd never been much of a sleeper, there was too much on his mind to get the rest he required. Over the years he learned to function on less and less sleep. He liked the quiet of the early mornings, as they gave him a chance to see things, places and situations in a new light. The city was just waking, coming alive and gearing up for the day ahead. There was something peaceful about watching the world this way. It gave him perspective, gave him control over time, or at least the illusion.

Declan's thoughts centered on one thing this morning. Three months had passed since Declan had the "talk" with Tate. Three months of being on the side of cold he never imagined being on. Tate had gone from flirty and touchy to absolutely nothing in a matter of minutes. The talk had been brutal. Declan played it over and over again in his head at least four times a day.

Declan walked back to the private suite. He didn't need to look behind him to see if Tate was following, he could feel him. Declan entered the suite, and after Tate crossed the doorway, closed the door and had Declan pinned against it.

"You wanted to talk to me?" Tate's hands were pressed against the door, his biceps blocking each side of Declan's head as he leaned in putting his face close to Declan's.

Declan's brain went blank. He couldn't think with Tate this close. Tate was in his personal space, so close that Declan wanted to climb the man and crawl inside him. No one had been this close to Declan before, he never let them in emotionally, and as much as he wanted to, as much as he wanted to stay pressed against the door and let Tate "talk" to him, he couldn't.

"Yeah, Tate." Declan searched Tate's eyes; they were so close he could see the true color he never noticed before. Declan always thought they were blue, but up close and with the morning light streaming through the skylight, they were a blue-green. Declan could count each freckle on Tate's face. They were few and far between, but they were there. They gave Tate a charm of the boy next door, but the stubble gracing his chin gave Tate the rugged look of a man. A man Declan was supposed to be telling they had to stay away from one

another, because having two gay men in a relationship or even seen in a pseudo-relationship, in a hard rock band, was bad for business. But did people really care who Declan was with? It was no secret he was gay. He was never in the closet. His sexuality cost him enough as it was. He refused to deny himself, so why would it matter if it appeared he was interested in Tate?

The longing in Tate's eyes, the patience as he stood there with his body inches away from being pushed fully against Declan, was more than Declan could take. He wanted so much. He wanted Tate more than he'd ever wanted a man. His life of one night stands or fuck buddies that lasted a week was wearing on his conscience and his heart. Declan shoved all the things he wanted in his life on the back burner when he took on the role no one wanted, the role of leader of Station Zero. He never minded the role as much as he did now. Now, he resented it and he wanted to be done. Why couldn't he be the one who was free to have... a life?

"Declan?" Tate's deep voice brought Declan out of his maudlin thoughts. He reached up and grabbed Tate's hands on the door. Tate flipped his wrists and laced his fingers through Declan's. He whimpered, he fucking whimpered at the touch.

"Tate, we have to talk." Declan tried to get a hold of himself, to get his emotions under control, but here he was, holding hands with Tate Newman, the man he would have to stay away from. The man who, if he was honest with himself, he was falling for, and the man who held his hands in his and was stroking his wrists in soothing circles. The man who, with a simple touch and a look, made Declan's dick hard and held his balls in a vise. His balls and his heart. Declan was lost. He needed to be away from this.

Declan shook his hands free of Tate's, pressed them against his chest, and pushed Tate away. The confusion on his face was immediate, and he raised his eyebrows in question at Declan.

"Tate, when I said talk, I meant talk as in I have to tell you something."

"If it's about last night, Dec. I know." Tate tilted his head and gave Declan the most devastating, sexy smile. "I felt it too."

Declan groaned and felt his legs go weak with Tate's admission. He slid down the door to the floor, brought his knees up, rested his elbows on them, and put his head in his hands.

"Tate, I..." Declan threaded his fingers through his hair, tugging on the strands, hoping the pain would give him clarity.

Tate dropped to a crouch in front of Declan. He took Declan's hands out of his hair and held them between his. "Talk then, Declan. Talk to me."

Declan looked at the man in front of him. He was open, he was real, and Declan could not do this. He couldn't get Tate to agree to...

"Tate, I didn't. I mean, I had a nice time last night, but we are bandmates. I enjoy your company and I like getting to know you, but whatever you think..."

"Bullshit, Declan. Bullshit. Don't you dare try to pull that on me. What's going on?" Tate was gripping Declan's hands tighter. "Talk to me."

"Tate, that is what's going on. Things get lonely on the road. We had a nice time, I'm sorry if you misread anything between us and thought it meant more than two guys just hanging out." Declan could feel his heart shatter inside his chest as the lies fell from his mouth. Why was he lying? Why couldn't he tell Tate the truth? Knowing Tate for only a short amount of time, Declan knew if he did, Tate would take his business skills and fight management on this. Rick would be pissed and they could lose the chance at a record deal. Declan's obligation was to put the band first. He would go through with this and then he would deal with his love life. If the chance for him to have a love life ever came his way again.

"I'm not buying it, Declan. What aren't you telling me?" Declan could hear the frustration in Tate's voice and see it set in his jaw. He put this lie in motion, and he would follow through with it. Declan yanked his hands out of Tate's for the second time that morning. It was the second time he had physically put distance between himself and Tate, or he would crumble and let this man pick him up and put him together again.

Declan stood and looked at Tate who was still crouched on the floor.

"You don't have to buy anything, Tate. Just open your ears and listen to what I'm saying. We are friends. Nothing more. I had a good time. I'm sorry if you misread any of my actions last night as me wanting anything romantic with you. You're a great guy, but I'm not interested."

Declan turned away from Tate, opening the door before looking back at his bandmate who was now sitting on the floor in a dejected state. His shoulders were slumped and his head hung forward as he played with the frayed hem of his light jeans. Declan fought the urge to go to him, to push him to the floor, press himself along each inch of the man and kiss him senseless. To lay all his worries about the band and their future at Tate's feet. Ask for his advice, for his

input, and for his guidance. Declan was tired, tired of it all, but he felt there was no choice. Declan knew if another man was making this decision, he would tell him to stop being an asshole and man up. Finding someone who fit you the way Tate fit him was rare. You didn't find this connection and walk away from it. This was a once in a lifetime chance. It was what the poets wrote about when they spoke of love of soul mates and forever. Declan wasn't telling someone else what to do, he was doing what he had to do for survival and the career of these men, Tate included, and their future.

Declan took one last look at Tate, whose pleading eyes met his just before he walked out of the room.

Declan tried more times than his pride wanted to admit to get Tate to talk to him. The man was cold and would talk to Declan only when necessary for the sake of the band or the tour. Tate didn't have a huge reaction to Declan's news about the possible record deal. He nodded and asked if they would still need him on drums if and when they got the contract for recording. The thought of Tate leaving, not just the band, but leaving Declan, hit him in the gut and made bile rise in his throat. Declan knew he fucked this whole thing with Tate up, but it was too late to fix it now. There were only a few days before this secret show Rick arranged.

The big wigs of the label wanted to see Station Zero on their own so they booked them a show to play the day after the tour with Balthazar ended. The boys were scheduled to play the Whisky a Go Go, the famous West Hollywood club, which hosted legends in every music genre. Declan had seen many shows there, and though they played other venues in Hollywood and on Sunset Boulevard, they never played the Whisky. As if he wanted more pressure put on him, now they were playing a famous venue.

Rick contacted local radio stations to spread the word about the secret show. Flyers were handed out at shows they played locally. Tonight they would play The Glass House in Pomona with Balthazar. It was one of the smaller venues they played. Declan loved the feel of the arena shows and playing to thousands of fans, new and old, but there was an intimacy to the smaller shows which fueled his love for performing.

Declan sipped his now lukewarm coffee as he walked farther than he meant to and ended up in a corner of a small park. He took a seat on a bench off the path, taking in the surroundings and breathing them in. Chaos would rise and turn his day and self-confidence upside down soon enough. He needed these

moments of solitude to form a plan. He never meant to lie to Tate that day. He wanted to tell him the truth, to let Tate help him out of the mess they were in and find a way to make it okay. The lies came out and tore everything apart. Declan was never good with lies, and he struggled with this one every day. There were so many times he wanted to let it all go, tell Tate the truth and see if there was anything left between them.

It was torture for Declan the nights they slept on the bus, having Tate sleeping in the bunk below him. Declan thought of moving bunks more than once, yet he never did. He didn't want to give up the only time he would be close to Tate even if it was in a cramped space. The man put miles between them in so many ways. Declan wouldn't relinquish this chance to be close for the world. Declan often wondered why Tate didn't move either. Maybe he still harbored feelings for Declan? He could only hope and hold onto that hope for the right time. Would there ever be a right time for them?

Declan rose from the bench, threw his coffee in the trash, and made his way back to the hotel. Last night was a rarity, and they got to stay in a hotel, not the bus. Their schedule was lighter the last week of the tour, and they all needed the break.

Declan walked through the door of the Hilton and went straight to the elevators. There was more activity in the lobby of the hotel as guests were starting their day. He entered the elevator and pressed the number for his floor. The band always stayed on the same floor, more for superstitious reasons than anything common sense related. Luckily for him, Tate's room was right next door. Karma was messing with him, as their rooms had an adjoining door. Declan could open his side and see the only thing separating them was Tate's side of the door, which Declan was now standing in front of willing it to open.

He took off his jacket, hung it in the closet, and checked his phone for messages. There was a text from Lisa letting him know she would be in boring meetings all morning, so she was free for random texts from him about how he was getting his love life in order. Lisa was and would always be Declan's best friend and the only one to ever tell him the truth, even when it hurt. She flew into a rage when he told her he lied to Tate. She thought it was the most moronic thing he'd done and she'd seen him through some stupid shit over the years. Lisa knew how lonely the road got for him, how he longed for a connection with someone. Lisa was married with two kids now and lived in the same town as his parents. She saw them at least once a week and talked about

Declan each and every time. His father would scowl at her and walk away, but his mother would stand silently with unshed tears as Lisa told her the latest news with the band and how much of it was due to the dedication Declan gave. She told his mother he used everything she taught him: the ingrained dutiful and sacrificial way of conducting his personal life. Declan never turned his back on a challenge.

Declan loved and hated Lisa for what she did. He knew it hurt his mother to hear about him, but it would kill her not to. Declan didn't want his mother to hurt any more than she already did, even if it meant the hurt fell onto him. She was trapped in a loveless marriage, and that was punishment enough. Declan wished he possessed the will to hate his parents. He knew they would not have the type of relationship they'd nurtured before he came out. He just wanted understanding and acceptance. He could deal with not seeing them much, but he wished they wouldn't think of him as something they failed at or as something that was wrong. Declan wanted to be someone to them, not a something.

Declan sent a quick text message to Lisa letting her know he was up for a round of texts and to let him know when she was ready. He pulled out a chair from the table, sat, and unlaced his shoes. He toed each shoe off and heard movement from the room next door. Declan stilled and listened to the noise of Tate going about his morning routine. Tate was the only other bandmate who woke up early, usually going for a run first thing. Declan waited for the sound of his door opening and closing to signal he was heading out. Declan laid his head back, closed his eyes, and just listened. He knew if he handled things differently months ago, he would either be in Tate's room with him, or the adjoining door would be open and their space would be one.

The sound of a guitar made Declan open his eyes. From the sound he knew it was Chuck's Gibson but it was coming from Tate's room. Declan stood and dragged the chair closer to the adjoining door. He strained to hear the sound again and held his breath waiting for it. It came again, fumbled notes across the neck and the strumming was stuttered. A few minutes of preparation passed with the guitar, music flowed through the walls and into Declan's pores. Declan's hands shook as he heard the notes from the guitar and Tate's accompanied voice. Tate was playing Men at Work's "Overkill", but it wasn't the single version, he was playing it acoustically and it was breaking Declan's heart.

Declan listened to Tate play and sing about fear, about being afraid of what we wanted and how lonely the nights were. He sang about it being overkill, and Declan was lost. He wanted to bang on the door, beg Tate to open it so he could fall on the ground at Tate's feet and beg his forgiveness. Instead, he sat and listened as Tate's beautiful voice took his breath away. Declan wanted to keep the sound and the words Tate sang deep into his soul, if only he hadn't sold his soul to their management years ago.

Silence once again filled the room, and Declan only heard the ticking of the clock. Movement from Tate's room made his heart race, and he heard the door open. Declan went to his door and looked through the security peephole, his breath catching when he looked right at Tate. He was standing at Declan's door with this look on his face, which could only be described as melancholy. Tate raised his hand as if to knock. Declan waited for it, but Tate just rested his hand against the door and leaned his forehead against it. His face was so close, and Declan could see those freckles he wanted to trace with a feather just to get a reaction from Tate. Declan raised his hand and placed it on the inside of the door where Tate's was on the outside. Tate raised his head and was looking at his hand as if he'd felt the touch. He removed it quickly, gave Declan's door a short smile, and then walked off.

Declan was frozen in place. *What the hell just happened?* Declan ran from the door to get his phone, checking to see if Lisa messaged him yet. He needed his best friend now more than ever. Declan called her saying, "Lisa. God, I need you. You won't believe what just happened..."

Declan knew Lisa would listen to his anxiety over this situation and give him ideas on what to do. This was enough. Declan couldn't stand not being with Tate, and if the song and bit at the door was any indication, what Tate felt for Declan three months ago was not over.

Declan formed an idea to test the waters. It might not be the best way to handle it, but Tate wasn't talking to him and he was desperate. Desperate times did indeed call for desperate measures. Declan just hoped they would work in his favor.

Chapter 7

Tate Newman strummed the strings on the guitar, and he sang the last lines of his favorite Men at Work song. The following silence was deafening as he looked around the lonely hotel room. There wasn't much time before he had to get ready for the press conference, and he needed to clean up. He took care to put Chuck's vintage Gibson guitar into its case, because he knew how much the guitar meant to Chuck.

Tate took a quick shower, he stepped out grabbed a towel off the rack, and wrapped it around his hips. He walked to the counter and wiped the steam off the mirror, looking at his reflection. He didn't know what he was looking for.

Tate was having the time of his life on tour with the band, enjoying being a part of Station Zero more than he imagined. When he found the flyer posted at The Roxy of their need for a drummer, he was shocked. Slater was a force on the drums, and the fact he wasn't with them anymore burned his curiosity. He'd toyed with the possibility of auditioning on his morning run, and mulled over it all day. The decision to go for it was made at the last minute.

Tate was a fan of Station Zero. He saw them live many times and their music was always on his iPod. Their songs were ones he would play on his drums to let his aggression out, and he loved the fast-paced tempos. Tate would admit to having a thing for Declan before he met him, though the attraction didn't have anything to do with his decision to audition. It was impossible not to be attracted Declan. He possessed raw talent and an appeal that drew Tate in. The knowledge Declan was gay only fueled the attraction.

Tate had been looking for a way to escape the daily grind, and music had always been a part of him, but it wasn't something he was comfortable attempting to make a living doing. He was a sensible man who needed a steady income for himself and his future. Nest eggs, his father always taught him, a savings account, money in the bank, and a retirement plan, were what made a man. If Tate threw caution to the wind and joined a band, what would his father think? Why, at twenty-seven, was he still worried about what his father thought? That was the question on constant repeat during his run the morning of the audition. That was the question in the back of his mind when he decided he would audition, and that was the question that became his mantra as he handed in his resignation, and left the steady job he had held for the last five years.

Tate was unprepared for meeting Declan at the audition—the playful nature he showed with Chuck—endeared him to Tate. It was different from what Tate saw at shows, the times when he almost walked up to Declan at the merchandise booth and asked if he wanted to get a drink later. The missed moments where Tate never got the nerve to ask out the “rock star”, and now here he was, sharing space with him daily for a short span of six months and Tate wished he didn’t feel the way he did. No, Tate wanted to feel the way he did, because he liked the way he felt when he was around Declan. He liked talking to him, playing with him, and he loved the energy he got off his front man. What he didn’t understand was what happened the day after the river walk. They’d had a good time. Tate thought he’d read Declan right and he’d enjoyed the night as well, but the morning after was a disaster.

Tate thought about that day a lot, though he willed himself to forget it. The morning was going well, and when Tate met Declan in the hallway, he knew he felt the pull between them. The need was pouring off the man in waves, and Tate was drowning in it. He was sure Declan felt the same. The same emotions that were causing his sleepless nights. Tate didn’t know when the shift happened, but Declan slamming the door in his face was not a positive moment in their possible relationship.

The night they walked along the San Antonio River Walk had been beyond amazing for Tate. He let his guard down with Declan so many times, and it was never difficult to do. He wanted to share his past, his struggles, and the secrets he kept hidden from the rest of the world with Declan. Tate saw a future with this man, and it scared him. They hadn’t known one another long, but they say when you know, you know, and Tate knew. He replayed the night over and over again, trying to figure out where he read Declan wrong.

Tate had a great time in the common area of the bus, with his bandmates, though his head was a jumbled mess. Their teasing banter and discussion of music made him feel more than just a part of the band. The way they were getting along made him feel like they were true bandmates, friends, and a group of men who respected him. Tate felt Declan before he spoke. He knew the minute he was close, as each hair on the back of Tate’s neck stood at attention. It didn’t take long for his dick to notice Declan was close either. Tate could see something was weighing on the lead singer. He lacked a good poker face, and the carefree way he looked the night before was gone. In its place was more than Atlas could bear on his shoulders.

When Declan accepted Tate's request to sit next to him at the table, he couldn't help but flirt. He needed to find out what was going on and he simply wanted to touch Declan. Nothing happened between them other than a few touches here and there. Not that Tate didn't want more to happen. He wanted Declan. It was that simple. He. Wanted. Declan. Tate was surprised and happy Declan wanted to "talk" to him after he touched him. Tate was hard and more than ready to get a taste of Declan. He wanted to take his time the first time he kissed him. Tate wanted to start at Declan's neck and work his way up Declan's rigid jaw line, kissing his way toward his mouth where he could trace his plump lips before he pressed his against them. Tate imagined how their lips would slide over each other, how he would lick the seam of Declan's lips until he opened for him, and how he would finally taste Declan when he licked inside his mouth.

Tate was getting hard thinking of how the kiss would have felt. He took the towel off and ran his hand along his rigid length, squeezing the base. He didn't have time to jack off now since the band was supposed to be down stairs in a half hour for another press conference. Tate loved Balthazar for considering the boys of Station Zero as part of the tour, but he was getting tired of the questions about who he was dating or why he wasn't dating at all.

This would be the first press conference they would all do together, as a band, since Declan blew him off and left him sitting on his ass in the middle of the suite. Declan turned down every other opportunity for exposure with the press, but this was one Max was insisting they attend.

Walking to his suitcase he pulled out clothes to get dressed for the conference. He always chose casual clothes—he'd spent too many days in a suit to have clothes be constricting. Tate pulled on a pair of dark blue jeans. He would have to go commando until his clothes returned from the hotel laundry service. He grabbed the only dress shirt he brought with him, even though it looked more like he should be wearing it on the beaches of Mexico, but the day was warm and the light-colored linen material kept him cool. Tate slipped into his favorite Chuck Taylors, and grabbed the key card from his room, putting it in his wallet, then shoving it into the back pocket of his jeans before walking out of his room.

The hotel was holding a convention for knitting. It was the strangest thing Tate experienced, but the hotel was packed. He'd been surprised they each got their own room, even though he'd hoped they wouldn't and he would have to

pair up with Declan. Tate hated Declan keeping his distance, but Tate decided to play his game and play it best. Tate wanted to talk to Declan, but unless the man was going to tell him what the fuck was going on, Tate refused to engage in conversation.

Tate headed down the hallway and stopped at Declan's door. He could do it, he could knock and just ask the man... what? Why don't you want me like I want you? Tate raised his hand to knock and laid it against the door, his forehead following suit, and Tate forced himself to breathe. These unrequited feelings made him feel like a teenager again. He was almost thirty years old and he couldn't maneuver into a relationship unless it was with his hand. Tate felt a jolt through the door, a bolt of electricity similar to getting shocked when you dragged your feet on the carpet and touched metal. He pulled his hand back, gave a longing look at Declan's door, smiled regretfully, and then walked away.

Lost in his thoughts, Tate walked to the elevator, pressed the button and waited. The bell chimed as the doors opened and a voice from down the hall yelled at him to "*hold the elevator*". Automatically he pressed hold. It didn't register who'd yelled at him—not until he looked up and saw his shock reflected in Declan's eyes. The smile Declan gave him nearly undid all his resolve. *So much for not being alone with him today.*

"Hey, Tate. Thanks." *Oh, what game are you playing, Morrison?*

"Sure, man. No problem. Anything for a friend." Tate watched the elevator doors close and their reflections stare back at them from the shiny doors. He pressed the button for the first floor.

Declan looked good—he was dressed in a dark pair of slacks that hugged his thighs, and his shirt was a signature Declan number with a mass of colors in dark plaid. Tate loved the odd array of patterned shirts Declan chose to wear because they matched his energy. Declan wore a pair of brown loafers, and on anyone else it would look like they raided their grandfather's closet, but when Declan wore them, they looked edgy and like something you'd see on a runway.

Declan nodded at Tate when the elevator chimed and the doors opened at the next floor. Tate looked up and noticed they were going higher rather than lower, he must have got on the wrong elevator. *Great.* They needed to get to the ground floor for the press conference.

The elevator doors opened and a large group of people, conference goers judging by the amount of yarn and needles hanging out of bags, crowded into the car. Tate moved to accommodate them, shifting to the back of the elevator before feeling himself press up against a body.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Tate turned to apologize face-to-face to the person when he felt a hand on his back and a shiver run through him.

“You’re fine,” Declan whispered in his ear. Tate felt his cock twitch at the words, and he adjusted his stance.

Tate nodded and felt Declan’s hand rubbing small circles on his back. What was he doing? They weren’t talking and now in a crowded elevator Declan decides to molest him? Not that Tate was complaining or anything, but this was throwing him off again and he wasn’t in the mood to be confused.

The elevator stopped at a higher floor, and a few convention knitters got off but more got on. This only pushed Tate into Declan further and Declan’s hand gripped Tate’s hip to steady him. Tate’s pulse raced at the touch. Declan squeezed his hip and released it, placing his hand on his back once again. Declan ran his fingers down Tate’s back, and Tate could feel the heat from them through his thin shirt. Declan stopped when he reached Tate’s waist. Tate felt a rush of air as Declan lifted the hem of his shirt and slid his hand underneath. Biting back a groan at the touch of Declan’s palm against his bare skin, Tate looked around the elevator frantically wondering if anyone was aware what was happening. Thankfully everyone on the elevator was lost in their own world. Tate didn’t know what game Declan was playing, but he knew he didn’t want it to stop.

Tate shifted and pressed his back in to Declan’s hand, and Tate heard a muffled “yes” come from the man behind him. Declan’s fingers drew patterns along Tate’s back, following his spine up to the base of his skull and back down. Declan’s fingers teased the waistband of Tate’s jeans, pulling at it before they slipped underneath. Tate grinned secretly, knowing the growl that came from Declan was due to the fact he wore nothing under his jeans. The grin was wiped off Tate’s lips when Declan’s fingers travelled below the waistband and slid along the crease of his ass. The touch was feather light, but it seared Tate. He was certain it would leave a permanent mark. If his brain function capability worked, he would remember to check for it later. Tate let his head fall back a fraction toward Declan and felt his hand briefly slide around his back to his stomach. The material of the shirt allowed for free movement and them not to

be seen. Declan made lazy circles along Tate's chest and slid lower to dip into his belly button. Tate was ticklish there and couldn't stifle the laugh with the touch.

"Shh..." Declan lightly bit Tate's shoulder with the command. Tate was not one for exhibitionism or public displays of affection, but he would not tell Declan to stop for anything right now. He wouldn't be able to form words, he was so turned on.

The elevator came to another stop. Tate glanced at the floor numbers seeing that they were on floor fifteen. If Declan kept this up the entire way to the ground floor, Tate would come in his jeans. He wasn't in the mood to sit through a press conference with wet jeans, but he would take what he could get at this point. Declan continued his erotic torture on Tate's back as the elevator made its descent, and Tate boldly pressed back, slowly rocking his hips from side to side rubbing his ass against Declan's erection. Yeah, Declan was hard against Tate's ass and it took large amounts of self-control for Tate to not turn around and... Declan's hands were fixed on Tate's hips, digging into them as he pressed forward in small thrusts. Tate was far more than lost at this point.

Tate groaned every time the elevator stopped because Declan stopped what he was doing. The knitting convention attendees walked off at the second floor, leaving Tate alone with Declan. Tate felt Declan's fingers dig into his hips as they watched the last passenger exit the elevator. Tate watched the doors close with wide eyes and felt his breath quicken and his pulse race with excitement and anxiety. The door closed and those hands of Declan's digging into his hips were suddenly at his shoulders, turning him around and pressing him against the wall of the elevator. Declan reached out and pressed the red emergency button to stop the elevator from moving.

"Fuck, Tate. Do you have any idea what you do to me?" Declan's face was inches from Tate's. His eyes were so dark with passion they turned from their gorgeous shade of light brown to near black. Tate was getting lost in the intensity of Declan's eyes when his hands grasped his face, bringing it impossibly closer. "Do you Tate?"

Tate groaned, reached out to grab Declan's hips and brought their bodies in contact. Their erections were hard and pressed against each other, the touch sending sparks flying through Tate's body. "Feel what you do to me, Declan." Tate ground his crotch against Declan slowly. "Feel it. Can you feel it, what you do to me?"

Declan's thumbs caressed Tate's jaw line, and the softness of the touch combined with the slow rut of their groins was maddening. It was erotic and tender, and Tate was so fucking lost in this moment that he was ready to drop to his knees and take Declan's cock in his mouth and the back of his throat.

"Kiss me, Tate," Declan whispered. His words puffed out breaths along Tate's lips, and he shivered. "Kiss me, please. Before..."

Before, what? Tate's erotic haze was pierced by that word. "Before what, Declan?"

"Just kiss me, Tate. I need you to kiss me." The urgency in Declan's plea set off warning signals inside Tate. He wanted this, he had wanted it for so long, but there was something missing.

Tate found the strength and pulled away from Declan. "No, Tate. Please no. Just give us this."

Tate couldn't speak. Declan was the one who walked away from him with the bullshit excuse of "I'm not in to you" and now he was pleading for a stolen moment? Tate would have given him months of stolen moments if he asked.

"No." Tate's hands were still on Declan's hips, but he pushed Declan away and pulled back against the wall of the elevator. "No, Declan. I can't. Not like this."

"You want me, Tate."

"I do, but I won't do it like this," Tate's insisted.

"What the fuck do you mean?"

"Declan." Tate looked at him, really looked at him, and saw how exhausted he looked. Tate worried he wasn't taking care of himself. They were like ships passing in port as much as they saw each other lately, but Declan looked like he was close to the edge.

"Declan, you don't want me, remember?" Tate hated throwing that back in his face, but he needed to snap himself and Declan out of this.

"Tate, about that. I wanted..."

"Hello?" A voice came over the internal speaker of the elevator. "Are you okay? Do you need emergency assistance?"

Tate looked at Declan and saw the war that was waging inside him. Tate wanted to help him, help him fight his battles, and he would if Declan could

open up and trust him. Tate knew how hard it was to trust. He'd been trusting before with his ex-boyfriend and faced the consequences. He offered his trust to Declan and it was thrown back in his face, but he would try again if only Declan would give him the smallest indication that it was wanted.

"Yeah, um." Tate cleared his throat. "Sorry about that. We're fine." Tate pressed the emergency button to release the elevator. They rode it the rest of the way to the ground floor. Tate turned to Declan whose head was hanging down; his shoulders slumped, and he displayed the body posture of a man who once oozed confidence but now looked defeated.

"I'm sorry, Declan. I really am," Tate offered the apology as the doors of the elevator opened and they walked through them into the lobby. He needed to get through this damn press conference, the show tonight, and would deal with the rest when he could.

What was he going to do about this? What the hell just happened between them on that elevator? Declan went from zero to *I want to fuck you like an animal* in such a short time; Tate needed to take a step back and downshift. Tate needed space. Odd to want that after months of having it, but he needed time to think this through.

Tate grabbed the towel to wipe the sweat off his face, neck, and bare chest. The Glass House was the hottest venue they'd played yet; he felt like he was suffocating in this place. The murmur of the crowd began to sound like a hundred bees on a hot summer day, hungry for more, and the set list Station Zero played wasn't cutting it. The dates they played in Southern California were the toughest ones of the tour, as the hometown crowds weren't giving them any slack. The new songs were getting the crowd moving, but they wanted the old school songs they fell in love with. Tate raised his arms above his head, grabbed his right wrist with the left hand, and pulled to stretch his shoulders. He repeated the stretch with the opposite wrist, the cracks and pops of his body making him feel older than his twenty-seven years. The tour was the longest the band had been on and they needed the exposure. Their manager was in talks with a new record label that was showing interest. These shows could mean a chance at a real record deal and the opportunity to take their careers to the next level.

Tate twisted the towel in his hand, snapped it in the air, and then looped it around his neck. He grabbed his boxer's-style water bottle, and drank deeply.

He watched as the members of Station Zero switched instruments with the roadies to enter the second half of their six-song set. Their instruments were taking a beating on the tour, but they were able to share the roadies with the boys from Balthazar, which saved them money and gave them the opportunity to sound their best.

Tate scanned the stage and watched Declan walk toward him with a natural swagger to his hips that screamed sex. Tate shifted on his stool as he watched Declan's eyes flick to his briefly, before he walked past him and straight to Chuck. *Ignoring me, asshole?* Tate knew he fucked up earlier. He fucked up and he wished he could take back those few minutes between him and Declan in the hotel elevator when they came close to crossing the line. He could still smell the man, and feel his breath on his face as their lips were less than an inch apart. Why didn't Declan take what he wanted? What was he waiting for? Tate wouldn't be the one to make the first move. Declan told him bluntly that he wasn't interested, even after the night on the River Walk. But night after night, sleeping on the bus under the man, the sounds coming from the bunk above him made him wish it would disappear and Declan would be on top of him, skin to skin. Tate took a deep breath as his dick twitched. He was thankful he was behind his drum set and made the choice to wear a loose-fitting pair of basketball shorts tonight. He didn't need the local press or his manager to see him as a walking hard-on for his lead singer. Speaking of his lead singer, what the fuck was Declan doing with Chuck? They never broke this long between songs. Tate scanned the stage and watched Chuck lean in to Declan, placing his arm on his shoulder and whispered in his ear. Declan returned his whisper, when they pulled back the pair grinned and did their signature fist bump. Declan stalked off to the front of the stage and grabbed his microphone.

"How you feeling, Pomona?!" Declan shouted into the microphone and held it out as the crowd cheered back.

"It's good to be back in Southern California with you sexy motherfuckers!" The cheers from the crowd grew when Declan raised his fist in the air and performed his Q&A with them. Tate loved to watch him work the crowd. Declan possessed a magnetism that drew man, woman, child, *and Tate* to him. The man didn't have to say much, he just looked at you to make you his. Tate knew the look since he'd been getting it lately from Declan. The look held promise, a promise Tate used many times alone in the shower when he jacked off. Tate wanted to see the look on Declan's face as he fucked him. Two years was a long time without intimate contact from another man. Tate tried the

hook-up deal, Grindr, and random encounters at clubs, but they left him empty. He wanted the raw emotion that came from being claimed by a man who wanted him for more than just his ass. Tate was a romantic soul and he wanted it all. He wasn't a blushing virgin and wasn't waiting for marriage, but he wanted more than previous boyfriends had given him. He was still putting the pieces of his broken family and self-esteem back together after his ex-boyfriend had torn his world apart.

The sound of a blues riff being played on the guitar by Chuck pulled Tate out of his trip down amnesia lane. *You have to be kidding me!* The familiar riff was soon joined by Keith on bass. The sounds blended together, and Declan's voice came through the speakers as he sang the opening lines to Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love." Tate knew he had less than fifteen seconds to grab his sticks and get his shit together to play his part. *What the actual fuck was this?* Tate grabbed his sticks, beat them on the toms, hit the cymbal, and pumped the bass pedal in time while watching as Declan ripped his shirt open and strut to the side of the stage to sing the first chorus with Keith. Thank fuck Tate knew how to play this song blindfolded because he couldn't take his eyes off Declan or his now naked chest. The open shirt showed off Declan's toned chest and abs; the stage lights highlighted the outline of his muscles as he gripped the microphone, bounced on his toes, and shook his ass on stage. Tight jeans hung low on Declan's hips, far too low for Tate and his now half-hard dick to take in as he seductively danced on the stage with the other members of Station Zero. Tate knew those hips, knew the outline of them, and he knew those abs held the finest of hair on them that after a shower would rise and catch the rays of early morning light strewn through the bus windows.

Tate's cock was now at full mast with the combination of his R-rated memories and the way Declan was performing the classic rock song. The music slowed and Chuck started his partial solo, mimicking the sound of a bow being pulled across his guitar the best he could with Keith filling in to make the sound complete. Declan walked behind Keith, grinding and thrusting against him as his fingers fondled the guitar's neck, playing the chords with him. Tate waited to add the full sound of his drums back to the song when Declan's voice came through the speakers. He panted, moaned, and grunted to the sounds of the guitars in a way that could only be described as orgasmic. Declan turned to Tate and held his gaze as he thrust his hips against Keith, and throwing his head back with one final groan, he leaned forward and licked Keith's neck. Tate gripped his drum sticks hard, glad there were only a few notes to play and that

classic rock didn't require a double bass pedal, because he might do serious damage to his dick if he moved both feet and legs right now. Declan was doing a fine fucking good job of teasing him, and for what? Because Tate wouldn't kiss him when he wanted it? *Well, fuck you too, Declan Morrison.*

The song picked back up to its regular tempo. Declan walked to the drums and started singing the next verse... straight to Tate. Tate made eye contact with his lead singer, unable to look away if he wanted to, and the fact was, he didn't want to. It was stupid how Declan could turn him on like this when he was playing with him, torturing him, showing him everything he wanted. Declan played air guitar, tossing his head back and forth with the song as it pulsed through the small venue. The tempo slowed once again, and Tate heard Declan change the lyrics from "woman" to "man" while walking around the drum set to stand behind Tate. Tate held his breath as he got close. He heard Declan sing the last few lines of the song, and when he stood behind him, Declan put his left hand on Tate's back. He slid it down and through the sweat that even playing the drums in a well air conditioned room could produce. Tate stilled as Declan's hand slid around his chest. He took a shuddering breath when Declan grabbed and pinched his nipple and pressed into Tate's back. Tate groaned at the touch, thankful he didn't have a microphone at his drums to be heard, and Declan started to pant into his microphone again. Tate felt the thick bulge of Declan's hard cock through the jean material digging into his back as Declan sang about the type of man he wanted to be. Tate leaned his head back against Declan's chest. Without missing a single beat of the drums, he closed his eyes letting the song, the touch, and the closeness of this man, wash over him. Declan ran his hands through Tate's hair softly before he gave it a tug, shoved Tate's head off his chest and walked away. Tate felt the rush of the warm air across his skin when Declan left, but the sting and the chill of loss was like ice in his veins.

The last notes of the song were played out with Declan slinking across the stage, dancing and grinding on his bandmates. The crowd broke out in applause, screams, and whistles for the boys. This was what they needed, but Tate could only focus on the dark-haired man in front of him as he rose from his drums and took a bow in time with the band. Declan walked to the front of the stage, bowed again and turned with a wave of his hand and screamed into the microphone "Give it up for my boys... Station Zero!" The crowd went crazy! Tate took another bow with the band. When he came up he found Declan staring, looking Tate up and down, and stopping when he got to his noticeably

hard cock. Declan gave a short bow to Tate, meeting his eyes with a raise of his eyebrows and a smirk. Tate put both drum sticks in his right hand, grabbed his cock with it, and flipped Declan off, giving him a smug smirk right back. Declan laughed, shook his head and led the crowd into the next song. Tate adjusted his dick before he sat behind his drums again and counted them off into "Iron Gates." The crowd started jumping to the upbeat rhythm.

Tate narrowed his eyes at Declan's back while he sang to the crowd.
Paybacks are a bitch, Morrison.

Chapter 8

~September, present day~

Four words...

I want you, Declan.

Declan stared at the hotel wall, playing those words over and over in his head. They'd been on the road for six months together, through the drama he created, yet Tate wanted him... still? He began to pace between the door and window, mulling over the last few hours. He wasn't prepared to hear that Tate wanted him after what he'd done. Declan wanted it, wanted Tate but was stunned to hear Tate wanted him. He knew he was messing with his future in too many ways and yet he wasn't willing to stop.

He'd told Tate too many lies and he needed to come clean with him. Fast. There wasn't time to talk on the bus after Tate's confession, not with the rest of the band awake and preventing any private moments. It didn't help that Declan took the coward's way out and snuck off the bus when they arrived in Los Angeles. After that, the band needed to concentrate on the preparation for tonight's show at the Whisky a Go Go and the meeting with the new label. Declan knew Rick would be pissed but *fuck Rick*. He wasn't going to let him tell him who he could love. *Love?* Declan would walk away from Station Zero before he walked away from Tate, again.

Declan grabbed his duffle bag off the hotel chair, took out his laptop, opened it and glared at the screen—he knew what he had to do. He'd done a damn good job of getting the pictures of he and Tate off the internet before they went viral. Sure, there were a few sites who still posted them but they were buried now after three months and he was lucky Tate wasn't one to troll those sites.

Declan pulled up the original email from Rick; the one that started his downward spiral of lies. He'd never been able to bring himself to delete the email or the pictures. He hated the invasion of privacy that led to them being taken, but deep down, Declan thought he was lucky to have photographic evidence of the day he fell for Tate. Not many people could claim the same. Declan scrolled through the emails between him, Rick and the CEO and President of *Free to Be Records*. Declan got a twisted kick out of their label

name, free to be what? Obviously not a gay man in a rock band in a relationship with his gay drummer according to Rick. It was insanity at best the way this business worked.

Declan click “forward” on the email and typed out a quick note to Tate.

Tate,

This is a pretty shitty apology but after this morning on the bus. I need to explain. Read the entire thread of emails, please.

It's all I ask.

Declan

Declan stared at the email, knowing this could end one of two ways. He hoped for the best, but life taught Declan nothing was easy and the best was out of his league. He hit *send* on the email, closed his laptop and knew he needed to get out of the hotel room before he lost it. Declan grabbed the brochure for the hotel, looking at what amenities the posh Luxe at Sunset Boulevard Hotel offered. *A heated pool, eh?* An exhausting swim could be just what he needed.

The warm water broke as Declan surfaced and stroked his way across the hotel pool. He alternated strokes with each set of ten laps he swam. He flipped underwater and came up to float on his back, reaching his right arm behind his head to cut down through the water in a new set of back strokes. He stared up as the sun fell, coloring the sky in shades of blue, orange, and purple. With the green trees surrounding the pool and red flowers in vases on the tables next to the lounge chairs, Declan was swimming surrounded by a rainbow. The thought would have made him smile if his stomach wasn't in knots waiting for Tate's response to the emails.

Whatever the outcome, Declan would deal with it and move on. Sending Tate those emails, seeing the back and forth he did with Rick, pleading for him to understand and let them try to keep things quiet but be together, they were the most honest thing Declan had done... for himself.

Declan's stroke stuttered as the pool rippled in waves as if someone dove in. The solitude was gone. He pushed himself under water, then floated back to the surface and was face-to-face with Tate. Declan treaded water as he stared at his drummer.

Tate's face was emotionless, making it hard for Declan to read him. Forcing himself to speak, he willed his voice not to break along with his heart.

"Tate?" he asked carefully.

"Declan?" Tate responded.

"Um... did you get—" Declan's question was interrupted.

"The email?" Tate nodded "Yeah, I did." Tate swam a fraction closer to Declan. "I read all of it, Declan."

The tone in Tate's voice put Declan on the defense; he never heard Tate talk this way. His voice was an odd combination of menace and seduction, and Declan wasn't sure which way was up. He started to swim backward to get some space between them.

Tate swam toward him. "I read it all, Declan. It's what you wanted me to do, right?"

Declan's heart was pounding as the sensation of being stalked by Tate sent a jolt of anticipation through his body. He turned and started to paddle to the shallow end of the pool where he could stand and get his footing. Tate swam closer once again as Declan swam to the side. It was like they were dancing around each other through the water. It would have been a romantic moment if Declan's heart wasn't racing with the unknown.

Tate darted forward and swam behind him, grabbing his arm and dragging him against his body. Declan's breath caught as his back bumped against Tate's chest, sliding against it through the water, and Tate wrapped his arm around Declan's chest and shoulders.

"Shhh... you're fine." Tate's mouth was right next to Declan's ear, the warm caress of his breath sent blood flow straight to his dick. Declan looked around the pool to see if they were alone, thankfully they were.

Declan couldn't relax, he wasn't fine. He could feel Tate's erection hard against his ass as he swayed in the water. The thin fabric of their shorts left nothing to the imagination. Tate's right hand slid down Declan's chest and began dragging his fingers against his nipple with maddeningly slow strokes.

"Tate?" Declan pleaded.

"Dec..." Tate replied with a hint of annoyance.

"Did you read the emails?" he asked.

“Mmm hmm...” Tate ran his nose down the side of Declan’s face and nuzzled behind his right ear. Declan shivered in the warm water, the touch was too much to take. Tate’s hand left his chest, coming up to cradle Declan’s jaw, and as he tilted his head, Declan almost came right then and there when he felt Tate’s warm tongue tracing the shell of his ear. Tate licked and nibbled on his lobe before taking it fully in his mouth to suckle. If it weren’t for the arm holding him up, Declan would have gone underwater.

“Tate?” How many times could Declan say his name as a question? “The emails?” he prompted. “W-what did you think?”

Tate’s hand, which was stroking Declan’s nipple, stilled at the question, and he felt a sting of pain on his ear lobe when Tate bit down harder than before.

“What did I think?” Tate slid his hands down Declan’s torso slowly, resting his hands on his hips, squeezing and digging his fingers in. Declan hissed at the rough contact. Tate pushed Declan away, the water moving him about weightlessly, until he was at arm’s length and turned him around to face him. Tate smirked and pulled him close until their chests bumped and their dicks met. Declan grasped for Tate’s biceps, trying to find purchase in the slick water.

“What did I think, Declan?” Tate’s gaze roamed over every inch of Declan’s face as his hands slid up from Declan’s hips, traced the lines of his abs and up to his chest. His fingers teased circles around each nipple before his hands travelled up and over his shoulders, sliding behind his neck and up to cradle Declan’s face in his hands. Declan’s cock was hard and throbbing as he panted under Tate’s thorough exploration of his upper body. Tate rubbed his thumbs along Declan’s jaw line and brought Declan’s lips a breath away from his and whispered, “I think you’re a fucking liar.”

Declan struggled against Tate as he was shoved underwater. He reached for Tate’s hands which were now on top of his head and twisted in his hair—Declan kicked, trying to get out of his grasp. His right foot made contact with Tate’s thigh, making Tate lose his hold, and he swam away until a grasp on his foot dragged him back.

Declan came up gasping for air, barely able to drag quick breaths in before Tate was on him again, his hands on his shoulders pushing him under once more. Declan thrashed, and his lungs were burning from lack of air. He reached to grab Tate’s wrists, digging his blunt nails into his skin and kicked out as hard as he could. He felt his foot make contact with flesh, where it landed he didn’t

know and he didn't care. He needed to breathe. The kick did its job, and Declan was released and pushed away from Tate.

Declan sputtered as he surfaced, shaking his head to get his hair out of his eyes when he could breathe. He gulped in air, paddling in circles as his brain received oxygen and he could think... *What the fuck?*

Declan waded into the deeper water, turning to find Tate swimming to the shallow end of the pool. He was standing in waist-deep water, his arms crossed over his chest and the scowl on his face told Declan exactly what he thought of the emails. As if the almost drowning or the fact he'd called him a liar wasn't a clear indication. And Declan was a liar, he couldn't argue with that, but there was a reason he lied.

"You done?" Declan yelled from across the pool.

"I haven't even started," Tate responded through clenched teeth. His voice was low and yet it carried like an echo across the pool.

"What am I supposed to do, Tate?" *What am I supposed to do?* "I'm sorry..."

"You're sorry?" Tate waded further into the water. "You're sorry, Declan? Just what are you sorry for?"

Declan noticed the dark look in Tate's eyes. He wanted more than anything to swim away from him but he'd run enough already. With deliberate strokes, Declan swam toward Tate.

"I'm sorry for everything, Tate." Tate made a strangled sound, showing how much he believed Declan. "What's *everything* to you?"

Declan couldn't say what he wanted to with a pool of water between them. He dove under the water, opened his eyes and swam straight to Tate's legs. He came up and met the most beautiful face he had ever seen. He knew how he felt about Tate; he just hoped there was some way he could show him. Declan knew by now that his words meant shit.

"Tate, *you* are everything. I know words aren't going to be enough here, but you have to listen to me." Declan reached for Tate's hand under the water. "Will you listen to me?"

"I haven't moved, have I?" The harsh words were accompanied by Tate's fingers twining with Declan's.

Declan could see the confusion etched across Tate's face. His lips were drawn in a tight line, and Declan wanted to kiss it away. To make Tate smile and kiss him until his lips were swollen from it.

"I know I fucked up, Tate. I'm not crazy enough to miss the fact, but there were reasons for what I did. I hoped in the emails you would see I fought *not* to have this happen. I've done nothing but fight for this band from day one and I don't know anything else." Declan searched Tate's face, but it revealed nothing. "But you, I wasn't expecting you, not the way you..."

"How am I, Declan?" Tate grew tense.

Declan leaned his head back and closed his eyes, asking the universe, the sky, even the freaking chlorine in the pool, to give him the strength to say what was needed.

"Cut me a break here, Tate. I'm not used to this, okay. I'm not the guy who wants anything more than a random hook-up. But this time, this time with you... you make me want things I never knew I could. You make me want things I shouldn't. You make *me* want you."

"*I make you want me?*" Tate pulled his fingers away from Declan's. "How do I make you do anything, Declan? Did I make you lie to me? Did I make you throw away what we could have had for *three months* so you could play 'yes man' to Rick? Did I make you hide things from me? Did I make you play with my head and my emotions after all I told you back in San Antonio? Tell me, Declan, how I make you do anything?"

Declan was twisted inside and out. He couldn't back pedal his way out of this mess he created.

"Fine, bad choice of words. You didn't make me do anything, Tate. You didn't do anything at all. You just accepted what you were told and didn't fight."

Tate's hands came out of the water and back in a slap, spraying water across Declan. "What was I supposed to fight for, Declan? Someone who didn't want me? Someone who wasn't interested in me as anything but a friend?" Tate smacked the water again. To a passerby it would have looked like playful splashing, but the force behind each movement Tate made was fraught with frustration and anger, and it was all for Declan.

"I lied. Fuck it, I lied." Declan threw his hands up in the air. "It was stupid and I wish I could take it back but it's done." Declan gripped his hands and brought them on top of his head. "It's done. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to take responsibility!" Tate yelled.

"That's all I do, Tate!" Declan yelled back.

"Not for the band, Declan. For you!" Tate pointed at him, jabbing his hand, if it were close it would have bruised Declan. "For your actions."

"What do you want from me?"

Declan stared at Tate, counting each second as it passed before Tate answered him. He would have to wait it seemed. Tate fell back against the water with a splash. His body came to the top and he just laid there and floated. He floated as if he didn't have a care in the world. He floated on the warm water of the damn hotel pool where they would have a meeting soon with the new label like it was the only thing he needed to do right then and there. He floated like Declan wasn't mere feet away from him. He floated like... *Well fuck.*

Declan sighed. "I get it, Tate."

"Do you, Declan?" Tate's arms were stretched wide; he looked like some sort of water angel with the late sun shining down on him creating a halo of light.

"Yeah."

Declan dunked himself under water, needing to be alone for a single second. The small act on Tate's part spoke volumes. Declan knew what he wanted, and he wanted Tate even though he didn't deserve him. He'd played with the man's emotions while he screwed with his own. Each moment together played over in Declan's mind. From the ridiculous first time they met, to their date. *It was a date!* To Declan's lies, to the elevator where he begged Tate to kiss him.

He swam toward the opposite side of the pool and pulled himself out and onto the warm deck. Declan laid on his stomach, crossing his arms in front of him and placed his head to the side to watch Tate float in the pool. *This is it, Morrison. It's now or never.*

"I'm sorry," Declan simply stated. He closed his eyes and waited for Tate's answer. He knew whatever it was, he could deal with it. Though Declan never had to mend a shattered and broken heart before, he knew he could do it. It would just take a number of phone calls to Lisa and probably a vacation somewhere with cabana boys who liked to offer more than drinks off the menu.

Declan was brought out of his maudlin thoughts by a splash of water landing on his back. He opened his eyes and was met with the blue of Tate's boring into his all the way to his soul. His skin peppered with goose bumps at the sight of Tate so close Declan could touch him. Physically he could reach out his right arm and run his hand across the close cut of Tate's hair, but emotionally, they were so far apart.

"I'm sorry, too, Declan." Tate's voice was barely above a whisper.

"What do you have to be sorry for?" Declan asked incredulously.

"I'm sorry I didn't fight for you." Tate gave a soft smile. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to help you when you needed it and you carried this alone." Tate leaned forward into Declan's space. "I'm sorry I didn't go after what I wanted when I saw the signs you wanted it too."

"Was I that obvious?" Declan muttered.

"You *were there* each time with me, right?" Tate chuckled. "Yeah, Dec. You were obvious, but I couldn't figure out why the switch happened." Tate crouched down in the water, as he rested his hands on the edge of the pool and propped his chin on top of his hands. "I get it now, and Declan, I'm so sorry."

Declan sighed and stared at Tate. He didn't deserve such understanding from this man; he lied to him, kept things from him, and took advantage of their situation.

"Tate?"

"Yeah?"

"What do we do now?" Declan was asking for his help for the first time.

"We move on," Tate said. "We talk, we find common ground, and we move on."

"You saw those emails, Tate. How do we deal with that?" Declan pushed himself up and sat crossed legged on the deck.

Tate grabbed the deck and pulled himself up and out of the water to sit next to Declan. Tate's bare arm resting against his, the casual touch sending shivers through Declan's body and made his stomach flip. "Lisa is how we deal with it," Tate said.

How could he be so stupid? Declan smacked the deck at his moment of memory lapse. His best friend and cousin was a paralegal who worked with

some of the top lawyers in Los Angeles. He knew all he had to do was pick up the phone and tell her he needed help and Lisa would move mountains, or at least move bigoted record labels and managers for him.

Declan leaned into Tate's side and let his head fall back to watch the thin clouds move across the darkening sky.

"You're pretty smart, Newman," Declan declared.

"You've no idea the ideas I have in my head," Tate's whisper was given with his lips against Declan's ear.

Declan held his breath as Tate's hand came down to rest on his and he threaded their fingers together.

"It's almost time for the show," Tate said.

Declan looked at Tate, and watched a mischievous smile slowly spread across his face before he planted his feet on the deck, stood and pulled him to stand, dragging Declan toward the lounge chairs hidden under canopies.

"What are you doing, Tate?" Declan's dick hoped he knew the answer because it was standing up proudly, begging to be noticed.

Tate turned and took both of Declan's hands in his and walked backward until his legs met one of the lounge chairs. His sudden stop brought Declan forward, and he crashed into Tate. Declan placed his hands on Tate's chest, feeling the bare skin still wet from the pool. Declan let his hands ghost down Tate's hard chest and flat stomach to rest on the waist band of his swim trunks.

Declan yelped as he was pulled by Tate, who fell back against the soft cushion of the chair, bringing Declan with him. Tate's arms wrapped around Declan's shoulders as he embraced him; Declan laid his cheek against Tate's chest and let himself be held. Declan couldn't remember the last time he was held this way. Lisa hugged him, but when was the last time he was held by someone who didn't want anything from him?

Declan grinned as Tate's erection prodded him in the stomach. Tate didn't want anything from Declan, not the way he was used to. But Tate did want him, and Declan would take what was offered.

Tate's hold relaxed and his arms slid down Declan's and began lazy swirls around his bare skin.

"I've wanted to do this for so long," Tate whispered. "Just to hold you, like this."

Declan's heart felt like it was on a race and he was out of breath with Tate's declaration. He felt there was more with Tate from the start, but he thought the wild romantic day dreams and vivid erotic fascinations was mostly one sided. He was lost for words.

Declan raised his head and nuzzled Tate's chin with his nose.

"Mmm... I like that, Dec," Tate groaned.

Declan repeated the motion. "I like when you call me Dec."

"Do you?" Declan nodded, and Tate hooked his finger under Declan's chin and raised his head. Tate's eyes were fixed on Declan's mouth, and Declan licked his lips, wanting to feel Tate's lips on his.

"Dec..." Tate said softly and leaned toward Declan. He placed his hands on the cushion on either side of Tate's chest and rose up to meet him halfway.

"Um, Declan?" The soft voice of his bassist came from the outside of the cabana.

"You have to be fucking kidding me," Declan swore under his breath. "How many times can we be cock blocked?" He banged his head lightly against Tate's chest, feeling the man's laughter before he heard it.

"It's kind of funny..." Declan stopped Tate's next words from coming out by pressing his hand against his mouth.

"Don't say it." Declan started to laugh—a full-bodied laugh which allowed him to relax and be in this moment with Tate. Keeping his position stretched out on Tate; Declan craned his neck to see the outline of Keith through the opaque curtains hanging from the cabana. Keith was standing a few feet away and looking at anything but them.

"What's up, Keith?" Declan asked. Tate's distracting hands started roaming lower along his back, finding their way to his ass, grabbing it with both hands and pulling Declan against him. He groaned and pushed back against Tate's hands before he rocked forward, sliding their still hard erections against each other.

"Fuck, Dec," Tate hissed in his ear and thrust up to meet Declan. All thoughts of someone standing close enough to watch fled Declan's brain. He was lost in all that was Tate. The rest of the world be damned.

"I want you," Declan panted out each word.

"I want you too, Declan." Tate's hand slipped under the waist band of Declan's trunks and was teasing the crease of his ass, dipping between his cheeks to stroke and tease Declan out of his mind.

"Hey?" Keith cleared his throat. "Not to be a total asshole, but we have an interview to do before the show. We should get going soon."

Declan pushed back against Tate's hand as Tate groaned, tossing his head back and exposing the long tanned column of his throat that Declan longed to taste.

"Yeah, Keith." Declan raised his head and licked Tate's throat, as he felt the rumble of Tate's moan in and through this mouth. Declan reveled at the sound and sucked on his Adam's apple. "We're coming."

"Keep doing that and we will," Tate ground out in his ear.

"Right, boss, see you soon and..." Keith laughed. "Shit guys, I'm sorry."

Tate's hand stilled as Keith walked away. Declan looked up at him. The lust had darkened his eyes and his mouth looked delectably kissable.

"We should get ready, Dec," Tate said.

"I know, I just... I want." Declan couldn't get the words out.

"What do you want?" Tate asked.

"You, Tate. I want you." Declan spoke the truth.

"Can you answer me something, Declan?"

"Anything," Declan answered honestly.

"You take on so much with the band." Tate placed a finger over Declan's mouth. "No, shh. Let me talk, please."

Declan kissed Tate's finger and nodded.

"You do so much for everyone else, always putting yourself last," Tate told him.

Declan ducked his head, not wanting to meet Tate's gaze anymore. Why did he have to bring this up *now*?

"You're so strong for so many, but Declan?" Tate pressed.

Declan glanced at Tate under his lashes.

"Can you be strong for *you*, Declan?" Tate raised his eyebrows with earnest. "For what you want?"

“What I want?” Declan pushed up and off Tate’s chest. “What about you Tate?” He slid to the end of the lounge and sat with his back to Tate. “What do you want?” He knew it was stupid to ask, but he hated where this line of questions was going. Declan shouldered responsibilities he couldn’t walk away from. There were people depending on him to do the right thing for them all. He didn’t have the luxury of being selfish.

“I told you what I want this morning on the bus...” Tate said, and Declan felt the weight of the lounge chair shift as he rose to his feet. Tate walked to Declan, standing in front of him and nudged Declan’s foot with his toe. “Look at me, Declan.”

Declan took a deep breath and obeyed.

“I want you, but more than that, Declan—I want you to find the space to take what you want.” Tate smiled sadly. “With or without me, I want that for you so much it hurts.”

Declan wanted Tate, he wanted the redemption he was offering, but could Declan be strong enough to take it? Who would he put first this time: him or the band?

Declan watched as Tate walked away, his back disappearing through the glass doors of the hotel. They had to get this show over with and the meeting with *Free to Be Records*, and then he could decide.

Fuck!

Why did this always have to be so hard? Declan knew what his heart was telling him, he just needed his heart to kick the shit out of his brain so he could have it.

The stage lights dimmed, bringing the band into darkness. The only visible light came from the open door behind the stage and the bar. The black lights from balcony seating illuminated the crowd as shadows danced over their faces. The crowd started buzzing with anticipation, as Station Zero closed each set with their one Chuck-penned ballad. Fans ate the song up even though it was a complete departure from their normal sound, and the boys in the band figured if *KISS* could get away with it, so could they. Their arrogance paid off.

Declan watched as Chuck removed his Stratocaster and set it on the stand at the edge of the stage. Their head roadie handed him his vintage acoustic guitar

and went to set the stool at the front of the stage for Chuck's solo performance. Declan smiled in encouragement as his friend readied himself. Chuck loved to play the fool on stage, but showing off his vocal talent also showed his vulnerability and it was something he struggled with. Declan knew all too well about the struggles of being vulnerable. He couldn't think about the fight with Tate this afternoon or what happened after in the cabana; this gig had too much riding on it to let it get in the way. He wanted Tate, he knew Tate wanted him, but the baggage and lies of the last few months could be dug out with a fork lift, and Declan wouldn't let himself be thrown off balance. Not now. He had to have his head in the game. People were counting on him.

A movement from the back of the stage caught his eye, as Tate rose from behind his drums and walked over to Chuck. He placed his hand on the Gibson and whispered something in Chuck's ear who responded with wide eyes. A nod and he released his prized possession to Tate. Tate strapped on the guitar and walked to the stool set up for the solo performance. *What the fuck was he doing?* Declan stood rooted in place as he watched Tate sit and adjust both microphones.

"Hi. I'm Tate." Tate introduced himself with a wave of his right hand holding the bright yellow guitar pick, and the crowd went crazy with applause, cheers, and whistles. "I know Chuck normally does the last song but tonight is special for us."

Tate turned and looked at Declan, and Declan stopped breathing. The blood left his head, went straight to his dick and made his jeans so tight Declan had to adjust himself. Tate grinned at Declan, noticing his crotch adjustment and winked before turning around to address the crowd.

Fucker.

"Chuck was kind enough to let me have this tonight. The song isn't ours, but I hope you like it and I hope..." Tate kept his body faced to the audience as Declan took small steps toward the front of the stage; the pull of this man was never something he could deny. Tate looked over his shoulder catching Declan's gaze and spoke five words which made him stop midstep. "I hope you get it."

Declan stood frozen in place as Tate started to strum the intro chords to Sheryl Crow's "Strong Enough". He loved to hear the sexy sound of Tate's voice, a rich baritone which lent to the song well. Tate's song choice was

telling; the lyrics flowed from him and hit Declan in the gut. Tate sang about being strong enough to be with him.

Oh, Tate. If you only knew.

Declan looked over the crowd as Tate sang. He wasn't surprised to find them in awed silence, he was much in the same state. Declan spun around as the sound from a bongo drum came into the song. Chuck beat on the drum with bare hands and grinned like the Cheshire Cat at Declan. He shook his head and got emotional at the support.

The crowd started to sway to the beat of the song and people held up their cell phones. Declan closed his eyes as Tate sang into the chorus, the lyrics changing to a deeper meaning than he would have imagined possible hearing Tate sing them.

Declan lied and Tate was still here. The decision he wrestled with for months blew up in his face. Tate asked if Declan could be strong enough for himself, and he felt he could do anything, with Tate by his side.

Declan did the only thing he could and grabbed a microphone off the stand. Walking up to stand next to Tate, he sang the next verse with him. Tate turned and they sang the last lines together and into the chorus. Tate strummed the guitar as he rocked on the stool; his eyes never leaving Declan's face and nodded—Declan sang the last verse alone. He sang the last verse to Tate; setting free all the emotion he felt. The emotion he couldn't usually let himself feel for fear of failing everyone around him. They sang the final chorus together, and the club fell silent. Darkness washed over them as they lights went out.

Declan watched Tate by the small lights on the stage floor, as he lifted the guitar up and off of his body, setting it carefully on the stand at his feet. He turned to face Declan, his hands resting on his thighs and his back straight with tension.

Declan dropped the microphone and the sound bounced through the speakers as he took the two steps it took to get to Tate. Grabbing his face between his hands, he brought their mouths together.

Tate clutched at his arms as the stool tipped back and found purchase with Declan's biceps. Declan felt the soft wetness of Tate's tongue sliding along the seam of his lips and opened without hesitation. Tate pulled Declan closer and

dug his fingers into his arms as he slanted his head to deepen the kiss. He groaned as Tate licked inside his mouth and Declan licked back. Their tongues danced with one another and explored their mouths. The kiss was raw, passionate and unlike anything Declan experienced before. Their mouths slanted over and over again, and though Declan's lungs were screaming for air, he couldn't tear his mouth from Tate's.

The sound of applause was faint, but Declan could only feel, could only taste Tate, the man he has wanted for so long.

Tate was the first to break the kiss, and a thrill shot through Declan to know he was in the same state. Their breaths mixed as they panted from the kiss, resting their foreheads against one another.

"Tate?" Declan could barely get his name out. The blood was pounding in his ears. The fear of the PDA he just put Tate, who wasn't out in this world yet, through scared the shit out of him.

"Dec, it's okay..." Tate kissed his nose. "But we are putting on a show."

Declan turned to look out to the crowd and realized the applause he heard was for them.

"Shit, Tate." Declan's words were cut off by the softness of Tate's mouth against his. This kiss was different from the one they just shared, it was reassuring and intimate.

"It's okay," Tate said again. "I just really need to get out of here, Declan."

Declan nodded and grabbed Tate's hand as they turned and waved to the crowd as it erupted in applause. He glanced at Tate who looked like a deer caught in headlights and tugged on his hand.

"Let's go!" he yelled above the noise.

Keith and Chuck were waiting by the back door of the stage. "Your get-away car awaits, gentlemen." Keith bowed and Chuck shoved them out the door.

Declan stumbled and fell into Tate as Keith opened the door to a black car he didn't recognize. "Whose car is this?"

"The new label sent it to take us back to the hotel," Keith affirmed. "You two take it and get out"—Keith waved his hand—"what you need to get out before the meeting."

Tate climbed in the car and Declan followed. Chuck stopped him from closing the door by shoving a plastic bag in his hands.

“What’s this, Chuck?” Declan eyed the bag with confusion.

“Provisions dude!” Chuck laughed and shut the door, rapping on the roof two times, and the car pulled away and onto the busy Sunset Strip.

The silence of the car engulfed them, as Declan reached across the seat and found Tate’s hand. He laced their fingers together and turned in the seat to look at him. Tate was in the same position with a beautiful smile across his face.

“To the hotel, gentlemen?” the driver asked.

“Not yet,” Tate answered and tugged on Declan’s hand. Declan let himself be manhandled as Tate arranged him on his lap. “Take the scenic route if you would.” Tate rubbed Declan’s thighs through his jeans, coming up to cup his erection. Declan’s head fell back and Tate leaned forward to suck on his neck.

“As you wish, sirs,” the driver replied and the partition started to close.

Declan ran his hands over the short hairs on Tate’s head, tipping his head back to give Tate better access to his neck and holding him in place. He was lost in what happened, but he would be stranded on an island if it would mean he could continue to feel the way he did right now—or better yet, stranded on an island *with* Tate.

“Declan?” Tate murmured against his neck.

“Mmm hmm...”

“How quiet can you be?” Tate asked as his hands were busy undoing Declan’s fly.

“Fuck, Tate,” Declan hissed as Tate’s hand slid into his jeans and stroked his cock through the cotton of his boxers.

“Oh I plan to...” Tate promised.

Epilogue

Declan stretched out on his stomach, resting on his elbows as he scrolled through the numerous unanswered emails filling his inbox. He tensed and listened as the quiet of the early morning he favored was disturbed by the sound of footsteps padding on the carpet and the smell of coffee wafting toward his nose.

Declan smiled as the mattress dipped under the weight of a body, and a cup of coffee was placed in front of him.

“Coffee for your thoughts?” Tate’s question was accompanied by a kiss on the top of his head. Declan reached his hand up, caught Tate’s coffee-free hand and brought it to his lips to kiss his palm.

This Sunday would be their last in San Antonio. After a back-breaking pace of dealing with the new label and laying down tracks for the new full-length album, Tate and Declan decided to take a small vacation to celebrate the anniversary of their first non-date. Spending the morning in pajama pants and T-shirts, lounging on a king-size bed with Tate was the perfect way start the day.

Declan took the coffee cup, sipped it and sighed. “Thanks. Just looking through emails wondering if I should answer any of them.”

“No. Not today, Declan. It’s our last day here,” Tate replied with stern sincerity. “Let’s enjoy it while we can.”

Declan set his cup of coffee on the low table he had dragged across the room to set their many forms of technology on. Between their individual laptops, cell phones and portable game system Tate insisted on bringing yet they never touched, they needed the extra table space.

Declan craned his neck to see Tate shuffling behind him in the spacious hotel room. Tate grabbed two pillows off the chair that sat adjacent to their bed. He shoved one under Declan’s feet and used the other under his shoulders as he laid down and used Declan as a cushion, resting his head on the small of Declan’s back. The warm weight of the man against him sent a thrill through Declan’s body and landed straight at his dick. He moved his legs to adjust his filling cock.

“You’re fast to respond, Dec,” Tate teased and braced his feet against the wall above the headboard.

“Screw you, Newman.”

“Anytime, anywhere...” Tate smacked Declan’s ass. “And always, Morrison.” His fingers were now running slow lines up and down Declan’s thigh.

The last nine months passed quickly, but Declan cataloged each moment in his memory. After their night of official PDA, Declan and Tate became lovers. Lovers was a small and insignificant word for what they were: lovers, friends, bandmates, partners... each and every word Declan could find in the romantic glossary of “in ridiculous love” with each other would fit what he and Tate became.

Declan never thought he would or could be the guy to fall in love—of course that was before he met Tate. Tate made him better, made him want to be better and made him want more. Together they worked with Lisa and her boss at the law firm to draw up a proviso on the morality clause of their new contract with *Free to Be Records* to allow them to be together. Declan wanted his career as a musician with Station Zero, but he was done sacrificing his life for the band.

The suits at *Free to Be Records* were shocked when they were presented with a counter offer on the contract—it impressed them. Declan and Tate had been in more meetings and on more conference calls with the label since they signed. They were now fully involved in deciding which direction to take the band. Standing up for their relationship earned them respect from the label and allowed them to fire Rick Mathias. After Declan learned the label never forced the issue of him and Tate being together, and it was Rick’s own homophobia talking, firing him was the easiest decision Declan ever made.

Almost as easy as letting his heart finally decide to be with Tate.

Tate knocked his head on Declan’s back. “Are you listening to me or did I lose you inside that overactive brain of yours, again?” Tate teased.

Declan turned on his side, careful not to dislodge Tate from his back, and ruffled his hair. He’d been growing it out again since they ended the tour. Declan threaded his fingers through the soft strands, twirling them as he thought.

“What’s on your mind, Dec?”

“Not much, just reflecting, you know? Thinking of where we were when this all started, where we are now and where this is all headed.” Declan smirked as Tate’s eyebrow lifted.

“That’s a lot of thought so early in the morning,” Tate said as he nodded, silently acknowledging the similar exchange they’d had months earlier.

Declan looked down Tate’s body; the long-sleeved, white T-shirt was snug against his chest, tapering down to his flat abs to where a small patch of skin visible above the waistband of his pajama pants. The pants he often wore with the silly drum sets all over them that made Declan laugh. Smirking, his eyes carried on their trail down and... Declan eyed a book on Tate’s lap.

“Hey, what are you reading?” he asked.

“One of those gay romance novels Lisa sent you,” Tate replied as he flipped through the book.

“Seriously? Which one?” Declan was curious what book his best friend thought he and Tate would want to read.

Tate lifted the book and turned it to show Declan the cover.

“*Catch my Breath*,” Tate answered. “It’s the one she swears by; with a gay for you story line she goes crazy for.” Tate shrugged and opened the book. “She says it reminds her of us.”

“Gay for you? Do you think it’s possible?”

“Not sure I’d call it gay for you, but I think anything is possible, Dec.” Tate leaned his head back and smiled. He adjusted his glasses and Tate’s eyebrow lifted in the sexy way Declan would never get enough of. “Have you seen who Chuck’s been hanging out with lately?”

“You don’t think...” Declan wondered.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to read this book and do some research for our boy,” Tate declared.

Declan laughed, he was in a different world than he was a year ago—with all the drama they endured, all the lies he told—he wouldn’t trade them for anything. He didn’t like the things he did, but working through it with Tate was more rewarding than he imagined. He found a partner in Tate, and that was worth everything.

“Dec-lan?” Tate called his name in a singsong voice, reached back to wave his hand in front of his face. “I lost you again... am I going to have to fuck you stupid to get you to pay attention as I read this?”

Declan tugged on Tate's hair, smiling at the easy and teasing exchange between them. He rolled to his back, stretched his arms over his head and was followed by the hard length of Tate sliding on top of him.

“You say the most romantic things, Tate.”

The End

Author Bio

Elizabeth Daniels is the possible made up persona of a girl who loves love and loves to read about love.

Elizabeth is a wife and mother who lives in the desert valley of Southern California surrounded by gorgeous mountains that are covered with bright orange poppies every spring. She shuffles a home full of boys and finds it unnerving to be the minority in the house most of the time. She loves animals, doesn't eat them, and has rescued the three canines that lay at her feet as she writes.

She recently took her love of boys who love boys on a challenge to let the characters out of her head and tell their own stories.

She is taking a chance at this thing called writing, when she is not busy being lost in a book.

She may be crazy.

She may be brilliant.

She may be trying not to talk about herself in the third person because it's pretentious and creepy.

Contact & Media Info

You can contact, stalk and/or follow Elizabeth on:

[Email](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Blog](#)

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A PALE SHADOW

By Eon de Beaumont

Photo Description

The photo displays a three-quarter portrait of a young, black man with dreads and an arm tattoo.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is our hero of the story, a young prince, in fact the youngest of his many brothers and sisters. He spends his days studying to be a diplomat and socialising with his fellow students, but mainly just being bored and hoping that something, anything would happen to alter the monotony of his life.

Then the Royal Seer has a vision, a prophecy that will alter our hero's path and give him the adventure he craves.

Please, Dear Author, tell me what happens next to this young man, but most importantly tell me how he meets his true love.

Sincerely,

Verity

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, young adult

Tags: fairytale/folklore, young adult characters, prince, thief, steampunk, sweet/no sex, magic users, adventure

Word Count: 19,535

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A PALE SHADOW

By Eon de Beaumont

Chapter One

Kaythan dodged a second barrage of arrows. He dashed along the branches of the Ceraylian trees, his bare toes instinctively gripping at the rough bark. He scanned the dark, blue-green leaves of the trees all around him, searching for the archers. Something moved at the very edge of his peripheral vision, and he leapt through the air, trusting to his training to get him to the next limb. A succession of arrows sailed just behind him, missing their intended mark. He felt the tree bark on the tips of his fingers and he gripped slightly, using his momentum to send him in a swinging arch beneath the branch. He flipped up and perched where the limb grew from the trunk.

He heard the arrow whistling before he saw it, and he jerked his head to the side just before the arrow sank into the tree behind him. The razor sharp arrow grazed one of the long, brown dreadlocks that marked him as a scholar to his people. "Oy-ay!" he barked, his chest heaving from the intensive workout, his dark skin moist with a thick sheen of sweat. "What are you trying to do?"

"Sorry, Kaythan." The archer, Millis, stepped out from the shade of the leaves. Millis's dark skin and matching leaf-colored tunic and trousers kept him nearly invisible among the humid canopies of the massive trees. "Kelelay!" Millis called and a small band of Aviar's archers also emerged, their bows at their sides. Those who weren't as dark as Millis used Cerayleaf paint to appear darker.

"It's all right," Kaythan said, raising his hand to shield his eyes from the midday sun, oppressive up in the highest branches. "It was a very good workout. Thank you."

"You did extremely well, as usual, m'laird."

Kaythan reached behind him and pulled the arrow from the bark with some difficulty. He tossed it to Millis, who caught it easily and slipped it back into his quiver. "You'd better take your men and return to your post before my brother becomes impatient."

Millis waved in response, then he and his band disappeared back into the treetops. Kaythan mopped his brow and thought of his brother, Marthan. As the second oldest of Aviar's royal brothers, it fell to Marthan to captaine the archers of the island kingdom of Aviar. They all had their roles to play, from

the oldest, Dayvan, next in line to be king, to Kaythan, the youngest, tasked with being the scholar and eventually diplomat for the throne of Aviar.

Kaythan dropped easily from his perch and landed on the boards of one of the many bridges suspended in the limbs of the great trees of Aviar, connecting all the homes, shops and storehouses built among them. He wasn't surprised to see his uncle awaiting him with a stern look that melted almost instantly into one of amusement. "Why do you put yourself through such rigorous torture?" His uncle, Morlin the Ambassador, held out a dueler's belt with a long dagger in each of the two scabbards. "And you don't need these either, Kay. Your sister can have a man assigned to you if you feel threatened, though I can't imagine you feel anything but safe on our insular little island."

Kaythan strapped the belts over his light, snug, shorts that ended midcalf. He'd been topless, but now he slipped into one of the sleeveless vests with the long tails common among their people. "Oh, Uncle. I merely wish to keep myself in shape." They strolled through the relatively cooler shade of the city proper. "Besides, Shayara has enough to worry about as the first female Captaine of Aviar's Guard. I don't need a Swordhammer to babysit me."

His uncle chuckled. "I was once not so different from you, full of piss and vine-jager, ready to take on the world. But I learned the hard way that we have these traditions for a reason." He lifted the sheer, scholar's robes he wore, revealing a thin, but puckered scar running from his right nipple to the bottom of his ribcage. "The first children are the king and queen-in-waiting, the second children are the captaine of the garde and the captaine of the archers—"

"The thirds are bird keepers and skypanthar wranglers, the fourths are the steward and seneschal, the fifths, record-keeper and bookkeeper, and the rest are varying levels of tedious scholars, historians and ambassadors. I know, I know." He also knew that Marthan and Shayara had fought against those traditions, trading roles captaining the guardes and archers. Typically archers are more slender and agile where the guardes, the Swordhammers, are big brutes of men. Shayara had been blessed with power and height, and soon after she and Marthan reached puberty, it became obvious to all that Marthan would make the better archer. Still they'd been faced with a fight to maintain the traditions; Shayara would not have been the first woman more suited to garde work, but none had the fire that burned within his sister, and she refused to back down. "Shayara fought the traditions."

“Aye, she did. That girl is more like a force of nature than a woman. I daresay your father would rather face the armies of the mainland warlords.”

One of the creatures the Aviarans shared the trees with, the ones they called the Old Men of the Trees, leaned down, reaching for Kaythan. He touched the hairy little creature's hand, giving it a light squeeze as he walked beneath. The beast chirruped happily and climbed back up the tree. “What are the mainlands like?” Kaythan had asked the question many times before, and everyone who had journeyed there seemed reluctant to tell him.

“It's a strange place, Kay. The people are all the colors of the rainbow. They are the best and worst of mankind, and everything in between,” his uncle answered after a moment of thought. “You'll love it and hate it. It's at once very beautiful and very ugly. The things they are building...” His uncle allowed the thought to trail away. Kaythan had heard all those things before and the rainbow comment always made him uneasy. He could picture people with blue, green, and red skin, but it scared him a bit.

Before his uncle could continue or Kaythan had a chance to ask another question, a scribewing, one of the birds the villagers used to carry notes and letters throughout the island kingdom, flapped down to perch on Kaythan's arm. It cooed insistently until Kaythan removed the tiny scroll from its scaly leg. As soon as its parcel was removed, the bird flew off, presumably back to its master. Kaythan unfurled the scroll and immediately knit his brows.

“What is it, Kay?”

He spun the parchment for his uncle to see. It was blank. “Comino.”

“The seer? That old buzzard and his blank parchments. You'd better hurry on to his parlor. He hates to be kept waiting, and if he's summoning you, it's bound to be important.”

Kaythan sighed. His uncle was right, but he failed to add that usually when Comino summoned someone, the news wasn't just important, it was generally bad as well.

Chapter Two

Comino's hut stood on the very edge of the island in what everyone believed to be the oldest tree in the kingdom, even older than King Tree, the palace where Kaythan's family lived. While King Tree remained lush and resplendent, Comino's tree, like Comino himself, was nearly bald, very few of its leaves remaining, however the tree looked as strong as ever with dark, almost black bark. Some of the children told stories of Comino's magic seeping into the tree and changing it, making "I'm not letting you do this alone!" he shouted.

"My men are on the way." Another blast of light and thunder erupted from below them. A bolt of skyfire grazed Shayara's mount and they spiraled downward toward the platforms of the city.

"Shayara!" Kaythan called, steering Perfin to dive toward her. Perfin caught them both in his talons and eased them to the boards of the walkways below, his wings beating the air to slow them down.

People dashed about as they landed, some screaming, some weeping. A smoking hole gaped in the walkway, and a rope bridge dangled into the darkness below. Smoke and steam still rose from the ruined planks. As soon as Shayara's feet rested on solid floor, she jumped into captain mode. She barked orders to make sure the fire wouldn't spread and started questioning anyone milling about.

"We saw someone below after the first blast. He ran that way," a man said, pointing to another section of ruined bridge. "He was all dressed in black, so we couldn't see much."

"Thank you," Shayara said, gripping the man's shoulder. "Please help suppress this fire."

The man nodded and dashed off.

Shayara stepped to the edge of the hole and peered into the depths. "Budgery dirt."

Kaythan approached her, glancing over her shoulder. "What do we do now?"

"We don't do anything," she responded. "I'm going to climb down there and see what I can find."

"I'm going with you." Kaythan made it a statement and invited no argument. He knew Shayara would respect his determination.

"Fine. Just be careful. Your father won't forgive me if anything happens to you."

"Deal." Kaythan turned and sent Perfin off to safety. Instead of flying away, Perfin leapt up to a low branch and sat lazily cleaning himself. "Oh fine." Kaythan dropped onto the ruined rope bridge, and like Shayara, used it as a ladder to climb down to the unfamiliar ground below.

Kaythan, like most Aviarans, rarely, if ever, set foot on the forest floor. It had even taken on a mystical, almost religious atmosphere for their people, and Kaythan felt as though he were descending into the world of the dead. His feet found the last intact plank on the makeshift ladder and he looked down. The ground was still a few feet away. "You'll have to jump," Shayara stated.

Kaythan dropped down until his hands were on the last plank and his feet swept through empty air. He hesitated, not because he was scared of the drop—he'd jumped farther than this in training. He could do this in his sleep. His heartbeat pounded in his ears. "It's just dirt," he whispered to himself, took a deep breath, and released the wooden plank. His partially bare feet touched the ground seconds later.

Shayara knelt in the cool shade of the forest. "Took you long enough," she said. Kaythan could hear the smirk in her voice. She pointed to the ground. "Someone was here. He's wearing boots. You can see the heel here." She stood up and followed the trail. "Broken branch. Another footprint." She continued to list off clues as she found them.

Kaythan looked around at the mostly unfamiliar vegetation at this level of the forest. He recognized a few plants that they cultivated above for various uses: medicine, cooking, cleaning. He wondered who had ventured down here first, who had discovered them and their uses. Shayara stopped abruptly and Kaythan walked into her. She pulled her sword out with one hand, motioned for Kaythan to be quiet with the other, then pulled out her hammer. Kaythan unsheathed his long daggers and turned, pressing his back to his sister's so they couldn't be taken by surprise.

"Show yourself," Shayara ordered. The authority in her voice made even Kaythan nervous.

"Damn," a male voice said with a chuckle. "You're good."

“I’m the Captaine of the Guarde. I’m the best.”

Kaythan turned to see a cloaked figure melt out of the shadows. “A female captaine? That’s cute.”

She thrust her sword at him. “Hands in the air, budger.”

The dark stranger raised gloved hands. The lower part of his face was covered with black cloth, and all Kaythan could see of the man were his strange pale eyes, so blue they were nearly silver. Kaythan stared at those eyes, so he noticed the quick dart just before the stranger’s hand shot forward and a bright flash of light obscured Kaythan’s vision.

“What the dirt?” Shayara barked. “I can’t see anything!”

Kaythan rubbed at his eyes. When he opened them, he saw a shadow retreating through the trees. “He’s getting away,” Kaythan shouted.

“Where?” Shayara asked, cocking back her hammer arm.

“Midday, ten feet away,” Kaythan said. “And he’s running!”

Shayara nodded and swung the hammer. It sailed directly at the escaping shadowy figure and smacked him right in the ass, knocking him sprawling to the ground. Kaythan sprung to his feet and dashed to the groaning stranger. He crouched over the man, brandishing his daggers. Shayara joined him. He could see her rubbing her eyes in his peripheral vision. She retrieved her hammer and gave the stranger a swift kick. He curled into a ball as Shayara searched him, tossing aside daggers, strange pouches, and vials. The last thing she discovered was a small wooden box with runes carved in the surface.

“What’s this?” she asked, preparing to open the small container.

“Don’t!” the stranger shouted, reaching out for his possession.

Shayara hesitated.

“Don’t open that. You saw the damage it did when I opened it.” The stranger pointed up at the ruined bridge and platforms.

“What’s in here?” Shayara asked.

“It’s a long story.” The stranger started to get up from the ground.

“Shorten it,” Shayara growled.

“It’s an eye.”

“That was certainly short.” Shayara shook the box. Kaythan wasn't sure what an eye would sound like.

“It's a wizard's eye. I stole it. I think he's using it to track me.”

“*What?*” Shayara and Kaythan shouted in unison.

The stranger nodded and shrugged. “I'm afraid so. Which means he's on his way here. And I need to get to the Night Island because I need the Shadesilver blade to fight the wizard's magic.”

Kaythan chuckled. “That's a children's story. The Shadesilver blade isn't real. And the Night Island is called Tivara.”

“It is real. And I need it. I come from Tivara. My people made their homes in the dark forest. We lived below your kinsmen. They call us the Shadows. We are thieves-for-hire.”

“The Shadows?” Shayara asked. “They aren't thieves, they're assassins.”

“Some are, yes. But not me.”

“Why are you here?” Kaythan asked.

“I need your help. Our assassins were sent to dispose of the wizard but they not only failed, they turned to his cause. At least the ones he didn't kill. We discovered the wizard had a false eye that turned men's minds.”

“This?” Shayara held up the box.

The stranger nodded. “Our population has dwindled. My elders sent me to get the eye in the hope that it would break the spell. When it didn't, we appealed to your kinsmen for the Shadesilver, but they refused to aid us.”

“Why would you expect them to aid you? A race of parasites that live beneath their society? I should think they'd be happy to be rid of you.” Shayara held up the box once more.

“What do you think he'll do once he has my people at his command?” the stranger asked. “He'll come for the Shadesilver first and destroy your kinsmen in the process. Once he's secured the Shadesilver and ensured that no one can stop him, he'll work his way through the outlying kingdoms, enslaving all he finds there.”

“And there are no kingdoms more outlying than ours,” Kaythan finished the stranger's implication.

“The Four will be the first to fall,” the stranger stated gravely. “Please, help me.”

Kaythan and Shayara stared at each other for a long moment, each wondering what the other thought. “This is absurd,” Shayara whispered.

“But if there’s a chance it’s true?” Kaythan looked at the stranger, his face still covered.

“We’ve only his word,” Shayara said.

“The wizard is Eldertalon,” the stranger told them.

“Chancewell Eldertalon?” Kaythan couldn’t believe it. “The Butcher of the Third Age?” He turned to Shayara. “Is that even possible?”

“I don’t know, but it’s not a gamble I’m willing to take.” She grabbed the stranger’s arm. “Come on. You’re telling your story to our parents, the king and queen.”

“Finally,” the stranger said with a sigh. “But we’d better hurry. I’m sure Eldertalon is on his way here.”

“And what is your name, stranger?” Shayara asked.

The stranger flipped his hood back, revealing pitch-black hair that appeared unruly like a spike-tree bush, short in the back with longer bangs. Then he pulled his face wrap down around his neck. Kaythan almost gasped, but caught himself. The stranger revealed a face that looked like a sculpture: pale skin, high cheekbones, and a strong but thin jaw that ended in a chiseled chin. His eyes looked perfectly at home in that face. His nose was straight, regal, and pointed at a pair of deliciously thick lips, stung a pale pink. “I am Janze Harkin,” the stranger stated with a smirk. “Pleased to meet you.”

Chapter Four

After a short flight on the backs of Perfin, Shayara's skypanthar, and a third loaned by one of Shayara's guardsmen for Harkin, the trio reached the King Tree, the Royal Palace of Aviar. The palace was a patchwork of styles from the old, woven orbs, to the modern framed structures. Built on one of the biggest trees on the island, the palace sprawled throughout the giant limbs of the central tree. The throne room sat at the heart of the tree, just above the trunk, where the limbs started to diverge. Much of the tree was carved into elaborate decorations, columns and statuary. Gems and precious metals were worked into the wood. They'd landed on the platform reserved for members of the royal family and were able to walk straight into the throne room.

Shayara handed the prisoner over to the palace guards. As they marched Harkin along the hallway, Shayara leaned over to Kaythan and whispered, "Were you coming to see me for something before this budgering dirt-herder came in and budgered everything to dirt?"

"Nice mouth," Kaythan whispered back with a soft chuckle. His sister's swearing could put even the hardest guardsmen to shame. "I visited Comino this morning."

"He summoned you?" Shayara frantically whispered. "That's not good. What did he say?"

"I think he foresaw this 'budgering dirt-herder.' He said I'm going to leave the island and I think this is why."

"Then I'm going with you."

Kaythan shook his head. "You can't. If this wizard is on his way here, you have to be here to defend the kingdom. We're going to need every Swordhammer we have."

"It seems like you've already made up your mind," Shayara whispered back. "Looks like you're going to get that adventure you're always clamoring for. Let's hope all that training pays off."

"I'm not worried about that," Kaythan said as he watched a few members of court rush past them. "It's convincing Father to let me go, that's going to be a chore."

“You leave your father to me.” Shayara put an arm around Kaythan’s shoulder and they entered the royal court.

They mounted the steps to the great round hall. Many people already stood beneath its vast domed ceiling. Birds and Old Men of the Trees sat in the alcoves and vents that decorated the dome. Shayara and Kaythan walked up to join Harkin. “Looks like your light show attracted quite a bit of attention,” Kaythan said, putting a hand on Harkin’s shoulder and motioning to the assembled court.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Harkin said. He looked around with his mouth agape. “Your people don’t wear a lot of clothing, do they?”

“It’s hot on Aviar,” Kaythan explained.

“Aye, so bloody hot your king and queen don’t even wear that much.” Harkin pointed to the dais standing before them. “That’s a lot of feathers though.”

Kaythan looked at his father sitting regally on his throne. Kaythan tried to imagine seeing them as Harkin was for the first time. Kaythan was used to his father’s traditional garb with his feathered collar, shoulder pauldrons, and crown that paid homage to the birds that lived among them. His father and aunt both wore their hair long and in dreadlocks that nearly reached their ankles. They wore beads and jewels in their hair and on necklaces and bracelets. Looking at Harkin in his utilitarian clothes that covered his body neck to toe, all buckles, pockets, and padded bits, Kaythan understood how he might find their clothes strange.

“Captaine Shayara!” his father barked, interrupting Kaythan’s contemplation of their customs. “Report. Explain this disturbance.”

Shayara stepped forward, took a knee before the dais, and stood. “Well, Uncle,” she began.

The king cleared his throat and fixed Shayara with an admonishing glare.

“Sorry. Your Majesty,” she corrected herself. She launched into her report of the disturbance.

“Uncle?” Harkin whispered. “I thought she was your sister?”

“She is.”

“But how is the king her uncle *and* your father?” Harkin asked.

“We are all brothers and sisters,” Kaythan answered. “Our king and queen are brother and sister.”

“*What?*” Harkin blurted, interrupting the court for a moment.

“Calm yourself,” Kaythan whispered. “They aren’t married. See the man and woman on the smaller thrones?” He pointed to his mother and uncle on either side of the king and queen. “The one next to the king is my mother; the one next to the queen is Shayara’s father.”

“Oh,” Harkin said, nodding. “You and Shayara are cousins.”

Kaythan shrugged. “I do not know that word.”

“So how does your succession work?” Harkin asked.

“It’s all based on birth order. Our first king and queen were married, but the first born son and first born daughter became the next king and queen,” Kaythan explained. “Obviously they couldn’t marry one another, so they married others but ruled together. It’s been that way ever since. We are all siblings.”

“Hmm.” Harkin nodded. “That’s actually pretty keen. So what are you?”

“Ah. I’m the youngest of my line so I’m required to be a scholar and ambassador.”

“Kaythan!” his father shouted, interrupting his Aviaran nobility lesson.

“Sorry, Fath—I mean, Your Majesty. I was just explaining things to our guest.”

“Our guest? He sounds more like an invader to me.” His father leaned forward in the throne. “Have you anything to say for yourself, stranger?”

“Uh, well, yes, Your Majesty.” Harkin stepped forward and raised his chin defiantly. Kaythan felt a strange pride seeing it. “I’m here to request your assistance in defeating a mutual foe.”

“Mutual?” His father barked with ironic laughter. “Were it not for your untimely visit to our island, I don’t think we’d have ever seen this so-called wizard. You have made him a ‘mutual foe.’”

“Let him speak, brother,” Kaythan’s aunt said, laying a hand on the king’s forearm.

“Thank you, Your, um, Other Majesty,” Harkin said, bowing slightly. “The wizard in question is Chancewell Eldertalon.”

A hush fell over the room at the mention of the wizard's name. "This cannot be so," the king sputtered.

"I'm afraid it is." Harkin glanced at Kaythan.

"Eldertalon is dead," Kaythan's uncle, Morlin, stated. "He was killed at the end of the Third Age."

"Everyone thought so," Harkin answered. "But he was biding his time, healing and accruing power."

Kaythan's father motioned for his advisors. Kaythan's uncle and the others ran up to the dais. The queen leaned in as they debated in whispered tones. Shayara ran up to join them.

"Is this good or bad?" Harkin asked.

"I'm not sure," Kaythan answered, drawing the words out slowly.

His father frowned as he looked from Kaythan to Harkin then leaned back into the conference. He shook his head and turned away from the huddle. Kaythan's mother pushed his father back in. "This is absurd," the king blurted. Shayara raised her finger violently and advanced on Kaythan's father. "Fine," he shouted and waved everyone away. The court waited breathlessly for their patriarch's verdict. "Kaythan," the king said.

"Father." Kaythan abandoned protocol.

"You're determined to help this blackgarde?" the king asked.

"I am." Kaythan stepped forward.

"What about this eye?" his father asked.

"I believe we should take it with us. If we can retrieve the Shadesilver, we can destroy the eye." Kaythan approached his father's throne. "If we destroy the eye, it will draw Eldertalon away from Aviar. Father, you must allow us this chance."

The king sighed and leaned back in his throne. "I do not love this plan." Kaythan's father shook his head. "But I cannot argue with it. If Eldertalon is truly among us, we need to stop him at any cost. Shayara assures me I have no hope of discouraging you from this foolishness."

"No, sir," Kaythan answered.

The king sighed once more. "I was afraid of that. I think I need to speak with Comino." He fixed his gaze on Kaythan. "I'm not going to stop you, son."

The king paused. "But I am going to warn you. This is going to be extremely dangerous. I have faith in you, but as your father, I am frightened. I don't want to allow this, but I know I must not hinder you."

Kaythan nodded thankfully.

"I wish you luck, my son."

"Thank you, father. I will not disappoint you."

"I know, son." The king rose from his throne, walked over to Kaythan, and embraced him. "I know. Just come back to me, lad."

"I will, Father," he responded, hoping he wasn't lying. "I love you."

"I love you, too, son." The king released him.

Morlin joined them. "You'll take my boat."

"What?" Kaythan asked.

"You'll take my boat," his uncle said. "You'll have to visit the mainland for supplies before you continue on to Tivara. But it will cut your travel time in half. The Wavemen will make sure you get where you need to go."

"Uncle, are you sure?"

"Of course," Morlin answered. "We're equals. This will be your boat someday anyway."

"Thank you, Uncle." Kaythan embraced him gratefully.

"Anything to increase your chances of coming back to us," Morlin answered.

Kaythan's mother left her great chair to give Kaythan a hug and a kiss on each cheek. "My baby boy," she said, tears shining in her eyes. "Look how you've grown."

"Don't weep, Mother." Kaythan wipe a tear away from his mother's cheek with his thumb. He pressed his lips to her forehead and released her as his aunt, the queen, approached him. She held him at arm's length and smiled at him. "Auntie," he addressed her. Being the youngest of all the siblings, she still allowed him the luxury of the endearment.

"Little Kay. Not so little anymore." She kissed both his eyes in their traditional blessing custom. Then she pointed to the tattoo on her chest. It matched his father's chest tattoo and the one Kaythan wore on his upper right

arm. It looked like a circle of four hearts all connected in the middle at their points. Each sprouted a symbol for one of the four islands of the Sky Tribe. "This." She touched his. "This means you are a part of something larger. Do not forget that, Little Kay. You are making your family and your kingdom proud by accepting this burden. We thank you." She kissed his eyes again before returning to her place on the dais.

Kaythan turned to find Shayara standing right next to him. "Are you absolutely positive you won't allow me to join you?"

"Absolutely, sister."

"Well, I'm still sending a few Swordhammers with you. The same ones that accompany Uncle Morlin on his ambassadorial journeys."

"That's fair," Kaythan said with a nod. "I must gather my things for the trip."

"Not yet," Shayara said, motioning to something behind Kaythan. He turned to find all his siblings dismounting their skypanthars. They all rushed up to him to bid him farewell or offer blessings. Marthan insisted he allow two of the kingdom's best archers to join them. Kaythan agreed reluctantly. Alara, Keeper of the War Birds, forced him to agree to take a regiment of the animals with him and Naythan, Steward of the Old Men, begged Kaythan to take a pair of the Battleapes to ease his mind. Kaythan declined.

"If I bring anyone or anything else with me, brother, the poor boat may sink beneath the weight of us." His brother laughed halfheartedly at the joke, but respected Kaythan's wishes. After finally saying good-bye to the last of his brothers, Kaythan led Harkin through Centre Royale to Kaythan's rooms, where they gathered supplies for the journey.

Chapter Five

“What are the Wavemen that guy who gave you the boat mentioned?” Harkin asked as they walked toward the docks.

Kaythan shifted the pack on his back. “You do not know of the Wavemen? I suppose they don’t like the cold waters around Tivara. They are half-man, half-fish creatures who live beneath the waves and can speak to the denizens of the seas.”

“Mermen?” Harkin barked a laugh. “You’ve got to be joking.”

Kaythan shook his head. “Mermen? That’s an interesting term for them. They are a noble race. When the great society fell in the Third Age, they were integral in relocating the Sky Tribe to the Four Islands. Without their help, it would have taken my people much longer to reach sanctuary.”

“How so?” Harkin asked.

“Most ships rely on wind to propel them, but with the aid of the Wavemen, who harnessed whales and other large sea creatures to drag our ships, our people escaped quickly and safely to the Four Islands.”

“That’s bloody insane.” Harkin clapped his hands and laughed. “So we’re going to be traveling on a whale-drawn ship?”

“Yes.”

“Your people should look into steamcraft,” Harkin suggested with a chuckle. “Coal power instead of whale power. You wouldn’t have to make deals with magical creatures.”

“Our pact with the Wavemen is mutually beneficial.” Kaythan paused. “What is steamcraft?”

“Industrialization,” Harkin answered. “After magic began to die out after the Third Age, people had to invent ways to do the things that magic used to. They’ve built great machines and discovered new fuels to power them.”

“I’ve heard some references to such things from Morlin. He says the new practices are filthy and they spew dirt and poison into the air.”

Harkin shrugged. “It’s the price we pay for modern convenience.”

“Seems like a heavy price to pay—” Kaythan’s response was interrupted by a commotion atop the watchtower they were passing at that moment. Kaythan

looked up to see the guardes pointing to the west. He scrambled up the ladder with Harkin at his heels. "What is it?" he asked as they reached the platform at the top.

"Something strange, m'laird." The man passed Kaythan a spyglass and he looked through it. What he saw on the horizon disturbed him to say the least: a giant cloud, a storm raging across the distance with some kind of deck floating on top of it. Skyfire erupted from within the cloud, and danced between the cloud and the surface of the ocean.

Harkin snatched the spyglass next. "Eldertalon. That's his Stormship."

"We need to leave immediately," Kaythan said.

"Agreed." Harkin handed the garde his spyglass.

"Alert Shayara, sound a general alarm," Kaythan told the garde. "The wizard is still a few days away, but we should prepare our defenses."

"Aye, m'laird." The garde tipped a salute even as Kaythan descended the ladder. He and Harkin ran the rest of the way to Morlin's boat. When they arrived at the dock, men were already loading supplies and making ready to set sail. Kaythan threw his pack on board and urged them to move faster. He ran over to the edge of the dock to speak to a man in the water, who had pale green skin and tangled hair. Kaythan could see Harkin's shocked expression from the corner of his eye. Kaythan explained the situation with the wizard and his Stormship, the need for immediate departure. The Waveman nodded and called out to three others that floated in the water nearby. They flapped their large tailfins, swimming about two enormous swiftwhales in front of the boat. They fastened the immense harnesses with dexterity and speed.

"Bloody hell. Mermen."

"Don't just stand there," Kaythan told Harkin. "Lend a hand." Kaythan didn't wait, he dashed about carrying boxes, securing riggings, and making sure they were ready to launch.

"M'laird." The captaine approached. "We're all set here."

"Good, let us be on our way." Kaythan leaned over the rail of the boat to speak with the Waveman.

The Waveman raised a webbed hand. "Everything is ready, Friend Kay. I have instructed Angla and Arbla on where to take you and the need for swiftness."

“Thank you, my friend. And please be sure to pass that along to Angla and Arbla, as well.”

The Waveman nodded and disappeared beneath the water. “Cast off,” the captain called. “And brace yerselves!” The ropes were tossed to the men on the docks. The swiftwhales simultaneously spouted water from their blowholes, and the boat lurched forward in their wake. The ship launched into the air several times before the great beasts found a mutual rhythm and the tossing evened out. Kaythan stood at the stern of the vessel and watched the only home he’d ever known retreat into the distance.

“Are you all right?” Harkin asked. The ship jerked and Harkin stumbled, grabbing hold of Kaythan to steady himself. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Kaythan said. The rocking of the ship was not unlike the rocking of the rope bridges and platforms of his tree kingdom when a good wind blew through the island. He stood fairly steadily. “I have never been off my island.”

“I gathered that.”

“It has been my entire world for so long. Of course, I know there is more out here, but I’ve never seen it from this angle before.” Kaythan closed his eyes and breathed in the salty scent of the sea air. “It looks so small,” he said when he opened his eyes.

“I know the feeling,” Harkin said, squeezing Kaythan’s shoulder. “I felt the same way the first time I left my island, though I was much younger. You’re afraid you’ll never see it again.”

“It is a possibility.” Kaythan sighed. “But this is something I must do.” Kaythan turned slightly to the right. “That bothers me more.” He pointed to the barely visible ball of bad weather looming inexorably near the horizon.

“He’s headed straight for your island.”

“And there’s nothing I can do about it.” Kaythan slammed his fist on the rail.

Harkin backed away from him. “That might not be accurate.”

Kaythan glanced over his shoulder. “Explain.” He noticed Harkin had the box with the eye in his hands, worrying it, spinning it thoughtfully. “What?”

“Well, Eldertalon’s following a trail to the last place he sensed his eye, right?”

“Presumably.” Kaythan turned to regard Harkin.

“We’re moving faster than the Stormship.” Harkin held up the box. “If we open this, he’ll know his eye isn’t on your island any longer, and he’ll change direction, follow us.”

“That’s a fair idea. What about the damage last time?” Kaythan reached out and touched the box. “If that happens here, it will cripple the boat.”

“Damn.” Harkin slumped, defeated.

Kaythan folded his arms and watched the wake of the boat stretch out behind them. “I think I may have a solution.” Kaythan offered Harkin a wide smile.

“I’m not going to like this, am I?” Harkin asked.

Kaythan, still smiling, shook his head.

Nearly an hour later, Harkin pulled at the ropes crisscrossing his torso in a makeshift harness. “Do you really think this is going to work?” he asked, obviously unconvinced.

Kaythan nodded as he double-checked his knots and the sail attached to Harkin’s harness. “Do you know what a kite is?”

“Of course I know what a kite is.” Harkin rolled his eyes. “It’s a children’s toy.”

“My siblings and I used to fly them all the time in the windy season. Sometimes the Old Men in the Trees would jump onto them and ride. This is the same idea.”

“I’m not a monkey!” Harkin protested.

“No. But this is not a child-sized kite.” Kaythan fastened the opposite end of the rope to the boat. “You’ll be able to avoid the skyfire?”

“Lightning,” Harkin answered. “We call it lightning, and yes, I think so. I managed to last time.”

“Very well. I’m satisfied that your tether is secure. Are you ready?”

“Hell no.” Harkin pulled at the rope tied to the boat, then nodded. “But I guess we may as well get this over with.”

Kaythan motioned a few of the guardes over and showed them where to hold the rope. “Now all you have to do is climb up on the rail and jump into the air. The wind should do the rest.”

“This is crazy,” Harkin grumbled, but climbed up on the rail. “Here goes everything.” He closed his eyes and jumped up. The wind did indeed do the rest. The sail strapped to Harkin’s back snapped open and lifted him into the air behind the boat. The guardes fought to keep hold of the rope and stay on their feet. Kaythan hopped on and held the rope as well.

“All right, feed him a bit more,” Kaythan said. They all released the rope little by little, allowing the wind to lift Harkin higher. Kaythan had been right; the contraption worked just like a child’s kite, and surprisingly, Harkin looked like he was enjoying himself. He whooped as a crosswind swooped him to the side. “Stop having fun,” Kaythan shouted with a smirk. “Let the rest of the rope out.” They did, until the only thing holding the rope was the railing it was tied around.

Kaythan couldn’t suppress a laugh at Harkin’s unguarded enjoyment at flapping around behind the boat. He let him enjoy the ride for a moment before he shouted for Harkin to open the box with the eye in it.

“Brace yourselves,” he shouted. Harkin extended his arms to the side and opened the box. A purple bolt of skyfire exploded from the eye, and the force of the eruption knocked everyone on deck off their feet. Harkin spun in the air at the end of his rope. Kaythan pulled himself up to his elbows just in time to see the eye tumble out of the box. Harkin reached for it. The morbid orb danced across Harkin’s fingertips and almost tumbled into the sea, but at the last moment, a gust of wind pushed Harkin close enough to grab it. He managed to get the eye back into the box just as a second bolt and wave of force ripped through the air before managing to seal it in. “Pull me in!”

Kaythan and the guardes got back to their feet and reeled Harkin in. When he was within reach, Kaythan grabbed him and dragged him over the railing. The force and weight of Harkin’s body tipped Kaythan’s balance, and they tumbled to the deck, Harkin on top. “Thanks,” Harkin said, his face nearly touching Kaythan’s.

“You do not need to thank me. We are in this together now.” He pushed Harkin off and sat up. Kaythan picked open the knots on Harkin’s harness, freeing him. “That could have gone much worse,” he said, standing and

offering Harkin a hand. They both rushed to the side of the boat. "Is it changing course?"

"I can't tell," Harkin said with a shake of his head. "Not at this angle."

"Then we can only hope for the best," Kaythan said with a sigh.

"We'll know soon enough," the captain said, surprising Kaythan and Harkin. They turned toward the man. "The island will soon be out of sight. If that giant, demon-storm remains visible, we'll know it's following us. For good or ill."

They turned back, staring out over the water, hoping for one of the most dangerous men to ever live to decide to pursue them instead of attacking Aviar.

Chapter Six

The captaine's theory proved correct after a few hours. Aviar disappeared but the Stormship remained in sight. Daylight steadily bled out of the sky, making the lightning of their pursuer easier to see. Kaythan constantly paced the deck of the ship. The guardes prepared a simple meal and tried to coax him to join them, but he refused. Harkin walked over with a half-loaf of bread, a bit of cheese, and some dried meat. He thrust it into Kaythan's hands without warning. "Eat," he said.

"I'm not hungry." Kaythan tried to return the food, but Harkin refused.

"Eat, damn it." He sat down on the railing.

Kaythan scowled at Harkin for a moment before he dropped to the deck, crossing his legs and sitting. "Yes, mother." Kaythan tore a bit of bread from the loaf.

"Cute," Harkin said. "But at least you're eating."

"Thank you," Kaythan said around a mouthful of cheese and jerky.

"Someone told me we're in this together now," Harkin said, leaving his perch on the railing to sit next to Kaythan. "You don't need to thank me." He leaned his shoulder against Kaythan's.

"You are very friendly." Kaythan continued to work at his meal.

"We have some time to kill, don't we?" Harkin asked with a smoldering gaze. "Where are we headed?"

"My uncle's regular stop, Port Fenril." He tore a bit of bread off and slapped a piece of cheese on it. He bit into it, chewing diligently.

Harkin held out a wine skin. "Here, wash it down."

Kaythan accepted the drink. The wine tasted of citrus fruits and baking spice. "Thank you."

"It's the least I can do," Harkin said. "You've gambled your life to help me, a complete stranger. I'd do anything to repay you."

Kaythan relayed Comino's prophecy and how he thought it pertained to Harkin. "So you see? This is my destiny."

"I don't believe in destiny," Harkin said. "I believe all men are the masters of their own fate."

"I respect that," Kaythan told him.

"So, Port Fenril. Are you familiar?" Harkin asked.

"Not really."

"I think you'll hate it."

"Why?"

"Well, it's filled with brothels, gambling houses, and popium dens. It's a place where villains, thieves, and cutthroats meet and negotiate." Harkin took another pull from his wineskin. "There are factories and fisheries, blacksmiths and bustling neighborhoods that spew black poison into the air."

Kaythan shivered. "That sounds dreadful."

"Aye, it is, but there's no better place on the mainland to shop for goods. That must be the reason your uncle stops there." One of the Warbirds screeched, drawing Harkin's attention. "Your Warbirds are bloody impressive." He stood and walked toward the bird on the nearest railing. He held his hand out, testing the creature's trust. It did not lash out at him or snap. He gently stroked the shiny, pitch-black feathers with their green-blue iridescence. "They're enormous."

"The shadowings are our most effective Warbirds," Kaythan explained.

"We have these birds on the mainlands," Harkin said. "They aren't nearly as large and we call them ravens."

"Ravens?" Kaythan repeated. "That is a beautiful name."

"The mainland isn't all bad," Harkin said, continuing to stroke the Warbird. "It has its charms."

Kaythan watched Harkin with a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He finished off the meal Harkin had provided. "It's shaping up to be a splendid evening."

"Aye, that it is," Harkin responded, leaning back on the rail of the ship. He gazed lustily at Kaythan, and the heat in that gaze made Kaythan feel exhilarated and apprehensive at the same time. He wanted to melt into that gaze, to surrender to it, and that scared him a little. He jumped up, forced a

yawn, and excused himself. "I think it is time for me to turn in. It has been a very long day and promises to be a long journey."

Harkin opened his mouth to say something, but Kaythan interrupted him, said goodnight, and retreated to his quarters in the cabin. He lay for a few moments, contemplating what he had just done, but he was truly exhausted, and his eyes grew heavy and he fell into a deep sleep.

Kaythan kept his contact with Harkin to a minimum for the next few weeks. He awoke and stretched as he walked onto deck in the bright, morning sunshine. The warm light felt good on his skin in the cool morning air. The crew already bustled about, taking care of all the little jobs required daily on boats. Kaythan had offered each day to help with those chores, but the captain and crew emphatically denied him each time, saying they had everything under control, and the prince need not worry about such things. It only served to make him more impatient.

Kaythan stopped in his tracks as he turned the corner of the cabin. Harkin, naked to his waist, stood on the railing, retying a knot that had worked loose on the riggings. Kaythan stared at the muscles flexing beneath Harkin's pale skin. He was nothing like the guards that Kaythan sometimes trained with and sometimes just watched train. They were big, dark men; Harkin was much leaner, much paler, and Kaythan couldn't take his eyes off him.

Harkin turned, finished with his knot work. When he noticed Kaythan, he hopped off the rail and smiled widely. He pushed the errant lock of hair from in front of his eye. "Like what you see, m'laird?" Harkin drizzled a bit of sarcasm on the "m'laird".

"What? I—No. I mean yes. I mean, you look fine," Kaythan sputtered, caught in the act of staring.

"Calm down, Kay," Harkin said with a laugh and picked up his tunic. "I'm not accusing you of anything. And not to worry, I can't have this fair skin exposed any longer, or I'll burn to a crisp. You can put your eyes back in your head." He smirked like the skypanthar that ate the scribewing.

"You are a budgering troublemaker," Kaythan barked.

"Guilty." Harkin held his hands up in surrender.

"What's burning? How will your skin burn?"

“From the sun.” Harkin finished buckling his tunic and leaned against the rail. “I suppose your people don’t really burn. Your skin is made to be in the heat and sun.”

“Ah. Yes. I see what you mean.” Kaythan shifted from foot to foot.

“Why are you suddenly so nervous around me, Kaythan?”

“I—” Kaythan opened his mouth to answer but reconsidered. Back home on the island, if Harkin were one of his people, he would just tell him how he felt. There was little to no deception among them. Love, physical affection, was never discouraged in their society. Kaythan remembered Morlin and some of the other Aviarans who had visited the mainlands speaking of their rampant dishonesty. Harkin had been honest with Kaythan so far though, at least as far as he knew, and he had no reason to return that trust with dishonesty. “I am attracted to you.”

“Really?” Harkin stood up, obviously interested. “I had no idea.”

“I’m not unfamiliar with sarcasm, Harkin.”

“Can we find a place to sit, talk?”

“Of course,” Kaythan said, dropping to the deck and folding his legs beneath him.

“Ah. All right.” Harkin joined him, his back against the rail. “Have you always been attracted to men?”

Kaythan nodded. “As a small boy, I kissed a girl. That was the last time I tried anything like that.”

“I’m attracted to men as well,” Harkin explained. “But on the mainlands, it’s frowned upon.” Harkin frowned, obviously thinking. “That might be putting it too lightly. There are certain factions and societies that find people with our tastes to be abominations, monsters. They feel completely justified to harm us, even kill us.”

“That is barbaric,” Kaythan gasped. “Morlin mentioned some people who did not share our beliefs about the nature of love, but he never went into detail.”

“Perhaps he was trying to protect you from the ugliness of the world outside your island.”

“Perhaps,” Kaythan agreed. He sat with his chin resting on his knuckles.

“Did you miss the part where I said I was attracted to men?” Harkin asked.

“Are you attracted to me?”

Harkin smirked and shook his head. “I’m not used to this directness and honesty.”

Kaythan remained silent, only regarding Harkin.

“You don’t even blink,” Harkin observed. He sighed. “Yes, Kaythan. I am attracted to you. I was from the moment I saw you.”

“Hm.” Kaythan raised an eyebrow. “I found you intriguing. But I hadn’t realized I was physically attracted to you until you fell on top of me the other day.”

“Ouch,” Harkin said. “You don’t pull any punches, just say exactly what you think.”

“Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?”

Harkin laughed. “I’m not sure. I love it and hate it a little bit.”

“I appreciate your honesty.” Kaythan rose to his knees and crawled over to Harkin. “May I kiss you?”

Harkin’s feline smile returned. “Please.”

“Hm. No. I’m not ready yet.” Kaythan jumped to his feet.

“You’re teasing me!” Harkin braced himself on the railing and stood as well. “You bloody bastard.”

Kaythan laughed. “I am playing difficult to acquire.”

“Do you mean ‘hard to get’?”

“Probably.”

“Well, stop it,” Harkin snarled.

Kaythan shrugged. “Very well.” He leaned in and cradled Harkin’s face, pressing his full lips to Harkin’s thinner lips. They kissed tentatively at first, before Harkin’s fingers ventured into Kaythan’s dreadlocks. When he gripped the dark tendrils of Kaythan’s hair, the kissing grew a little more desperate, more frantic, until Kaythan pulled back, dragging Harkin’s bottom lip until it popped away. “That was delightful,” Kaythan stated, dreamily.

“Mm.” Harkin’s eyes were closed and a lazy smile sat across his lips.

“You have an interesting taste.” Kaythan licked his lips. “I like it.”

Harkin laughed. “You’re a mystery to me, m’laird. You seem so liberated sexually while remaining refreshingly naïve about the world outside your island.” Harkin twisted one of Kaythan’s dreads in his fingers. “I find that pretty amazing.”

“You should spend the night in my cabin,” Kaythan suggested.

“I would like that,” Harkin whispered with a sultry smile.

“Yes. You would.”

Harkin laughed. “When we reach Port Fenril, you may want to rein that in. Don’t forget about those groups of people who will not tolerate intimacy between two men.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

That night, Harkin eagerly visited Kaythan’s cabin.

Chapter Seven

Kaythan woke to a commotion. He untangled himself from Harkin's limbs, pulled on his trousers and vest, then walked out onto the deck. He looked out over the bow of the ship. A dark cloud loomed on the horizon. No skyfire or lighting blossomed from it, but Kaythan still wondered how the Stormship could have maneuvered ahead of them. Kaythan heard the soft pad of bare feet before he felt arms wrap around his midsection. Harkin kissed his shoulder. "What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know," Kaythan answered. "What am I seeing?" He pointed to the dark cloud.

Harkin released Kaythan and stepped in front of him. He raised his hand to his brow, shading his eyes. "You're seeing Port Fenril," Harkin answered. "Or at least the pollution that hangs above it."

Kaythan grimaced. "That is terrible."

"You have no idea," Harkin said with a sigh before he retreated once more into Kaythan's cabin. Kaythan regarded their destination for another moment then followed Harkin.

Kaythan and Harkin helped the sailors prepare for docking as they approached the bay of Port Fenril. The captaine spoke into a brass tube that led beneath the water so the swiftwhales could hear the command the Wavemen had taught him. They slowed immediately and guided the boat into the docks.

Kaythan stood at the port rail, his mouth gaping. He'd never seen anything like the city before him. Metal, bricks, and glass spread out before him in a hazy mist of smoke and pollution. Black clouds spewed from chimneys. Kaythan said a secret prayer, thankful that his people had shunned this way of life. They'd discussed it at one point and decided they could live more simply, more cleanly, and seeing this blighted city inspired pride in his home.

The ship bumped on the boards as the swiftwhales towed them into the docks. The captaine approached Kaythan and Harkin. "We're going to dock here for a few hours while we restock our supplies. You may stay on the boat or explore the city. Just be sure you are returned by sunset and be careful."

“We will. Thank you, Captaine.” Kaythan watched the dock grow steadily closer. When it was close enough, he jumped over the side of the boat and ran out into the city.

Harkin jogged at his heels. “Kaythan, wait up!”

He shouldn't have worried, because Kaythan nearly doubled over seconds later, coughing and choking on the filthy air of Port Fenril. “My chest and eyes are burning,” Kaythan sputtered, tears streaming down his face.

“That'll be the smog,” Harkin said, rubbing Kaythan's back until he was able to get his coughing under control.

“How do people live like this?” Kaythan made a disgusted face. “The air even tastes horrible.”

“Are you all right now?”

Kaythan nodded and continued walking more slowly. “I do not understand this place.” Kaythan looked all around him at the shoddy, mismatched structures. On some he could see where salvaged ship parts had been incorporated into the buildings. He had never seen buildings made of stone and metal. “Everything looks so heavy.”

Harkin laughed. “How do you mean?”

“When we build our homes, we build them to move and grow with our trees. These are just planted.”

“You know, if we brought these people to your island, they might think the way you live is strange.”

“That is a fair point.” Kaythan continued to gaze about. The giant factories spewing their filth into the air almost frightened him; they were so alien to his way of thinking. “How did you get to my island?”

“What?” Harkin had stopped at a cart and bought two sleeves of food. He handed one to Kaythan.

“What is this?” Kaythan sniffed at the meal. It didn't smell awful.

“Fish and chips,” Harkin said. “It's battered fish and potatoes, fried. Try it.”

Kaythan took a tentative bite. His face lit up. “I like this.”

Harkin nodded with a satisfied smile. “Everyone likes this.” He took a large bite from his own portion.

“You did not answer my question,” Kaythan said around a mouthful of fish and chips. “How did you get to my island?”

“It wasn’t bloody easy,” Harkin answered. “There are a lot of people who don’t even believe your island exists.”

“But my uncle comes to the mainlands from time to time.” Kaythan happily chomped on his chips.

Harkin shrugged. “I’m sure your uncle doesn’t deal with the common folks. There’s quite a gulf between the rich and the poor on the continent. The average man on the streets isn’t educated. They believe what they’re told, and someone along the line decided to tell them that the Four Kingdoms were a faerie story.”

“Odd,” Kaythan said. “Back to your story.” He motioned for Harkin to continue.

“Even those that believe your islands exist don’t believe there’s any way for outsiders to reach them. I couldn’t charter a ship to carry me there. So I took a job on a merchant vessel that I believed would pass very near to the island closest to this side of the continent. That just happened to be yours. Based on what I could gather about the location, I waited until the ship was as close as it would get and I stole a lifeboat. Paddled the rest of the way.”

“What if you had been wrong?” Kaythan asked.

Harkin took Kaythan’s empty paper wrap and balled it up with his own. He tossed both into the gutter. “I don’t know.”

“That doesn’t seem wise.”

“Desperate measures, I suppose,” Harkin said with a dismissive shrug.

Kaythan shivered. He hadn’t expected the mainlands to be so much cooler than his island.

“You’re cold,” Harkin said. “Let’s find a shop and get you some warmer clothes.” Harkin guided Kaythan down a side street, not much more than an alleyway.

It appeared deserted, but when they reached the middle, they passed a dark recess in one of the buildings and a gravelly voice drifted out. “Well, well, well, if ain’t Janze Harkin.” A big, bald man emerged from the darkness. He looked rough, dirty.

“Hello, Gurnst.” Harkin took a nearly imperceptible step back.

Another man, a bit smaller, just as rough and dirty, but with slightly more hair, appeared at Gurnst's shoulder. He smiled and Kaythan winced at the row of filthy teeth in his mouth. “Oy, Janzey,” the smaller man said, his voice oozing menace.

“Mr. Ficks. I'd like to say it's good to see you, but we both know that's not true.”

“Oh, there's that smart mouth we all love.” Mr. Ficks said *mouf* instead of mouth.

Harkin pressed his hand back, urging Kaythan to retreat, but when Kaythan glanced over his shoulder, he noticed another man had moved into the mouth of the alley, cutting them off from their escape. “Not that way,” Kaythan whispered. His hands fell instinctively to his daggers, readying himself for an attack.

“Look, Ficks, I don't want any trouble.”

“Well, that's too bad in't it? Because I owe you some trouble, me fine lad. And Mr. Ficks always pays his debts. Do it quiet, Gurnst.”

Gurnst cracked his knuckles and Harkin whispered, “Close your eyes.”

Kaythan was confused but he did as Harkin instructed. His eyes were only shut for a heartbeat before Harkin yelled, “Run!” Kaythan opened his eyes to see Ficks and Gurnst covering theirs as Harkin barreled past them. Kaythan followed, elbowing Gurnst as he ran by. Ficks had fallen and Kaythan leapt over him. He yelped as he was suddenly dragged back by his hair. He spun, kicking Gurnst in the jaw and forcing the man to release his dreads. Kaythan followed through with a punch to the man's temple, knocking the dirt-rag unconscious.

From the corner of his eye, Kaythan saw a flash of metal. He pulled his daggers out, but Harkin returned with a kick to the back of Ficks's head before the villain could lash out with the blade. It fell uselessly to the ground. The man at the other end of the alley decided to give the job up as a loss and ran off. “Thank you,” Kaythan said, more out of breath than he should have been from the minor workout.

“No need to thank me.” Harkin touched the side of Kaythan's face. Kaythan's heart skipped at the contact. “It's my fault the filthy beggars attacked us in the first place.”

“Why did they?” Kaythan asked as they left their attackers sprawled in the alley.

“Ah, let’s just say when you make your living as a thief, you’re forced to cross paths with some rather unsavory characters from time to time.” Harkin pointed to a shabby wooden sign with a picture of a needle and a spool of thread. “We were both hired by different men to steal the same thing. I was just better than they were. Their boss wasn’t pleased.” He smiled at Kaythan as he opened the door to the shop.

“If you are better than them, why do they blame you? Why don’t they become better?” Kaythan followed Harkin into the cramped, cluttered store.

Harkin laughed. “Life isn’t so simple, I suppose. Not out here.” He held up a long coat. “What do you think of this?”

Kaythan touched the fabric. It felt like the animal skins they tanned on the island, but much thicker and heavier. “It is not beautiful.” He tried it on. “Too constricting. I feel like I cannot move in it.”

“It’s not beautiful, but it will keep you warm. And as you wear it, it’ll get easier to move around in.”

“What about this?” Kaythan asked and pulled on a silvery-gray cloak, complete with a hood and shoulder cape. He shrugged out of the coat and slipped into the cloak. The fur lining felt warm and soft. “This will keep me warm and,” he said, throwing the cloak open and demonstrating, “when I need to move, I will be unhindered.”

Harkin nodded approvingly. “It’s a fine cloak. Good wool. Even if it gets wet, it will keep you warm.”

“And it looks similar to yours.” Kaythan lifted the hem of Harkin’s cloak. The material slid through his fingers like liquid. “Yours is not good wool, though.”

“No. It isn’t,” Harkin answered with a chuckle. “You might want to invest in a pair of boots as well.”

Kaythan looked down at his light, high-ankled, open-toed shoes. “Must I?” he asked.

“No. But the Night Island is quite far north and it can get rather cold.”

“The Night Island?” The storekeeper who had remained so silent, Kaythan thought him dozing, suddenly jumped up from his stool. “Are you out of your

bloody minds?" He limped around his counter and approached them. "Cursed it is. Filled with assassins, monsters, and Nightmen."

"Yes, yes, we've heard all the stories, old timer," Harkin said, rolling his eyes. "How much for the cloak?" Harkin and the shopkeeper haggled over the price for a few moments before they reached a compromise and Harkin passed the man a couple of coins. He and Kaythan walked toward the door. Harkin stopped suddenly and picked up a pair of boots. He held them up for the shopkeeper to see and tossed another coin through the air to the man. "Just in case," Harkin said, leaning toward Kaythan.

"Thank you, Harkin." Kaythan pulled the cloak around him tighter once they were on the cobblestones of the street again. "I will have the captaine return your coin from my uncle's purse."

"Not necessary. Consider them gifts."

Kaythan smiled. "Are you taking care of me now?" He bumped playfully against Harkin's shoulder.

Harkin sniffed a little laugh and bumped him back. "I just want you to be warm." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "Be careful showing affection. Don't forget what I told you back on the boat."

"I haven't." Kaythan peered around at the booths as they walked along the main street. "What was that flash you made with your hand? You did it to Shayara and me, and I think you did it back in that alley as well."

"I did."

"How?"

"Magic."

"No. Really. How?"

"Magic. Really." Harkin stole a glance at Kaythan, who had stopped walking and stared wide-eyed at him. "Keep walking." Kaythan did. "It's not a big deal. I know a few simple spells. Most of my people do."

"This is all very overwhelming," Kaythan said.

"We should get back to the boat. I'm sure Mr. Ficks and Gurnst are back on their feet by now, and they're going to be looking for us."

"You should open that box again before we leave port," Kaythan suggested.

“Mm. That’s a good idea. Eldertalon will stop here and waste some time trying to find his eye.”

“We should find somewhere secluded.”

“I know just the place,” Harkin said and ran toward a rock outcropping overlooking the bay.

Chapter Eight

After opening the box and running all the way back to the boat, Kaythan and Harkin helped load the rest of the supplies so they could be underway two hours ahead of schedule. As the boat pulled away from the docks, Kaythan and Harkin retired to Kay's cabin. Harkin emptied his pockets on the bed.

"What's all this?" Kaythan asked, shedding his cloak.

"Stuff I snatched while we were in Port Fenril."

"What? You stole all this?" Kaythan dropped his cloak. "Why?"

Harkin regarded Kaythan for a moment before clucking his teeth and answering. "Thief," he said, pointing at himself with his thumbs. "You can't be upset with me. You knew I was a thief. What did you expect?"

Kaythan shook his head. "My apologies. I have no right to judge."

"Really?" Harkin asked.

"Really. It's your nature. It is not my place to reprimand you for that."

"You're a little too good to be true, you know that?" Harkin lounged on the bed among his pilfered spoils.

"You think I'm being dishonest?" Kaythan asked.

"Not at all," Harkin said with a smirk. "I think you're adorable." He grabbed a bottle of wine, popped the cork and took a swig. "Wine?"

Kaythan looked at the bottle apprehensively for a moment, shrugged, took it, and drank. "It's good." They spent the rest of the afternoon and evening talking in the cabin.

The journey northward proceeded easily and without incident. The speed of the swiftwhales shaved months off their voyage and the farther north they traveled, the more grateful Kaythan was for his new cloak. He'd also given in and started wearing the boots Harkin had bought. They caught a glimpse of the Stormship before Port Fenril disappeared completely from view.

They spotted other ships soon after leaving the port, but the ocean traffic had tapered off to nothing. A few days away from Tivara, the night that

enshrouded the island kingdom became visible during daylight. Kaythan spent hours staring at the strange and improbable sight. His breath misted in clouds in front of his face, something he'd never experienced before but the captaine explained it for him. Luckily for Kaythan, the sailors were used to sailing into colder climates and had extra warmer clothes they loaned to him. He felt constricted under all the layers, but he was thankful for the warmth.

He felt a familiar set of arms snake around his ribs and Harkin rested his chin on Kaythan's shoulder. "Why don't you come inside the cabin? It's nice and warm. And I know this cold is making you crazy."

Kaythan could see the frosty puffs of breath from Harkin's words. "I've heard about Tivara and its perpetual night my entire life, and I never questioned it. It's just something that was. I never wondered what caused it, but now, seeing it... It's impossible. I thought it was some natural occurrence, but this, what is this? Is the island truly cursed?"

"No." Harkin released him and stood next to him, his elbows resting on the railing. "Kind of. It's complicated actually."

Kaythan turned to look at Harkin, sparing just a moment to admire his profile. "Are you telling me my people living on Tivara are cursed?"

"No." Harkin stood and looked into Kaythan's eyes. "The island has been shrouded in darkness since long before your people came to it."

"Please explain."

Harkin sighed. "This may or may not be true, Kay, but it is what I was told as a child."

"Go on."

"The island was the site of a great battle. Two sorcerer-lairds used the island to stage a grand duel with amazing feats of magic, enormous war machines, and opposing armies. The duel raged for seven years."

"Seven?"

"I told you it may or may not be true. It's the story I was told."

"Sorry," Kaythan said.

"It's all right. I know it sounds preposterous." Harkin paused, squinting at the darkness in the distance. "Anyway, the duel raged for seven years. At some

point, one of the wizards cast a 'spell of eternal night.' That's why the island is trapped in darkness."

"So what happened? Who won?"

"No one," Harkin stated.

"What?"

"The wizards killed one another before the duel was settled. The armies continued to fight in the darkness until they learned that both their patrons were gone. They'd become experts at night-fighting, stealth."

"They were your people," Kaythan guessed.

Harkin nodded. "Not at that point, but, yes. The armies dwindled and eventually reached a truce, melded, became one army, one tribe, one civilization. They eventually repaired the ships that had originally carried them to the island and began selling their unique skill sets to the highest bidder. The fact that they operated primarily at night and from the shadows made it easy for people to deny their existence and relegate them to myth."

"The world is infinitely more complicated than I could imagine," Kaythan said.

"My people lived on that island for generations undisturbed. Then, at the end of the Third Age, your people showed up looking for a place to live. Our elders and your elders agreed to share the island, my people on the ground, your people in the trees. And it has been so ever since." Harkin sighed. "Or at least it had been so, until my people started disappearing."

"So the island is ensorcelled?"

"That was your take away?"

"I thought magic did not outlive the caster," Kaythan said.

"Normally that is true." Harkin nodded as he paced the deck. "But there are charms, wards, spells that can be constructed to draw power from the environment rather than the caster."

"This is a whole new world to me." Kaythan gazed once again at the looming darkness.

"Kaythan," Harkin said, his voice gravelly with emotion. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry I dragged you into this."

Kaythan caressed Harkin's cheek. "You've nothing to apologize for."

"I do. If I had gone right to the source, gone home, not bothered you or your island, you wouldn't be in this situation. Your life wouldn't be in danger right now."

"But then I wouldn't have met you," Kaythan said. "And I wouldn't trade that for anything, even my own safety."

Harkin pulled Kaythan into a warm embrace and Kay melted into Harkin's arms.

Kaythan stared at the wall of night they sailed toward. The swiftwhales slowed at the command of the captain. The bow of the ship pierced the bubble of dark. Kaythan half-believed the boat would meet resistance when it touched the dark but it glided easily through. He retreated from the shroud of darkness, step-by-step, avoided it as long as he could, his butt finally bumping against the aft rail. He closed his eyes and tried to feel the transition from light to dark. There it was: the slightly cooler air as the absence of light enveloped him.

The boat docked. The crew dashed about securing it. A few men from the land of night joined them, doing what they could to assist them. Kaythan disembarked as a man dressed all in black leather, with a scarf and goggles approached them. He was bald with skin much the color of Kaythan's. Kaythan recognized the emblem of the Royal Tivaran Guard. "Hail, brother," Kaythan said as they met on the dock. "I am Kaythan of Aviar. I have come to speak to your king."

"Well met, brother. I am Kass." They embraced quickly as was the custom of their people. "We were not expecting a visit from our southern brothers. Where is Master Morlin?" Kass craned his head, presumably to look for Kaythan's uncle. "What's this? Janze Harkin?"

"Ah, hello, Kass. It's good to see you."

"Something is wrong." Kass grimaced in Harkin's direction.

"It appears your reputation precedes you," Kaythan muttered over his shoulder.

"Ha. Ha," Harkin replied sarcastically.

"You are correct, Kass. We come to you in dire need. We are pursued by the wizard, Chancewell Eldertalon."

“Budge!” Kass spat. “What have you done?” He advanced on Harkin.

“Me? Why do you just assume it’s my fault?” Harkin took a step back.

“Because I am no fool. Is it not your fault?”

“No. It’s my fault,” Harkin confessed.

“Budge!” Kass swore again. “Eldertalon is coming here?”

“I’m afraid so,” Kaythan answered.

“This is an unbelievable amount of trouble, even for you, Harkin,” Kass growled.

“We must speak with King Gnolin,” Kaythan said.

“My father,” Kass said. “Yes, I agree. Come, I will take you directly to him.”

They followed Kass into the forest. Kaythan noticed that as soon as they’d moved away from the water, the island air felt noticeably warmer; nothing like on Aviar, but warmer. “It’s warmer,” he said.

“Yes, there are natural hot springs on the island and a few dormant fire mountains,” Kass explained as they walked.

“Volcanoes,” Harkin added. “On the continent they call them volcanoes.”

“Fascinating,” Kass grumbled, jumping onto a series of pegs running up the trunk of a tree. He climbed nimbly. Kaythan and Harkin followed slightly less nimbly. When they reached the platform, Kass already waited for them. The wood and trees were darker than those on Aviar. They had silver leaves. Kaythan knew they were in a hurry, but he couldn’t help but look around at all the things that at once were so alien and yet so familiar. The rope bridges were similar to those on Aviar but they were covered almost like tubes that ran through the trees. The structures weren’t as open and airy as the homes he was used to. Everywhere he looked there were points of light: bugs with luminescent tails, glowing moss, fruits and flowers that shone with their own radiance. He found it beautiful. “Can you fly?” Kass interrupted Kaythan’s thoughts.

“Of course,” Kaythan answered, his gaze drifting up. What he saw shocked and elated him. “I’d heard of them.” Kaythan’s voice was that of a child with a new toy. “But I never imagined how beautiful they would be.” He ran over to the leatherwing that perched hanging upside down from a branch near the

platform and wrapped his arms around it. The creature flapped, startled by Kaythan's attention, then yawned and leaned in so Kaythan could scratch it. The brown-gray fur on its body was so soft Kaythan couldn't help but run his cheek against it.

"Bats," Harkin said, smiling at Kaythan's unabashed joy. "On the continent, they call these bats, but they're a lot smaller." Harkin held his hands three inches apart to demonstrate.

"Is time still of the essence?" Kass asked, tapping his foot.

"My apologies," Kaythan said, color rising in his cheeks.

"Can you carry the troublemaker?" Kass hooked a thumb at Harkin.

"I can carry the troublemaker."

"Hey!" Harkin barked. "I'm standing right here."

"Follow me." Kass jumped on the second leatherwing and swooped off.

Kaythan mimicked the way Kass gripped the leatherwing around the neck and flipped. Harkin jumped on as well, wrapping his arms around Kaythan's waist. The leatherwing released the branch and dropped into the air.

Kaythan whooped laughter at the exhilaration of flying again for the first time. Flying on a leatherwing felt brand new, similar to flying on a skypanthar, but it was also unique and delightful. Kaythan urged the leatherwing up above the treetops. He could see mountainous rocks emerging randomly from the forest as the leatherwing dipped and whirled. Harkin interrupted Kaythan's elation with a furious tapping on his shoulder. He glanced back over his shoulder to see Harkin pointing south. His blood ran like ice when he saw the giant storm on the horizon. "Dirt," Kaythan cursed. He reined the leatherwing back into the canopy, catching up with Kass.

The royal palace loomed before them, dark, sporting towers and spires. It looked like something an evil witch would call home. Kaythan tried not to judge. His brothers' and sisters' society had grown from the same seed in a vastly different garden. Kass's leatherwing landed on the platform in front of the palace. The creature crawled along using its wings like legs. Kaythan brought his leatherwing to roost next to it. Kass dismounted his leatherwing and marched into the palace with Kaythan and Harkin on his heels.

Kass threw open the doors, and Kaythan had to squint at the sudden onslaught of firelight. The walls were crowded with torches, giving the interior

of the palace the appearance of daylight. Kass waved off the guards and soldiers. He led Kaythan and Harkin directly into the throne room. When they entered, it was surprisingly empty. "Budge." Kass waved them along, entering a dimly lit corridor near the back of the room. They walked a few yards before Kass ducked through a door.

The new room was again blindingly bright and the walls were lined with books. A large, dark, polished desk sat at the center of the room. A man reclined at the desk with an open book. He wore his hair long, like Kaythan's, but it was more gray than brown. The man snapped the book shut, stood, and pulled his fancy robe closed, tying it. "Kasstien, what is the meaning of this?" He looked at Kaythan and Harkin. "Why is the troublemaker here?"

"There is a danger on the way, Father." Kass flopped into a chair in the study. "Kaythan is one of our brothers from the south."

"Aviar?" King Gnolin guessed.

Kaythan nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty. I am Prince Kaythan."

"Kaythan?" The king said with a nod. "You are off the island prematurely or Morlin has passed."

"Morlin has not passed, Your Majesty. I am here because a grave threat pursues us. We ask for your help."

"This is all very vague, my nephew," the king said, using the familiar honorific.

Kaythan launched into an explanation of the prophecy, Harkin's appearance, and the problem they all faced. "We spotted Eldertalon's Stormship on our way to the palace," Kaythan confessed. "I humbly beg your forgiveness for dragging this mess to your doorstep, Your Majesty."

"We're beyond forgiveness, nephew," Gnolin said. "What do you need from me?"

Harkin stepped forward, shouldering Kaythan out of the way. "We need the Shadesilver blade."

Gnolin leaned back and bellowed laughter. "Our most precious artifact? By all means, thief, please allow me to fetch it for you. Just be sure to return it when you're finished."

"He's being sarcastic," Harkin needlessly explained to Kaythan.

“Your Majesty, please consider it,” Kaythan pleaded as he stepped forward. “Harkin has the wizard’s ensorcelled eye.”

The king raised a curious eyebrow, and Harkin shook the eye box in response.

“If we can destroy the eye, we can free Harkin’s people. Maybe we can even put a stop to Eldertalon.”

“You’re insane, Kaythan. Two boys and a knife isn’t enough to stop the Stormbringer.” Gnolin paced the room. “And you will forgive me, but I do not want this war fought in my home. That is why the council of elders denied you the first time you asked for it.”

“Father!” Kass shouted. “We are not cowards. Are you really suggesting we hide, that we don’t face this battle head on?”

“No.” Gnolin raked his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know. Of course I do not want to back down from a fight, but this is not our fight. It is his.” Gnolin pointed to Harkin. “And I don’t want to endanger my entire island to protect one troublemaker.”

“What if you didn’t have to?” Kaythan asked.

“Didn’t have to protect the troublemaker, or didn’t have to endanger the island?” Kass asked.

“Am I invisible?” Harkin asked, wiggling his fingers in front of his eyes.

“We can take the fight to him,” Kaythan said slowly with a devious smile.

“You’re mad.” Gnolin shook his head. “You cannot mount an assault on that flying monstrosity. He will see the attack coming a mile away. Literally.”

“He is connected to the eye?” Kaythan asked, pointing to the box in Harkin’s hand.

He nodded. “That’s why it shoots lightning when I open the box, and also how he can track it.”

“Then we can assume that if we destroy the eye, he will feel it?” Kaythan grabbed Harkin’s shoulder.

“He will. It should hurt like a bastard.”

“And while he’s distracted with the pain, we attack!” Kass thumped his fist on his father’s desk.

“We?” Kaythan and Harkin asked in unison.

“I am not missing this,” Kass answered. “I have trained all my life for something like it.” Kass paused. “And, if I’m honest, I think it sounds like a great adventure.”

“Budge it, Kass,” Gnolin growled. “This is no child’s game.”

“I am well aware of that, Father.” Kass stood with his back straight, his chin thrust out and his shoulders back, looking the picture of the legendary hero. “You cannot talk me out of this.”

Gnolin sighed. “Obviously.” He rubbed his eyes and then his temples. “Fine.” He walked around his desk, opened the top drawer, and pulled out a silken cord. At the end dangled an elaborate silver key. He tossed it to Kass. “Go to the armory. Get the Shadesilver blade. Then go to the garde barracks, assemble your best team. Twenty men, at least.”

“Yes, Father.”

“You.” He pointed at Harkin again. “Can you fly a leatherwing?” When Harkin nodded, Gnolin continued, “Good. You will fly out first, drawing the wizard’s attention, and then you’ll use the Shadesilver blade to destroy the eye. When that is done, you pass the blade to Kass. He is the most skilled. The rest of us will keep the wizard distracted long enough for Kass to get in close enough to use the blade.”

“Wait. ‘The rest of us?’” Kass repeated.

“You don’t think I’m going to let you do this budgering fool thing on your own, do you?” Gnolin patted his son on the shoulder. “Have the guardes that remain evacuate this end of the island. Just in case. I’m going to dust off my battle armor.” He waved them out. “Go. I’m assuming we don’t have time to waste.”

“We do not, Your Majesty. I have guardes as well, Swordhammers, two expert archers, and a regiment of Warbirds.”

“Excellent. Summon them. We will need all the help we can get.”

Kass, Kaythan, and Harkin left the king without another word to prepare for the fight of their lives.

Chapter Nine

Harkin and Kaythan weaved through an excited crowd of Tivarans. Some were trying to get a look at the Stormship and others were clamoring to get away from this side of the island. Kaythan yelled when Harkin ducked into an empty building, dragging Kay with him. The sparse room was lit by a single large bloom growing from the ceiling. Harkin reached up and spread his fingers, creating a flash of light. To Kaythan's surprise and amazement, the light in the flower dimmed to nothing as the flower collapsed in on itself. "How did you discover that?" Kaythan asked.

"When I was a boy, I noticed that none of the luminous bits and bobs of plant life were glowing near lit torches," Harkin explained. "I thought it had to be the heat or the warmth so I tested it out. I found out the lights went out when another light was near."

"It is fascinating," Kaythan said with a smile he knew Harkin wouldn't see. "Why have you pulled me into this dark room?"

"Two reasons," Harkin whispered, his breath warm on Kaythan's ear. "The first: I can eliminate the glow of the plants on this side of the island with a big enough burst of light. It should hide us from Eldertalon, buy us a few more minutes."

"That's a good idea." Kaythan leaned in until he could feel the heat from Harkin's skin. "What is the second reason?"

"I wanted to kiss you one more time in case we die," Harkin answered in a husky tone.

"You better do it quickly," Kaythan whispered. Harkin dipped in and they kissed, deep and desperately. They grasped and explored with their hands before their embrace was rudely and prematurely interrupted.

"Brothers!" Kass growled, leaning into the building. "I appreciate the sentiment, but now is hardly the time."

"Dirt," Kaythan groaned, before Kass dragged them both out and toward their rendezvous with the rest of their regiment.

After Harkin blacked out the southern edge of the island, King Gnolin, dressed in his dark leather armor, marched before his royal garde, his son, the

two visitors, and their Aviaran guards. Kaythan watched with respect and awe as Gnolin addressed his troops. “You will wait until I give the signal to leave the safety of the darkness. As planned, Harkin first, then Kass and I. Kaythan, you stick with the right set of flyers. When the eye is destroyed and Kass has the blade, we move in. Are we clear?”

“Clear, Majesty!” the guardsmen shouted in unison.

“I cannot guarantee anyone’s safety or survival. What I can guarantee is the Tivaran people’s gratitude for your sacrifice,” Gnolin announced. “If we succeed here today, the entire world will be grateful.”

“Do you see that sparking, thundering behemoth blundering toward us?” Kass inquired. “It is time for us to end it.”

His men cheered.

Kass turned to his father. “You really don’t have to do this,” he said. “We can handle it.”

“I know that you can,” Gnolin answered. “I really do have to do this. I am your king. I must set the example.”

“You could not sway my decision and I know I cannot sway yours,” Kass said with a chuckle. “What a pair we are.”

“Are you ready?” Gnolin asked Harkin.

“I am, Your Majesty. We’re going to make this filthy beggar pay.”

Mounted on their leatherwings, the small army dipped and darted about through the air within the bubble of night, invisible to their enemy. The sparking, thundering ship bore down on them, nearly to the bay beyond Tivara’s shores. They circled for more than a minute, within the dome of darkness, tossing worried glances at one another. Kaythan’s men sat behind Gnolin’s on the backs of the flying creatures, and the Warbirds weaved among them.

Kaythan was relieved he wasn’t chosen as the one to administer the deathblow to Eldertalon. He saw the wisdom in Gnolin’s choice. He waited impatiently in the dome of darkness, shifting his weight, resting his chin on the back of his leatherwing’s skull amid the soft fur while the chill wind whipped past. He was thankful for the thick, black leather flight suit the Tivarans had loaned him.

The wizard's ship was close enough now for Kaythan to see the crewmembers milling about the oblong disc of the deck as the storm raged beneath it. The men on the deck stood armed to the teeth and seemingly ready for a fight. Kaythan nervously reached down and checked both of his daggers. Gnolin's men traded glances, waiting for their king to give them the signal to attack.

They didn't have to wait for long. Gnolin raised his open hand then snapped it shut into a fist. Ten men banked to the left. Another ten men and Kaythan broke off to the right. Harkin flew directly at the ship, flanked by Kass and Gnolin. The flyers on either side fanned out to surround the ship as Harkin reined his flyer back. He held the eye box in one hand and the Shadesilver blade in the other. Kaythan had been amazed that the legendary weapon looked like just another dagger. Harkin held the box in front of him and instead of opening it, he brought the blade down, stabbing through the wood and destroying the eye.

Purple light exploded from the box at the exact time the same color lightning leapt from Eldertalon's empty eye socket. The wizard screamed and gripped his head. Smoke poured out from between his fingers. He bellowed as he started lobbing lightning bolts at his attackers. Harkin, Kass, and Gnolin dipped, rolled, and dove to avoid the energy blasts. Kaythan continued to cast glances back toward Harkin, concerned for his friend's safety.

The first of the flyers reached the deck of the ship, which had begun to list to one side. Apparently navigating the giant vessel required the majority of Eldertalon's attention. The wizard's men were at a distinct disadvantage as the flyers dove in to attack. The Swordhammers leapt to the deck, leading the battle. The Warbirds joined them, fighting the wizard's men. The archers rained arrows down at the ship. Kaythan hooked his legs through the saddle and harness on his leatherwing, hanging upside down. He drew his daggers and attacked the enemies. He managed to drop three before his 'wing flew back up. He climbed back onto its back and glanced up at Harkin just in time to see the pass off of the Shadesilver blade get interrupted. A bolt of purple skyfire caught Gnolin in the chest, and he tumbled from his leatherwing.

"No!" Kass screamed and forgot the blade completely, diving to save his father.

"Kass!" Harkin shouted, still holding the Shadesilver blade. "Bloody hell!"

Kaythan looked back at the deck of the ship. Eldertalon, satisfied that he'd blasted Gnolin, began to attack the other flyers and the Swordhammers. "Budge!" Kaythan barked. Leatherwings were dropping from the sky. Some landed on the deck and the riders who were able continued to attack the wizard's men. One of the Tivaran flyers swooped at Eldertalon. The wizard ducked to avoid the flyer's blade, then he rose and extended his arms. Purple fire erupted from his hands and engulfed the retreating leatherwing and its rider. The screeching of the immolated creature blended with that of the man on its back, and both dropped from the sky, bounced off the edge of the Stormship, and fell to the water below. Eldertalon had to be stopped. Kaythan pulled his wing up and flew directly for Harkin. He grabbed the Shadesilver blade from Harkin's hand.

"What are you doing?" Harkin shouted.

"Ending this," Kaythan yelled. He urged his leatherwing around and dove for the Stormship. He heard Harkin swear and glanced over his shoulder to see Harkin following him.

Eldertalon's men were all dead or injured and still the wizard fought the remaining flyers. Six Tivarans and two Swordhammers sprinted at the wizard from behind. It looked like they might make it before Kaythan, but at the last moment, Eldertalon spun to face them, and with a swipe of his hand knocked all eight men back where they crumpled unconscious on the deck. All but one of the Warbirds had been destroyed, and Eldertalon grabbed the last one from the air, snapping its neck with his bare hands. He'd stopped holding his smoldering eye socket so he could attack twice as many men. With his left hand, he tossed magical fire at the flyers attacking him, and with his right, he shot bolts at Kaythan and Harkin. They tucked and rolled to avoid the blasts.

Kaythan had almost reached the deck of the crashing ship when one of Eldertalon's bolts struck his leatherwing and they both tumbled, rolling across the deck. Kaythan managed to hold onto the blade. His gaze snapped up just as Harkin crashed his leatherwing into Eldertalon, all three of them cartwheeling across the deck. Kaythan spared a glance for his injured leatherwing, its wing jutting at an odd angle. He shook off his worry and sprinted for the wizard.

Eldertalon shoved Harkin and his leatherwing off. He grabbed Harkin by the throat and his good eye glowed bright purple while the hand not holding Harkin bloomed with fire. Kaythan pushed harder to reach him. He raised the

Shadesilver blade. Three feet from Eldertalon, Kaythan bounced off an invisible barrier.

“Filthy little tree jumper,” Eldertalon growled. He stood, still holding Harkin by the throat. The wizard pulled himself up to his full height, thrusting out his broad chest. He looked more like a blacksmith, with arms like fence posts and a full, bushy black beard, than a wizard. Harkin clawed at the hand gripping his throat. “What is this troublemaker to you?” Eldertalon doused the magic fire around his free hand and ran it over his shiny, bald pate.

“What do you care?” Kaythan said with a defiant sneer.

“Call me curious.” The wizard narrowed his gaze, and Kaythan suddenly felt compelled to answer.

“I—have feelings for him.”

“Love?” Eldertalon said, sarcasm dripping from his tone. “Oh, that’s rich. Perhaps I should kill him?” The wizard squeezed Harkin’s throat, a strangled yelp escaped his mouth.

“Stop!” Kaythan demanded.

Eldertalon chuckled. “Adorable,” he said with a snarl.

Kaythan threw one of his daggers and Eldertalon used Harkin as a shield. The dagger sliced Harkin’s arm.

“I’m going to kill you,” Kaythan said, matter-of-factly.

“Try it.” Eldertalon spread his legs and tossed Harkin aside.

Kaythan worried for his injured friend, but had to remind himself that Eldertalon’s defeat was his first priority, and he desperately wanted to stop this dirt-herder. He glanced at Harkin, holding his throat, kneeling on the deck. They shared a miniscule nod and glance. Kaythan held his arms out to the side. “You win.”

Eldertalon laughed, tilting his head back. Kaythan took advantage of his distraction, tossing the Shadesilver blade to Harkin. “Any weapons?” Eldertalon asked, his eye flashing purple. The wizard patted Kaythan down, removing his dagger and tossing it away. He clucked his tongue three times. “Little tree man, why would you take the side of this thief and troublemaker? He’s pretty but not *sacrifice your life* pretty.”

“Hey!” Harkin shouted.

“Silence!” Eldertalon backhanded him, knocking him to the black planks of the deck. “You do realize that you’re on the wrong side of this fight?” the wizard asked Kaythan, aiming a kick to Harkin’s midsection. “I’m the victim here. My eye was stolen and destroyed for no reason. My men were attacked and killed.” Eldertalon stepped over Harkin and pressed his foot down on Harkin’s neck. “I’m the hero of this story, you know.” He ground his foot on Harkin’s throat. Harkin winced and slid the blade back to Kaythan.

Eldertalon shot a glance over his shoulder. “That wasn’t?”

“Oh. It was,” Kaythan answered. He jumped at Eldertalon but the wizard swatted him away, sending the blade clattering to the deck. The wizard strode over to Kaythan with murderous intent in his eye. Whatever he planned for Kaythan was interrupted when Kass appeared on his wing. He dropped out of the sky, bellowing with his sword extended menacingly. Gnolin sat behind, cradling his injured arm. Kass dove off the flyer’s back, shooting straight for Eldertalon.

The wizard held his hands up and muttered something Kaythan didn’t understand. Kass stopped and hovered in midair, as did his father and the leatherwing. Eldertalon’s fingers curled in like he was gripping something very tightly. Kass, Gnolin, and the creature all screamed in unison. The leatherwing’s delicate wings crumpled like parchment. Somehow the wizard used magic to crush them.

Kaythan knew he had to move. He scrambled across the boards of the deck, retrieving the Shadesilver blade, and then he marched over to the distracted wizard and plunged the blade into Eldertalon’s back. He turned, fuming, and his prisoners dropped to the deck, unmoving.

Eldertalon seemed unfazed by the blade sticking out of his back. He reached out, and Kaythan’s blood ran icy cold. Harkin grabbed the wizard’s ankle in a futile attempt to save his friend. Eldertalon kicked Harkin in the face and lunged. Kaythan dropped to the deck and used the wizard’s momentum to throw him over. He rolled and regained his feet. Kaythan could see smoke, light and blood leaking around the edges of the blade.

If it caused him pain, Eldertalon didn’t show it. He moved his hands in an elaborate pattern as he muttered continuously and furiously. Sparks of arcane fire gathered in the air between his hands. Kaythan could feel the magic on his skin and in his teeth. The air tasted sour and metallic. Kaythan couldn’t see the wound, but he saw smoke rising from behind Eldertalon.

The wizard stopped chanting, his eye growing wide with shock. The ball of fire evaporated and Eldertalon spun, clawing at the handle of the Shadesilver blade. Energy exploded around the wound, and Eldertalon fell face-first to the deck. He tried to pull himself along as if he could escape the wound as it billowed smoke. Energy crackled around the blade and then Eldertalon swelled, his face growing fat, his clothes splitting. He opened his mouth as if to scream. The sound that came out was more like thunder booming, and the wizard popped, leaving a fine mist and a greasy stain on the deck.

Kaythan walked over and helped Harkin to his feet. "Thanks," Harkin said in a gravelly voice.

"Don't mention it," Kaythan said. He walked over and retrieved the Shadesilver blade.

"Kass and Gnolin?" Harkin asked, bruises already blooming on his face.

Kaythan pointed. Kass hoisted himself up. He limped over to his father's sprawled form. The ship finally crashed onto the ocean and everyone braced themselves against the impact. "Is your father—?" Harkin motioned, unable to finish the question.

"He's breathing," Kass answered. "Eldertalon?"

"Dead," Kaythan stated proudly.

Kass nodded slowly, his eyes closed. "We lost too many good men today." Those that weren't dead or catastrophically injured tried to pick up the pieces, taking the wizard's remaining men into custody.

"We did it," Kaythan said with a smile.

"Yes, we did," Harkin agreed, putting his arm over Kaythan's shoulders. He winced and sucked air through his teeth sharply.

"What are we going to do with this giant, budgering ship?" Kass asked.

Kaythan shrugged and Harkin shook his head. "How are we going to get off this ship?" Harkin asked in return. "None of these big bats look like they're in any shape to fly."

Kaythan remembered his injured leatherwing. He jogged over to the creature. He kneeled to inspect the injury, running his hand over its twisted limb. He realigned the break and splinted the appendage. "It's all right, girl," he whispered. "We'll get you sorted." The leatherwing lifted her nose and nuzzled

up under Kaythan's arm. He scratched her behind her big ear and she made a sound something like a purr.

Gnolin finally stood. He bled from a head wound and still cradled his injured arm, but he seemed to master himself instantly. He strode over to Eldertalon's remaining soldiers. They looked dazed and disoriented. Gnolin soon found out that the men had been under the wizard's mind control; they'd woken up when the wizard had been destroyed.

Two leatherwings landed next to the small group soon after. They had been knocked into the water and had only just managed to regain their wings. The two flew back to the island to arrange for the remainder of the ship to be dragged back to the island.

Harkin joined Kaythan on the deck next to the injured leatherwing. "If I never have to do that again, it will be too soon," Harkin said, laying his head on Kaythan's shoulder.

"At least you know you've freed your people." Kaythan pressed his cheek to Harkin's hair. "If those men woke up when the wizard was destroyed, then your people did as well."

Harkin nodded but didn't lift his head. "I reckon they'll be pretty confused." He chuckled lightly and flinched at the pain it caused. Kaythan sat enjoying the weight of his friend against him, the soft fur of his leatherwing. They had lost much and Kaythan would help his Tivaran brothers mourn the loss of their brave warriors, but right now, in this moment, Kaythan felt right and content.

Chapter Ten

Gnolin and his people spent the following week in mourning for their lost brothers. Those who made it through were patched up and healing. Kaythan and Harkin stayed in the capital city for another month. Harkin visited the forests and caves of his people, looking for signs of their return.

“The Tivarans have spotted a ship coming in from the west,” Harkin called from the other room as Kaythan packed for their return trip. “That’s got to be them. Some anyway.”

“That is wonderful,” Kaythan answered. It didn’t feel wonderful. He knew Harkin wouldn’t want to leave his people now that they would be restored to their home.

“What are you doing in here?” Harkin popped into the room.

“Packing,” Kaythan responded. He pushed the Tivaran flight coat in with the pants and cinched up his pack.

“Oh. Are we leaving?” Harkin asked.

Kaythan nodded. “Since we released the swiftwhales to return to the Wavemen, the voyage is going to be much longer. The captaine doesn’t want to delay any longer.” Kaythan paused. “We? Are you planning to come along?”

“Do you not want me to?” Harkin asked.

“Of course I do,” Kaythan said, throwing his arms around Harkin.

“Careful,” he said. “Ribs.”

“My apologies.” Kaythan released him. “I forgot.” He picked up his cloak and pulled it on over his traditional Aviaran clothes. “I was not sure you would want to leave your home with your people returning.” He pulled on the boots Harkin had purchased.

“I’d rather stick with you, if you’ll have me.” Harkin dropped his head, his dark hair shielding his expression.

Kaythan took his hand. “I would like nothing more, Harkin.”

Harkin looked up, blushing and smiling. “That’s great.” He darted forward and planted a kiss on Kaythan’s mouth. “Stop using my last name. I think we’re good enough friends now.” He tipped Kaythan a cheeky wink.

Gnolin, his arm no longer in a sling, stood next to Kass and an entourage of Tivarans eager to bid their guests a good voyage. "Kaythan, I wish we had met under better circumstances, but I am honored to have fought beside you." He opened his arms. Kaythan embraced him happily. "We have stocked your boat with plenty of supplies."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. You have been uncommonly kind to us considering we brought this scourge to your doorstep."

"Evil wizard." Gnolin held one hand up. "Evil-wizard-killing knife." He held his other hand up mimicking a scale, then shrugged. "It was bound to occur at some time." They shared a sad chuckle. "And you, troublemaker." Gnolin turned, putting his hands on Harkin's shoulders. "I've come to tolerate you." The king offered him a big smile.

"Wow. I feel so loved," Harkin answered with a sneer. "But thank you for not having me executed anyway."

"You are welcome." Gnolin released him.

Kass embraced them both and wished them luck. "I will have to come and see Aviar some time," he said.

"You are welcome anytime, brother," Kaythan said with a grin.

"My father has given you a gift," Kass said as they walked along the dock.

"That is not necessary."

"Ah, you say that now, brother." Kass patted Kaythan on the back. "But wait until you see it." He moved so that Kaythan could see the deck of his boat. Kaythan's face lit up when he saw the leatherwing waiting near the cabin. He sprinted up the gangplank onto the boat and over to throw his arms around the creature's soft neck.

"Hello, girl." Surprisingly the leatherwing hugged him back with her good wing while she made her strange cooing purr. Harkin and Kass joined him on deck. Gnolin leaned on the rail, watching the exchange.

"We thought you might like to take her home with you," Kass said.

"That and the way she cried every time you left the caves became terribly annoying for the people living on that part of the island," Gnolin said, then laughed heartily.

"Yes. There was that," Kass added. "Perhaps you should name her?"

“Doesn't she already have a name?” Harkin asked.

Kass shrugged. “We called her Veera.”

“Veera,” Kaythan repeated. The 'wing cooed at the sound of her name. Kaythan laughed and hugged her again. “I wonder how you and Perfin, my skypanthar, will get along.”

“M'laird,” the captaine said. “We are ready to be under way.”

“Very good, Captaine. Thank you.” He stood up. “I can honestly say that she is the best gift I have ever been given.” He glanced at Harkin, who looked wounded. “Second best,” Kaythan whispered so only Harkin would hear. “She will be cherished.”

“Obviously,” Gnolin answered with a large, warm smile. “You must be off, nephew. Your captaine grows impatient. Take your troublemaker and your new leatherwing and go home. Hug your brothers and sisters.”

“Thank you, Uncle. I will return.”

“I know you will and we await that day with great joy.” Gnolin stood and waved. He waited for Kass to jump back onto the dock as the crowd dispersed. The captaine and crew unfurled the sails and they slipped easily away from the docks leaving Tivara, the Night Island, behind.

“What time is it?” Kaythan turned quickly.

Harkin pulled out a watch on a chain. “Eight bells.”

“Day or night?”

“It's always night here.”

“But not out there.” Kaythan pointed out to sea.

“Day out there,” Harkin responded.

“Help me get Veera into the cabin and get the curtains drawn. The light will hurt her eyes.” Kaythan grabbed her harness.

“Where will *we* sleep?” Harkin didn't move.

“She will not need to be in there at night. We'll switch. Now don't just stand there, help me.”

Harkin helped get Veera settled in the cabin. “Thank you,” Kaythan said, taking Harkin's hand and leading him to the bow of the ship. He stood at the

rail looking at the horizon. Harkin snaked his arms around him and rested his chin on Kaythan's shoulder in a now familiar gesture. They watched as the edge of night crept closer and closer until they broke through the bubble and into the bright morning sunshine. Kaythan squinted until his eyes grew accustomed to the light. "It's a brand new day, Janze."

"I'm glad we're facing it together, Kay."

Kaythan leaned back and Harkin hugged him closer. "So am I," Kaythan said. "So am I."

The End

Author Bio

Eon de Beaumont is a versatile author, craftsman, and raconteur. He has written a number of short stories, novellas, and novels, both solo and with his longtime writing partner and best friend, Augusta Li. Eon is an accomplished playwright and actor under an alternate identity. Above all Eon loves storytelling in all its myriad forms and sometimes has trouble sleeping for the abundance of ideas in his brain. Eon is alternately a mask maker, seamstress, doll maker, and amateur cook. His passions include makeup, shoes, comics, movies, and the pursuit of an ever-higher gamer score. He has recently discovered burlesque, finding another outlet for his creative expression. Eon welcomes and encourages feedback and questions from his readers.

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PAST THE HORIZON

By D.C. Williams

Photo Descriptions

Two very young men in WWII era uniforms stand in a field, gazing at each other with their hands clasped. I'm always aware that prior to about 1950, men were much less self-conscious about that kind of pose than became the norm later, but there's something about this photo, the absorbed way they look into each other's eyes and smile shyly, that makes it hard to believe they are not in love. The second photo is of two older men, obviously affectionate with each other, sitting at a table or a counter among what looks like the aftermath of a really good party.

I initially assumed that the two men were Army Air Corps, and that they were enlisted, not officers, and that they were flight crew. Two out of three, right. It was actually very difficult to get the uniforms identified, but it turns out they are Luftwaffe. That's a very different story from the one that popped into my head and that Kat's excellent prompt inspired. Maybe I'll write that one someday, but this one is about Buck and Joe.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Meeting him was one of the best and worst things happening to me... why? Well, the best, because I met him and he was him... the worst, because our fate was more than uncertain, we didn't know what would and could happen next, where would we end up and would we survive? It made us desperate and I always knew losing him was a distinct possibility and although I've only known him a very short time I knew it would gut me.

The funny thing was that I didn't really like him in the beginning; he was one of those funny guys, always grinning, always in a good mood and a total morning person which annoyed me no end. But underneath all that there was a decent guy, a loyal friend and a strong man. I was drawn to him like to no other... I was afraid he would send me away or laugh at me or worse, tell the others or beat me up should he ever learn about my feelings for him... but in the end he was so tender, so understanding of all my insecurities and fears and I loved him even more. He was the center of my world and would always be even if I should never see him again after this war. We got separated in the end

and what we had together it was over way too soon, our time together was so short.

I came home changed, not broken but a different man. It was hard to go on with life but I knew he would have wanted me to try and so I did. I found a job, had a small apartment and lived... at first minute to minute, then day to day... for him I lived and tried to be the good man he always said he knew I was. I didn't know where he was, there was nobody I could ask, but one day, out of the blue, his sister contacted me. She had tried to find me, she only had that one photo of us and my name, but it's a fairly common name and I was hard to find. But she's like him in that sense, never give up, always fighting and going on and so she found me. She knew of him and me, what we meant to each other, I was shocked he had told her but when I got to know her better, I learned that she loved her younger brother and supported us. She didn't know where he was either... he was MIA... but that's not dead, right. So it's not silly or unrealistic of me to still have hope? It wasn't easy to keep on hoping, not to lose faith and believe I'd see him again one day. In the dark of the night I often lay awake and worried with our fate, cried hot tears about the unfairness of it all, I missed him terribly, even his perkiness in the mornings... but in the end hope won out... and I was right never to give up.

Dear author, can you work with that?? I don't like cheating, bitchy females or post-apocalypse but a strong, supporting female character that would be fab!! And I'm a hopeless romantic so a HEA would be perfect. :)

Thank you!

Kat

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: World War II, Battle of Britain, sweet/no sex, family life, whole life through, B-17, bomber crew

Word Count: 7,088

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Author's Note

When writing historical works I'm always conscious of the line by L.P. Hartley "*The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.*" America was a very different place seventy years ago. I try to reflect that in my work and as a result, my characters do and say things that moderns wouldn't. This probably doesn't cover everything, but WWII servicemen freely used phrases like Kraut and Jap. "Negro" was a polite term for African Americans in 1947. Pregnant women weren't advised to avoid alcohol until the early 1980's. "Monkey Ward" is an old nickname for Montgomery Ward, and has no racial connotations that I'm aware of. And Monmouth County was "South" Jersey when I was a child.

PAST THE HORIZON

By D.C. Williams

One, two, three, oh fuck. A callous hand gave Buck a hard shove and he was out, ten thousand feet over England. Double and triple fuck whichever goddamn colonel had thought this was a good idea, to give them a taste of what it was like to bail out. Buck counted patiently, because what else was he going to do, and then he pulled the cord, and he was floating. It was better than sex, just like that crazy paratrooper had said, even if no little doll ever got Buck going.

Nice and easy and down, and as Buck landed he could hear some hollering from an apple tree. Apparently, they weren't all that different here from the ones in Jersey. Real Jersey, not that semi-tropical island in the Channel the Jerries had taken over. Buck wandered into the orchard and looked up. Christ almighty, there was the new radioman. He was a pain in the butt, and now he was dangling from the parachute, caught in the branches like a Christmas tree ornament. Buck suppressed a snort at that idea, and called, "What the fuck are you doing up there?"

The new guy yelled. "What do you think? If you get me down, I'll buy you a beer."

He grinned and Buck couldn't help grinning back. "English beer is piss," he yelled.

"Two beers!"

"Still piss," replied Buck as he started to climb.

"Aw hell, fellas, go ahead and make it a good one, there ain't no brass here," Ray drawled, camera in hand. Buck didn't know where the heck the pilot had gotten film for the old Kodak Brownie, but Ray was determined to get pictures of every soul he could round up on this particular drizzly Sunday morning in November of 1943. Starting with his very own B-17 crew, even if all he could find were Buck and Joe, who'd been behind the hangar sneaking a cigarette and a quiet word or two with each other.

Buck reached out and grabbed for Joe's mitt, trying to make it look like they were shaking each others' paws in a manly way, but Joe grabbed on and held. Ray, grinning like the madman he was, snapped the photo of them holding hands like sweethearts. Not that Ray would care. The Texan was legend. He'd fuck anything that moved and probably a few things that didn't. Buck knew Ray had pretty much figured out that his radioman and waist gunner were an item and had dropped more'n a couple of hints that he wouldn't mind fooling around with the pair of NCOs, but he took a quiet rebuff gracefully.

Buck figured if anyone else saw that photo, he could pass it off as Joe being the smart aleck they all knew he was. Perky first damn thing in the morning, full of jokes, he'd pissed Buck off the first couple of weeks they'd known each other because he never shut up. Then they'd gotten drunk on lukewarm English beer and ended up fucking in a haystack. Buck hadn't been any virgin, but he still wasn't sure how that had happened since he hadn't pegged the guy as being bent, and swore he didn't know which of them had made the first move.

He thanked his lucky stars every day. He'd found one good thing out of this damn war, and Buck didn't like to think about how long he might have it. Or what would happen afterwards if they both made it out in one piece.

Ray might be plumb crazy, but he was definitely one of the good guys. Buck thought the Captain might have gotten some whiff that Joe was being transferred out, because when he got those pictures developed, he got two made of the one with Buck and Joe and gave a copy to each of them. Buck knew he didn't want to think about the markers Ray must have had to call in for the chemicals and photo paper.

Three days later Joe got the orders to go to an airfield in West Bumfuck, Yorkshire. No liberty, no privacy for anything more than a single crushing kiss in a munitions locker. They didn't usually take that kind of risk, because they weren't stupid, but neither of them needed to say this could be the last time they ever touched each other, and fuck the court martial that was waiting for them if any officer other than Ray strolled in.

Buck wrote as often as he dared, which was once a week or so. They would've had to be discreet anyway, but Buck was always conscious that the censors saw everything. He knew his letters would arrive at the tiny base in

Yorkshire that didn't show up on maps with black blocks all over and not the half of it making sense, the way Joe's did to him.

In March, they took a nasty hit over the Netherlands coming back from a "precision" raid on someplace in Germany that Buck tried to pretend had no schools or homes or anything but S.S. officers and munitions factories. Crazy Ray got them over the Channel trailing smoke and dodging opportunistic Luftwaffe pilots and down sort of safe in a cow field somewhere in Kent. Hendricks broke his collarbone. Gallibrandi had taken some shrapnel and was already dead. He'd bled to death in the tail gunner's station, but the rest of them walked away.

Buck wrangled some leave after that one, probably with the good word of Captain Hansell, otherwise known as Ray, and made it up to Yorkshire hitching rides on transports. He turned up outside the enlisted mess, such as it was in that dismal place, figuring he could get someone to tell him where Joe was.

The first man out the door was Joe, cigarette dangling from his mouth, cap pushed back as always. Buck knew his lover wasn't technically a handsome guy, not with that big Roman beak of a nose, but he never, ever got tired of looking at that face, even when he hadn't seen it in four months.

"Crap, Buck, is that you?" Joe said, cigarette dropping from his mouth.

"Yeah." Buck nodded, thinking he should have found some way to let Joe know he was coming, wondering if he was even welcome, if Joe was fucking someone else.

Joe said, "Oh fuck, not here, can't even touch you, the goddamn walls have eyes. Give me a few. Weather has us grounded anyway... I'll talk to the LT and tell him my buddy just came all the way up here to catch up. See if I can get off-base, at least find somewhere to sit for a minute."

Buck nodded mutely and huddled by the side of the Quonset hut while Joe strode off and came back.

"I'm clear until midnight," he said. "This way," he indicated a path, "there's a pub down this way. It's not much, but it's dry, and they sometimes have beer."

"Don't suppose they have rooms to let?"

"A couple, but we'll find someplace for you to camp out. Don't spend your money."

“You know what I was thinking.”

Joe winked at Buck. “I know, not worth the brig.” Buck was suddenly reminded of the brand new shiny sergeant fresh out of radio school who had turned up back when they were first assigned to Blighty. He couldn't even remember what had happened to their original radioman, but he hadn't liked the new guy at first. Now he couldn't imagine living without him.

“You sure about that?”

“Now that you mention it, maybe not.” Joe laughed, then suddenly serious, “You know we're winning.”

“Yeah,” said Buck. He'd been getting an increasing sense of optimism since Christmas or thereabouts.

“Maybe there'll be an after.” Joe inhaled sharply on the fresh cigarette he had lit. “No reason a couple of old army buddies can't bunk in together.”

“No reason at all,” replied Buck.

Later, much later, after they had drunk as much beer as they could persuade the landlord to sell to them, their bodies moved silently in the shadow of an ancient stone wall, grateful for the utter darkness of blackout.

Just after D-Day, they took another hit, and this time Ray didn't make it across the channel, putting the big bomber down in a field in Normandy. Buck could see pissed off looking Germans piling out of what looked like a broken down tank as they just cleared the hedgerow and bumped down. Hennessy was slumped in the copilot's seat, but Ray, bulletproof as always, was up and ready to go the minute the old bird stopped shuddering. “Fucking Krauts are on top of us. It's every man for himself, and I'll see you all behind Allied lines.”

Buck was almost as quick as Ray, Kowalcki behind him. He hoped the goddamn Germans would at least get a medic to the guys they left behind.

Buck made it halfway across the second field before a skinny French teenager jumped out of nowhere, grabbed his arm, pulled him into a barn, and shoved him under a load of rotting hay and manure. After the manure, he spent two days in a farmer's cart under a bunch of turnips and was delivered to a sentry post outside of Bayeux. Buck wasn't what you would call conversational, but Keyport High had attempted to drum French into him for

two straight years, and he was amused when the farmer successfully demanded three packs of cigarettes and a fifth of bourbon for him.

Kowalcki never made it back and Buck never did know what happened to him. Ray had hightailed it in a full day before Buck arrived with the turnips, and they were both sent back to Britain, assigned to different crews on new bases.

By the end of August with Paris liberated Buck was starting to think it might really be over soon. When the Allied advance ground to a halt at the end of September, Buck hardly noticed. Mail call yielded his last three letters to Joe, unopened, with a lazy “no addressee here” scrawled across the top. His new captain was a dour Bible thumper that Buck did not ever want to begin to explain the situation to, and the copilot was wet behind the ears and drunk when he wasn't in the air. He had crazy Ray's new posting, and wrote to the man, figuring if anyone could pull some strings, it'd be him.

Just before Christmas, Ray turned up in the hangar one day with a bottle of scotch just as Buck was shucking himself out of his electric flight suit. Buck took one look at his face and knew it wasn't good news, and probably not anything Ray had trusted to get past the censors either.

Ray lazily saluted Buck's new captain and said. “I need to borrow your waist gunner here, sir.”

Sour as he was, Captain Wapnell didn't know what to say to that. Fraternalization be damned, Ray had wrangled himself some private quarters and took Buck straight there. After he told Buck that Joe's plane had gone down somewhere outside Arnhem and no one knew a goddamn thing, he proceeded to get Buck drunk and made love to him, sweet and slow, letting Buck cry some and not saying a thing when Buck called him by Joe's name.

Buck spent the rest of the war trying not to be a sad sack, because anyone might be cut up at losing a buddy, but well... Sometimes he almost persuaded himself he hadn't been in love with Joe.

In early '46 he found himself on a transport back to the good old U.S.A. and demobbed. He went home to see his folks, and a week of that was more than enough. Apartments were like hen's teeth and rents were three times higher in New York than the sleepy South Jersey town where he'd grown up. Buck figured he'd never get laid again if he stayed home, and he still had a raw place

in his soul when he thought about Joe or looked at the now dog-eared photo Ray had taken of them holding hands. He wasn't going to hide that photo away or pretend to be looking for a nice girl to settle down with.

Buck spent a week at the Y on 47th, having sex in the bathrooms late at night while looking for work and a place to stay by day. A friend of a friend hooked him up stocking bar and mopping tables down at an Irish place on the edge of Hell's Kitchen, and another guy told him about a room to let, up in Riverdale. It wasn't much, but it beat the hell out of growing tomatoes and listening to his old man. Every now and then he'd hit the bathhouses and tell himself that was enough. Buck knew men like him paired up sometimes, but mostly just settled for getting laid.

He thought about Joe sometimes, but figured lightning didn't strike twice. He got a card from Ray every once in a while. He'd gone back to Texas and gotten married, but probably not settled down.

It was just before Thanksgiving, and Buck was putting his tie on, ready to go to work when Mrs. Mooney, his landlady, yelled through the door. "Mr. Jennings, you have a phone call. I told you to only give out this number for business purposes. There is a woman on the phone."

Buck tried not to roll his eyes. "Right there, Mrs. Mooney. I'm sure it's important." He walked into the small kitchen and took the instrument from his very affronted-looking landlady.

"Hello, Buck Jennings here," he said.

A flat Midwestern voice said hesitantly, "Is this the Buck Jennings who served in the Army Air Force with Joe Willis?"

Buck took a deep breath, willing that the woman on the phone wasn't Joe's wife. He'd said he wasn't married, but he wouldn't be the first or last guy to lie about that. "Yes, it is."

"This is Darla Willis, Joe's sister." Buck exhaled. "I've been trying to find you, but the army isn't helpful. There are an awful lot of Jennings out there, and I didn't know if Buck was your given name or a nickname."

"Given," said Buck. "It's nice to hear from you, Miss Willis."

"Darla, call me Darla," she said firmly. "You and my brother were... close." She hesitated a little on the last word, her intonation a little odd.

Suddenly wary, Buck answered, "We were crewmates."

Darla sighed. "The photo of the two of you was in the things the army sent me, after. There was a letter for me, too. Joe and I never had any secrets."

"Oh." Buck had to know. "The army confirmed it, then? I had a buddy ask some questions, but he couldn't get much past that your brother's plane was shot down. It was part of some hush-hush secret thing."

"Missing, presumed dead. I hoped, you know, for a long time, we'd hear something. That he'd turn up as a prisoner of war, or even..." Her voice broke. *That someone had actually confirmed that Joe was dead. Made it possible for that tiny, crazy nugget of hope to die and let some of the raw places scab over and heal.*

"Hey, I know, it's hard." He had to say something. "He was my best pal."

"You're not alone?"

"No, I'm in my landlady's kitchen." And probably the operator was listening in, and for all he knew this was a party line.

She sighed again. "Can I have your address, Mr. Jennings?"

"Buck, and of course." He recited it to her.

She sent his letters back to him, carefully rubber banded and packed into a shoebox. She would have sent him the photo, too, but he'd let her know that he had a copy of it. Darla Willis wrote a lot, and Buck wrote back.

He knew she was twelve or thirteen years older than Joe, never married, and responsible for caring for their mother, who was getting on in years. Buck figured she was lonely, and he enjoyed the letters. If he hadn't already known she and Joe were related, he'd have figured it out just reading the stuff she sent him. The woman could turn a trip to the beauty parlor with her mother into a howler of a story that had him laughing so hard Mrs. Mooney knocked on his door to see if he was alright.

Thanksgiving at home was so miserable he let Mrs. Mooney feed him overcooked chicken for Christmas. When Darla wrote him in February to come out to Indiana for Easter, he figured why not? There was no way in hell he was going to Jersey for his father to pick apart everything he'd done wrong since he got out of the army and his mother to sit there silently. Not to mention his brother James and a few pointed words about queers and faggots who thought they were too good to live at home.

The ticket was expensive enough, even without springing for the Pullman car, but Buck had never been a big spender and he had money in the bank, mostly saved from his army pay. Darla Willis had offered, but there was no way Buck was going to have a woman pay his way, even Joe's sister.

Buck still couldn't believe that she had gone looking for him, instead of just burning the picture of him and Joe together and trying to pretend her brother hadn't been *like that*.

Twenty hours on a train had left him pretty well wrung out when he stepped out of the station into that soft spring morning. He stepped towards the faded woman in the blue dress and straw hat who was standing by the cabstand when another woman, no spring chicken but good looking still, waved at him from against the passenger side of a gleaming Packard. She was wearing a wine-colored hat covered with flowers that definitely hadn't come from Sears or Monkey Ward, and she had a piece of pasteboard in her hand with "Buck Jennings" carefully lettered on it.

Buck had figured that Joe's people were decently off, and knew he'd been a freshman at Purdue when the Japs had bombed Pearl Harbor, but that had not prepared Buck for this. The car was a '34 or '35, not brand new, but its black enamel gleamed, and a grizzled Negro sat at the wheel.

Miss Willis stepped forward and said, "Buck, is that you?" and enveloped him in a bear hug before he'd finished saying yes. She smelled expensive, and a tear rolled down her cheek, making marks in the powder.

The chauffeur opened the door for them, and they sat in the back, Buck's army duffel carefully stowed in the trunk as they drove to the Willis house. Joe had grown up in a big outdated Victorian, homely but well-cared for, white painted and intimidating enough to Buck, who had grown up in a shotgun with a couple of extra rooms tacked on and a cold-water WC off the kitchen.

The Willises weren't ostentatious about it all, and Buck was pretty sure they were a far cry from Rockefellers. The expansive house with its comfortable furniture, staffed with the man who drove and did heavy work and his wife who ruled the kitchen, was as alien to his existence as the French people who had hidden him in their barn.

They welcomed him with open arms. Not just Darla, but the old lady who had cried when she embraced him and asked him to tell her about Joe, and then the rest of them. Joe's brothers and sister all came to dinner to meet him, and exhausted as he was, Buck reveled in their company.

All of those Willises acted like he'd every right to be there with them at the big mahogany table with the white cloth and the roast pork loin with applesauce and new potatoes. After they'd all gone to their own homes he sat in the front parlor with Darla Willis and drank sherry.

"All you folks have been so good to me and you don't even know me. I can't begin to thank you."

Darla shook her head. "Thanks are completely unnecessary. As far as we're concerned, you're part of the family." She hesitated, "He was a hundred percent honest with me, but we pretty much all knew he wasn't going to get married. How we are with you is the same as if you'd been Joe's girl."

Buck shook his head softly. "That's how you've treated me, for sure. It's just not the way it's been for me."

"Your family didn't know about Joe?"

Buck shook his head again. "No. Don't really even know about me, and don't want to. I sure wouldn't be welcome there if it was out in the open." He hadn't realized he was feeling bitter about it until he opened his mouth.

Darla sighed. "That's a pity. Family is family, and it shouldn't matter. I'll take you to see Uncle Art tomorrow. Joe was always his particular favorite and he'd love to meet you. He'd have been here tonight, but the whole crew is kind of overwhelming, and he's nearly ninety."

The next afternoon Buck dressed carefully and got into the big black Packard with Darla and her mother. He wasn't entirely sure who Uncle Art was, or why the Willises were so sure he wanted to meet Buck, but he was game for pretty much anything. He was also going to get fat if they didn't stop feeding him.

After about a half hour's drive, they pulled up in front of a little white-painted cottage. There was a sly smile on Darla's face as she rang the doorbell.

An old man answered and Buck instantly understood Darla's mischievous look. For all his advanced age, the man was a thoroughly "artistic" type, floppy purple tie and all. He embraced Darla, kissed her on both cheeks and her hand as well, and gave the same treatment to Mrs. Willis. Then he put his hands on Buck's arms, holding him at length.

“So this is my Joe’s dear friend.” Buck had never heard so much innuendo put into a relatively innocent statement in his life. “What a strapping young man.” Some of the affectation dropped and Uncle Art said, “I am so very glad to meet you. Thank you for coming here.”

Buck stammered, “Of course.”

Darla said, “Of course we were going to bring him to you, Uncle Art. Do you think we’d forget you?”

“Why wouldn’t you forget me? I’m old, I’m all alone here, and Missy,” Art indicated Darla and winked at Buck, “only comes every couple of weeks.”

Darla sighed in obviously fond exasperation. “As often as I can. Did your girl make coffee before she left?”

“In the electric pot in the kitchen. Hopefully she remembered to plug it in this time, and she said there were sandwiches. I told her to leave cookies out.”

Darla settled her mother into a chair and went into the kitchen to investigate.

“She’s not really my niece, you know, although you’d never know it from the way she takes care of me.”

“My husband’s uncle,” said Mrs. Willis, “was an um...”

“Very good friend of mine,” supplied Uncle Art. “Michael. We lived here together for, oh...”

“Forever,” said Darla, carrying in a tray with a coffeepot on it. “Since before Mom and Dad were married, anyway.”

“I was married in oh-two,” said Mrs. Willis, “and Uncle Michael was in that little place on Railroad Street, and you were certainly there with him. My Harold brought me to visit his favorite uncle and his good friend.”

“After thoroughly warning her about theatrical types. Michael brought me here from Chicago, where I was on the stage, although not with any great success, and I taught drama here for many years. I had a little studio downtown.” Art’s smile grew a little sad. “Michael was a writer. He had a couple of good books, and he bought this place, and here I am.”

“Yes, you are.” Darla reached over and patted the old man’s knee. “Uncle Michael died in thirty-five.”

“Yes,” said Art, “I miss him every day, but these ladies,” he smiled at Darla and her mother, “treat me like their very own family.”

It was just the three of them for dinner that night, but the rest of the family was in and out all week, and Buck started to get to know them. There was Rob, a year older than Darla and a successful doctor with a surgical practice, three children, and a thin, nervous wife. Addie, one down from Darla, plump and comfortable with four children and a husband who indulged her in everything and looked at her as if she was Betty Grable. Walter, who sold insurance, and his fiancée, Lola, who peroxided her hair and was the only member of the whole crew who seemed to be a little confused by why Buck was there. Jenny—whose husband hadn't come back either—was also engaged to a loud young guy who sold Cadillacs and made Mrs. Willis cringe a little. Joe had been the youngest, except for a baby who died of diphtheria.

Buck had a ticket to leave on Easter Monday and as he got dressed on Sunday for church, he reflected that he was going to miss this place and these people. Darla had made it clear that he had a standing invitation for holidays, and Buck knew he'd like to make it back for Christmas, but Indiana was an awfully long way from New York City.

After Easter Sunday Service in the pretty Methodist church, Darla introduced him around as “Joe's army buddy, who was good enough to come all the way out here so we could meet him”. The whole gang had come for dinner, of course, and Betty the cook was clearing the dishes from the pear salad when the doorbell rang.

“Who can that be?” said Mrs. Willis.

“I don't know,” said Darla. “We're all here, and it can't be a delivery on Easter Sunday. I'll get it, though.”

She rose and told Betty that she had it and Betty should concentrate on the dinner and not worry about the door.

Buck heard her muffled yelp, and was first up and through the hallway. Darla stood there in the pretty lilac dress she'd worn all day, holding a yellow envelope in her hand, her face completely wrecked. A kid in a Western Union uniform stood on the step.

Buck took charge. He fished in his pocket for two-bits, gave it to the kid, and said, “No reply,” closing the door. He turned to Darla and took the

envelope gently from her hands, still unopened. "We'll know now," he said, working the slip of paper free.

Darla nodded. "It's probably from some company telling us we won a lifetime supply of flour or something and I'm getting worked up over nothing."

Buck smiled softly and looked at the slip of telegram paper in his hand. Then he looked at it again. No "regret to inform" you. It made no goddamn sense, but there it was in black and white.

"He's alive," said Buck, unable to completely trust his own voice.

"What?" responded Darla. A murmur rustled through the Willises clustered in the doorway.

"He's alive," repeated Buck, clearer and firmer this time. "Go-Goldarned Germans had him prisoner, and he was stuck in the Russian sector and there's some craziness about the Russkies deciding he was an Austrian citizen and he's alive, and they're sending him home, and there's a letter to follow." Buck became aware he was babbling and tears were running down his face.

Darla hugged him, and Addie and Jenny clustered in and joined her. Rob went down to the basement and busted out some champagne they'd been saving. It didn't work out to more than a thimble full apiece but they all toasted to Joe's still being alive, even the kids.

Buck knew damn well that Joe might not still want him after all he'd been through, but he called his job up to quit anyway, and when he went back to New York he settled up with Mrs. Mooney and gave her notice.

Darla rode the train out from Indiana the day before the troop ship with Joe on it was due to arrive, and they were both there on the dock when Joe stepped off the gangplank. He was too thin and there was something a little haunted in his eyes, but he grinned wide when he saw them and said, "Darla, Buck, my two favorite people here to meet me. I see you've made each other's acquaintance."

"Yeah," said Darla, "I told this big lug he's family now. Can't get rid of us."

"Is that so?" said Joe, looking Buck in the eye.

Buck nodded and Joe grinned wide again.

Darla had gotten them a room next to hers in the same hotel, and after they'd taken Joe out for a steak and she'd said goodnight to them, they went in and closed the door.

"I am going to take the longest shower ever," said Joe. "All the hot water I want." Buck nodded.

Joe wasn't kidding, and while he was bathing, Buck put on his pajamas and got into one of the beds with the tattered copy of *The Glass Key* he'd been reading off and on.

Joe appeared in the bathroom door wearing just a towel around his hips nearly three-quarters of an hour after he'd started to shower. "You can't believe how good that was. Never thought I'd see hot water again." He ducked his head. "Never thought I'd see you again."

"No," said Buck, putting the book down. "I thought you were dead."

"I figured. Gussed you'd moved on to someone else, maybe?" Joe shrugged.

"No," said Buck. "No one else. I got laid a few times, and I should tell you I let Ray fuck me once, when I was broke up that you went missing, but that's all."

Joe nodded. "A couple guys. I'd still be in East Buttfuck, Germany learning how to be a good Communist if it weren't for one of them, but nothing..."

Buck nodded, because Joe didn't have to come out and say that it was nothing that meant anything. "We can take it slow," said Buck, just because he had to.

"Do you want to?"

"No," replied Buck. Joe looked mighty fine in that towel, even if he was too thin. Buck figured Betty and Darla would take care of that, and right now Joe was all his.

They'd never really had a bed before. Not like this anyway, with the smooth cool sheets and just the two of them. There was a little hesitation the first time, since it had been a little over three years, and Buck was afraid of hurting Joe, fragile as he looked, and then everything was as it had ever been. Better, because the war was over and they had all the time in the world.

Buck went to Jersey by himself on the day Joe and Darla went to wrangle with the army. His father was frankly hostile when Buck told them he was moving to Indiana with an army buddy, and Buck figured that was the end of that.

He rode back in the Pullman with Darla and Joe since they seemed to just assume he was coming with them, and he couldn't see why not.

And after that?

Well, they had a life.

Joe went back to Purdue and got an engineering degree. Buck got a job tending bar. None of the Willises ever said anything about it to him, but he knew they must have thought that strange. Uncle Art died in '51 when he was ninety-two, and left the little cottage Michael had bought for him to Buck and Joe.

Joe found a job, and then another one. Every now and then, he'd lose an interview for being a bachelor rather than a married man, but they lived quietly and never had much trouble. Addie had three more children. Jenny got married, and divorced, and married again. Walter's Lola ran off with a mailman. Mrs. Willis died in '54.

In the summer of 1957, Darla showed up at their cottage one night, and after they'd all had three highballs apiece said, "I'm pregnant."

Buck just looked at her; Joe was choking on rye and ginger ale. She didn't look it, but Buck knew Darla had to be nearly fifty, unmarried, and had never kept company with anyone in the time he had known her.

Joe caught his breath and said, "Married man?"

Darla nodded.

"Do I want to know who?"

"No, and his wife certainly doesn't."

"Do you want me to ask Rob if he knows a doctor? Someone who won't have trouble with a hospital board?"

Darla shook her head no. "I actually wanted to ask Buck if he'd marry me."

Once Buck stopped choking on his drink, they all discussed it rationally and decided it made sense. No Willis in his or her right mind was ever going to

believe that Buck and Darla were actually man and wife, but it would stem at least some gossip, and make things easier if anything ever happened to Darla.

So Buck and Darla went down to city hall with Joe and Addie. None of them could keep a straight face, but the mayor married them according to the laws of the state of Indiana. Buck went home with Joe while Darla went home alone to the big white house. In January of 1958 when she was forty-nine years old, she gave birth to Josephine Willa Jennings, who was healthy despite all of the dire things the OB had said about advanced maternal age.

Betty's husband Hank died later that same year. Darla put the big house on the market and it got divided up into offices.

Buck's mother and father died six months apart in 1962 and his brother James called him so he could fly back for the funerals. Joe stayed in Indiana, and Buck figured that was the last time he'd ever go to Jersey.

Rob's youngest, who'd been a freckle faced five-year-old on that Easter of 1947 went to Vietnam and didn't come back. Addie's second oldest went to Canada instead and her oldest got married. Rob refused to go to the wedding, and the two of them spent years ducking in and out of family gatherings to avoid each other.

Jo grew up tall and pretty. Buck never knew exactly how Darla explained it, but she always knew he was her uncle, despite being on her birth certificate and very theoretically married to her mother. Rob and Addie started talking again around the time President Carter signed the pardon for draft dodgers.

Darla was diagnosed with lung cancer during Jo's senior year in high school, and hung on long enough to see her graduate. The neat little house she'd moved into was sold, and all through college, Jo regarded Buck and Joe's as the place she came home to.

Walter, who'd moved to Chicago after Lola left him, came home for Christmas of 1982 with a slender mustachioed man twenty years his junior and announced he was gay.

Jo got married in '83 and Buck and Joe gave her away. Rob fell asleep one night and didn't wake up. Jenny got lymphoma. Buck retired and then Joe did. Jo had babies. Addie's oldest had grandchildren. Addie's husband got Alzheimer's and went into care and died in '93. Walter died in '94, and his partner buried him outside of Chicago. Jo drove Buck and Joe up to the funeral because that was starting to be more of a drive than they were up to. Addie kept

going strong, but fell and broke her hip a few months after 9/11 and never really recovered.

Through it all, Buck was there for Joe, and Joe was there for Buck.

As marriage began to look like a possibility, they started to discuss it, but it never seemed worth the effort, and the State of Indiana didn't seem like it was going to pass it anytime soon. By the summer of '13, Buck walked with two canes or a rollator and Joe sometimes forgot small details, like the name of Jo's youngest, now married and a father himself. By then, any ceremony seemed to Buck like an affront to all those years they'd had together, but he wanted to have an anniversary party, for all of those seventy years.

And they did.

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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PINK LACE AND STOLEN HEARTS

By JC Wallace

Photo Description

A man leans heavily on the railing of his balcony with his back to me. His hands grip the metal railing tight. He has a long, lean back and slim hips. He is wearing a pair of sheer boy shorts, which show off his nice round butt. He has black hair, longer on the top and shorter on the sides. His head is bowed, and his shoulders slumped, showing the tension in his body.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is my roommate and best friend, Greg. He's been depressed, and maybe even suicidal, ever since his boyfriend found out that he likes to wear feminine underwear, especially the sheer styles like the one in the picture above. He was so in love with that loser. He even told me that he was holding off from having sex until they got to know one another, because he wanted it to be perfect. He's old-fashioned that way—a history major who's enthralled with the history of dating and romantic relationships throughout the centuries. He believed he could find his own Prince Charming and have a Happily Ever After romance. Because he's a bit embarrassed and unsure of himself about his underwear fetish, he'd always wear "tighty whities" when he was with Simon, or Simple Simon as I like to call him in my mind. Why Simon never questioned that a flamboyant gay man like Greg would wear simple white briefs, I'll never know.

When Greg started to feel comfortable in their relationship, and was ready to go all the way, he finally got up the nerve to wear his favorite pair of undies—a silky smooth, sheer lace, pink bikini with tiny embroidered roses. He was hoping to please Simon, but when he saw them, Simon became enraged, smacking Greg in the face, calling him sick, and storming out the door.

Now, there's Greg standing at the railing, looking at nothing in particular, lost, forlorn, sad, all the things that I don't want him to be. I love him—as a friend, and maybe even more, though I've never told him. I'm straight, at least I think I am, but when I first saw him in a pair of pretty powder blue panties, I swear my heart skipped a beat, and I think I even drooled a little. My reaction made me question my own sexuality, but I haven't explored anything further

with him. I'm happy that he trusted me enough to reveal his secret to me, but now my heart is broken for him due to Simon's rejection.

Greg is so special, so wonderful, please dear author, give him a love story, even if it can't be with me. He deserves to find happiness with someone who loves him unconditionally and appreciates all the facets of his personality.

Sincerely,

Barb ~rede-2-read~

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: best friends, friends to lovers, slimy ex, first time, fetish/toys, lingerie, phobias, gay for you

Word Count: 20,165

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PINK LACE AND STOLEN HEARTS

By JC Wallace

Chapter One

Damn, the rain was coming down hard. I cursed my lateness as I ran to my truck. The wind drove cold drops into my face and across my arms, stinging my skin like dozens of biting insects. The temperature had barely cleared forty, but that was April in Vermont for you—warm one day, cold the next. Didn't matter. I'd drive through a hurricane to get to my roommate, Greg.

The sky had been ominous for hours, and I'd tried my hardest to leave before the first raindrop hit. Fuck that leaking pipe in 4C. Sure, I was the maintenance guy for the building, but why couldn't that pipe have let loose the next day? Greg needed me—not that he'd called or anything. Thunder and lightning storms always triggered some fear inside of him he'd never deliberately shared with me. Gentle rain soothed Greg, but if a storm raged relentlessly, violently, without a break, Greg would get restless, pace, mumble to himself, and even shake. I knew how to handle those moments, knew how to keep him grounded and in the present. Where he went at those times—when he looked lost and got that far-off, vacant look in his eyes—he'd never tell me. Wherever he went, it scared the crap out of him, and me as well. Simple Simon, his jerky boyfriend, wouldn't be there for him. He was never there when Greg truly needed him. Even though Greg claimed to love him, I was sure the feeling wasn't mutual.

Traffic slowed to a crawl. My chest tightened, and the rapid thumping of the windshield wipers beat steady with my heart. Everything outside of my side windows was blurred and wavy as the water streamed over the glass. Greg had been home from work for hours. He was a paraprofessional at the elementary school, and worked one-on-one with kids with disabilities, his patience and kindness awe-inspiring. By now, I knew he'd have worked himself up, probably even before the storm had begun. He was like a human barometer. He could announce a storm coming hours before it appeared. It was like living with a weatherman.

I pounded my fist against the steering wheel. Traffic inched along the freeway, churning my gut even further. Pulling out my cell phone, I called Greg, hoping he would answer, praying he hadn't hit that scary, hyperventilating stage yet. By that point... well, I just hoped it hadn't reached that point yet.

Two rings... Each second pushed my heart rate. Three rings... Each ring foreboding, telling... Four rings... "Pick up the phone, Greg," I mumbled beneath the sound of the rain pinging against the metal of my truck.

Shit.

"Hey." The cheerful, upbeat voice threw me for a moment, and I almost pulled the phone away to check that I had the correct number. *What the hell?*

"Greg? Are you okay?"

Greg chuckled—actually chuckled—in the middle of a raging storm. "I'm good. Simon's here."

That was the last thing I'd expected to hear. "Simon's there," I repeated, lacking any other words.

Another chuckle and a muffled, "Simon, stop. Give me a minute." A pause, and Greg said, "Yeah, he just got here. And... well, don't rush home." The innuendo in his voice was enough to roil my stomach. Thoughts of Simon making Greg smile and laugh and calming him during the storm stirred up my green-eyed monster. Just another of the many reactions my best friend had instigated over the last few months. Reactions that had totally unsettled me.

"Yeah, I don't think that's going to be an issue. Traffic's backed up on I-89. I think there's an accident up ahead."

"Drive carefully, Law. Please." The concern in Greg's tone was always nice. At least someone gave a crap. Another chuckle and Greg exhaled noisily. "Gotta go, Law. See you later."

I'd barely said "bye" and Greg was gone. Sighing heavily, I chucked the phone onto the seat, blocking out my disappointment that Simon was doing something I'd thought only I could do. I would have been the one making Greg laugh and relax during the storm if I'd been there on time. And didn't that just confuse me more. No. It was good Simon was there for him. Greg wanted Simon, claimed to love his so-called boyfriend, and I wanted Greg to be happy. That was all that mattered, right?

The traffic inched along, and the rain fell harder. The hard knot that had formed under my breastbone all those months ago grew larger, denser, heavier. God, how was I supposed to get rid of it? I needed to distract my mind from what was happening at our apartment. That's when I saw the sign for the next exit. I pulled off the highway and headed to my favorite pub.

The bar was surprisingly full for a Friday afternoon. Everyone had the same idea—beating back the bad weather blues and warming up with some alcohol. Percy's Pub was off the main drag. It was popular with the locals, which meant I knew most of the regulars. Right then, I needed some time to clear my head of the background noise threatening to encroach on my well-ordered life.

Tyson, the regular bartender, greeted me with a wide smile and a Corona already on the bar. He snickered. "Damn, you look like a drowned rat, Lawson. It's pretty nasty out there."

"That it is," I said as I snatched the beer and took a long swig. Ice cold and good. "How's it going with you?"

"Can't complain." Tyson wiped at the bar with a rag, grinning so wide his back teeth showed. "Molly's pregnant."

My eyebrows raised and I extended my hand. "Damn, Tyson. That's great. Wow!" They'd been trying for over three years without success. The stress had been starting to show in their relationship. Their last fight outside the bar had been hard to hear.

Tyson shook my hand. "Been a long road, but it's finally happened. She's due in August."

"Congratulations, man. Tell Molly I said so, too."

"Thanks. You need another?"

I shook my head. "Gotta drive home soon." Pulling out my wallet, I handed him a ten, waving off the change. "Add it to the diaper fund."

"Thanks," Tyson said, and went off to wait on another patron.

I headed to the back of the room and the empty tables, nodding and waving to those I knew along the way, but I didn't stop. The need for solitude filled me until I was sure I'd scream just to be left alone. Probably wasn't the best choice to seek solitude at a busy bar, however there was beer, so that was a plus.

Flopping into a chair, I pushed down on the gnawing in my gut that threatened to burst forth. Greg and Simon. What were they doing at that moment? Why the fuck should I care? I picked at the corner of the label on my beer with my thumbnail. If Greg were there, he'd be prodding me to remove the label whole, in awe when I accomplished the feat. He said it was good luck. Hadn't done me much good over the years.

Damn, I had to stop thinking about Greg. He was home, warm and safe, with Simple Simon to keep him happy, probably fu—

I slammed my beer onto the table with a *thud*. *Cut that shit out!* I focused on the people around the bar. Months had passed since I'd last been there, and the same faces populated the room. Many I'd known since high school and some I'd met in the past few years since I'd started coming back to Percy's. Usually, I went to the bar whenever Simon was at the apartment, unable to stomach his aloof, better-than-everyone attitude. He was the opposite of Greg's warm, caring, altruistic nature. Greg was a dreamer, a believer in happily ever after, and Prince Charming. He was a history major, slowly working on his Master's degree. Name a time period and he could list great lovers of that era. Whenever Greg went off, speaking in-depth of those couples and his thoughts on their love, I could only smile because I could listen to Greg talk for hours. I'd never seen that behavior as odd, but now I questioned every reaction I'd ever had to Greg.

Again, he crowded my mind. I lowered my head and clutched strands of my black hair tightly, wincing at the pain, yet grateful for the distraction. The list of repairs at work, the state of the economy, the downfall of the Steelers, the goddamned weather... Grasping at anything and everything, I tried to get my mind off Greg. Hell, he'd overtaken most of my waking moments and even parts of my dreams for months, ever since I'd seen—

“Lawson? You okay?”

Shit. I released my hair and looked up. This night was getting better by the minute.

Chapter Two

“Stephanie. How’s it going?” This was the last thing I needed.

She shrugged and worried her bottom lip with her teeth. “I’m good. You?”

Fucking dying, ready to crawl out of my skin and bang my head against a wall to get my life back. You? “I’m good. Busy at work.”

She was the reason I hadn’t been to Percy’s in a while. *She* worked here. How could I have forgotten?

“I haven’t seen you around since... you know.”

I closed my eyes and opened them slowly. “About that, I’m...” *I’m sorry I took you home over a month ago and fucked your brains out and never called. Sorry I used you to forget, to prove to myself that what I’d seen hadn’t really affected me as badly as I’d thought it had.* That night with her had been all kinds of fucked up. “...sorry for not calling. I—”

Stephanie raised her hand to stop me and then sat down. Great. She was going to ream me out right there. She gathered her long, silky blonde hair in her hand and flipped it over her shoulder, a move that had mesmerized me before we’d hooked up. She was gorgeous—slim body, nice round breasts—and she wasn’t conceited like most good-looking women. Any guy would be lucky to have her, but I hadn’t been able to think past that Saturday night three months ago and what I’d seen.

Avoiding eye contact, I abandoned all attempts to keep the label on my beer intact and scraped large chunks off with my thumbnail as I waited for her to speak.

“I know this is probably the last thing you want to talk about...”

Got that right, I thought as my gut clenched uncomfortably.

She sighed wearily. “That night when we went to my place... I got the feeling you weren’t really in the room with me. I mean, you were there, but your mind was somewhere else. Maybe with *someone* else?”

I sucked in a breath, the air caught in my throat, and I coughed. Had I been that transparent? Did she know just who I’d been thinking about?

No sense in denying anything. “That was shitty of me, Stephanie. I shouldn’t have gone home with you when I was upset.” And I had been upset.

And scared. And fucking lost... And questioning everything I'd ever known about myself. "Please forgive me," I said and laid my hand on hers. I truly felt like the scum of the earth. The thin line of her lips and furrow of her brow told me I'd hurt her. Yup, I was a dick.

She licked at her red lips. That alone should have made my cock hard, but my usually overactive member remained dormant in my jeans. If I truly wanted to get hard, I only had to think of—

She sighed and feigned a smile. "Actually, I was watching you that night, and knew you were upset about something, but I didn't realize you were upset about *someone* else." She paused and looked away, as if contemplating something, turned back and then pointedly asked, "Someone special?"

Looking down at the table, the need to nod hit me hard. "Yes," I whispered, that knot expanding and making it hard to breathe. I was going to pass out right there, or shatter into hundreds of pieces, too fragmented to repair. How much longer would I be able to hold myself together?

"That's a good thing, right?"

How could it be? But I nodded again. Someone called out Stephanie's name. Across the room, a dark-haired woman waited, a set of keys dangling from her hand. Stephanie stood. "That's my ride. I'm still pissed off, but if you need to talk, I'll listen." The pity and concern in her voice grated on my last nerve, but I tried to smile.

When she'd gone, stale air formed a suffocating sphere around me. The beer hadn't helped, having gone warm long ago. As I looked around at the smiling, carefree, and laughing faces, anger rose from a vile pit in my gut. I was going home. Fuck Simple Simon. If I wanted to check on Greg, then I would.

Any dryness I'd gained in the bar disappeared quickly as I ran through the rain to my truck. Within minutes, I was back on the highway, battling the weather once again to get home. The rain-slicked road and limited visibility kept me at a steady forty miles per hour. Luckily, I only had two exits to go. My phone, which I'd forgotten on the passenger seat, rang, pushing my pulse rate higher, nerves tighter. When Greg's number popped up on the screen in my truck, I sucked in a breath. I pushed the "answer" button on the steering wheel.

"Greg?"

"Law, where are you?" Greg's wavering tone lacked the giddy infectiousness that never failed to warm my heart.

Shit, that wasn't good.

"I stopped somewhere but I'm headed home now. I'm on the highway. Exit 13. The rain's really coming down. What's wrong? Where's Simon?"

Greg's breath hitched and echoed painfully over the phone. That sound raced anger through me, and I knew I'd be having words with Simon for leaving Greg alone.

"Simon... he..." Another painful hitch. "He left. Are you coming right home?"

"What did Simon do?" The words had barely escaped though my clenched teeth.

A tentative silence followed. I pictured Greg sitting in the corner of his room, casting wary glances at the storm through his window, silently reciting one of those damned wishes that he believed in, pleading for the storm to disappear.

"You're late," he finally whispered. Beneath those words was a silent plea for me to come home.

"You said not to rush home because Simon was there and I didn't want to intrude, so I stopped and got a beer." When you *needed* me, I got a fucking beer. Maybe I could distract Greg over the phone. What should have been a fifteen-minute drive from Richmond had passed the twenty-minute mark, and I still hadn't reached my exit.

"I should be there in fifteen minutes. So, today I had to fix a pipe in 4C, you know Mrs. Reynolds and her old, deaf Chihuahua?" Mrs. Reynolds couldn't see well, and her deaf dog couldn't hear, so she was constantly asking me to find him. Usually, he was sleeping right out in the open.

Nothing from Greg. Exaggerated breaths, laced with fear and secret wishes that wouldn't be answered anytime soon, were all I could hear. I clutched the steering wheel, finally edging up to fifty miles per hour in a sixty-five. *Lawson, you screwed this up. Greg needed you and you fucked it up.*

Well, Simon was supposed to be there.

"Did she lose Sweetums again?" Greg whispered.

Talking. Good. And the rain was letting up. I swerved into the left lane, which was clear of cars, and accelerated.

“Well, she had a leaking pipe under her sink. Looks like it’s been leaking for a while. But, while I was there, I did come to the rescue again. Lawson the super Super!”

A slight chuckle from Greg. A sigh released a metric ton of pressure from my chest, pulled my shoulders down from around my ears, and unclenched my jaw. I swore to God, if I didn’t learn to relax, my heart would give out before I hit thirty, only five years away.

Finally, I came to my exit. Our apartment was only two minutes away. “Greg, ask me where Sweetums was.” Again, nothing but jagged breaths. “Come on, play along,” I pleaded, my throat tight with both anxiety and anger. My Sweetums stories had become Greg’s favorites, so things had to be bad if he wasn’t playing along.

Greg cleared his throat. “Where was he this time?” Greg asked, his whisper competing with the pelting rain and squeak of the windshield wipers.

I pulled into the driveway of our apartment house and jumped from the cab, barely shifting into park before I did. The rain pounded against me, and the inky black cloud cover meant the end of the storm was nowhere near. I fumbled with my massive ring of keys. Why I kept my house key on my work ring, I had no clue.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” I said, buying time as I ran up the back steps to our second floor apartment.

More silence and I swore I heard a sob. “Lawson, I don’t know if I can do this anymore.”

Greg definitely wasn’t talking about guessing where the dog was.

“Greg, what happened?”

No reply. No breathing.

“Greg!” My mind reeled, my nervousness edged with a nauseating fear. Getting the door open, I darted to Greg’s room at the back of the apartment. Reaching up, I grabbed the key stashed on top of the molding above the door. I knew the door would be locked to keep out—well, exactly what I wasn’t sure, but if a locked door soothed Greg, so be it. I would put a hundred locks on his door to make him feel safe.

“Coming in,” I warned so he wouldn’t freak-out. I stepped inside of Greg’s cocoon, and quickly closed the door behind me.

Greg wasn't sitting in his usual corner, farthest from the window. Also strange was the darkness in the room. Greg had three lamps placed strategically around the room, including an overhead light he used to negate any shadows. Greg's room was a shadow-free zone. Violent storms and shadows definitely topped Greg's list of things he hated most. All of that only served to escalate my fear that Greg might have hurt himself.

Movement of the heavy, maroon-colored curtains, which covered the doors to the balcony, caught my attention. The sliding door was open and that's when I saw Greg, partially sheltered from the rain and in the midst of the storm. I froze at the sight. Greg had his back to me, hands grasping the black metal railing, arms locked tight as if they were holding him up, head ducked down. He was practically naked except for a pair of sheer, black boy shorts. Disappearing between the round cheeks of his ass, the pink string of a thong. The sight slammed into me like a semi, hurtling me back in time to that night three months ago, the sight of Greg forever burned into my memory.

Chapter Three

Three months ago...

Greg had been acting strange for weeks—distracted and agitated, morose and quiet. No matter what I'd tried, that funk continued, until I'd been ready to rip out my hair. Finally, on a Saturday night, I convinced him to have a movie marathon, filled with some of his favorite movies. We were starting with *Cleopatra*, a movie that never failed to garner Greg's full attention. He'd sigh and *aww* over the love affair between Cleopatra and Antony. During each viewing, he never failed to note some historically inaccurate fact, such as the erroneous appearance of the Arch of Constantine, which hadn't been built until three and a half centuries after Cleopatra's visit to Rome. Or the appearance of philodendrons, which were a South American plant and unknown in Rome during that period. Over time, I'd come to look forward to his facts as much as watching the movies themselves.

Halfway through the movie, not a single fact had poured forth from Greg. Several times I'd caught him staring off into nothing, his eyes not even on the TV, and I was past worried. For me, asking someone what's wrong happened about as much as my getting a raise (next to never), but Greg's unease was cause for concern. Reaching for the remote, I hit pause. Thirty seconds passed before Greg noticed the movie was stuck on a single frame.

"What're you doing?" He glanced at me, and then to the screen and back again. That's when I got a good look at him and noticed the dark circles under his eyes, the deep lines around his mouth, and the sallow shade of his skin. My heart lurched with the thought that he'd been sick and I'd missed it.

"You can't sit still. You look exhausted, as if you're not sleeping. You're pale. Something's wrong, Greg."

He eyed me, a momentary defiance hardening his face, and then he looked away again. "I'm okay."

Greg and I had been roommates for over six years, since we were freshmen at Champlain Valley Community College. I'd made it through one year of classes before deciding that college wasn't for me. But since then, we'd remained roommates and best friends. I knew Greg better than I knew anyone else in my life. I knew when something wasn't right. I knew when he was hurting, and he was hurting now.

“We both know that’s not true,” I stated emphatically.

The rigid line of his shoulders sagged as he continued to avoid eye contact.

“Greg,” I said softly. Maybe he was having issues with the jerk. “Is it Simp—” I cut off the word as he turned glaring eyes on me. He hated when I called his boyfriend Simple Simon. “Simon, I mean.”

He chewed on his bottom lip. “Do you have any secrets, Law?”

“Secrets?”

Greg raked his fingers through the dark waves on top of his head. His leg bounced in a nervous, jerky manner. Just what was he getting at?

“Like a secret no one would understand, even though it makes you feel good, makes you happy?”

Thousands of possibilities ran through my mind. If Greg weren’t an out-and-proud gay man, I’d assume he was talking about liking guys.

“I don’t think so,” I said, unable to focus on figuring out if I actually had any secrets. Besides, I was pretty much an open book, mostly a “what you see is what you get” person—well, except for emotions. I rarely went around showing those off.

Greg nodded. He rubbed his palms together, every muscle in his lanky frame wound so tight I was sure he’d shoot off into the atmosphere at any moment.

“You have a secret?” What could I possibly not know about Greg? Except for the reason why he hated storms, which I knew went back to his childhood. Something bad must have happened to him during a storm. Maybe that was what he was referring to? However, that memory never made him feel good, and clearly distressed him to the point of panic.

I clenched my hands into fists, prepared to hear some morbid tale. Whatever Greg imparted, I only hoped I could handle hearing how someone had hurt my sweet friend and refrain from seeking retribution of my own. Anger was the one emotion I showed easily, especially if it was for a good reason.

“Yes,” he finally whispered. “It isn’t horrible, and it doesn’t hurt anyone, but people won’t understand. I learned that when—” He squeezed his eyes tight and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. But I think you should know about this. And if you want me to move out, don’t want to speak to me again, I’d understand.”

I frowned. “Greg, what’re you talking about? I don’t want you to move, and I’d never stop being your friend. I mean, unless you ate my last Swiss Roll—then all bets are off.” A tight chuckle emerged from me as I tried to shed humor on the tense conversation.

A tired smile tugged at the corners of Greg’s lips, but faded fast. “Don’t say that until you know. But, when I tell you, just say it’s over and walk away. Don’t tell me I’m wrong or...” He swallowed hard. “Or sick or anything. Okay?”

“I wouldn’t—”

“Law, please, just promise me.” The pain in his brown eyes reached depths I’d never seen before. The crushing pressure in my chest felt as if a building had fallen on me. I could only nod when what I really wanted to do was wrap him up tight.

He stood, his motion so tentative I thought he might sit back down, but he managed to stand and walk a few feet from the couch. Emotions I kept deep down in the pit of my stomach expanded and churned, seeking release, and I clenched my jaw. What the heck was so awful that knowledge of it would send me out of his life forever?

His back to me, I saw his muscles quaking. *Please, don’t be crying.* I didn’t do well with tears. When they occurred in others, I did my best to handle them, but really, I had no idea how to react. I hadn’t cried since I was a teenager.

Greg turned, and I was relieved to see his eyes were dry. That relief was short-lived, as again, his defeated expression struck me hard, defeat like that of a man heading to the gallows. I tried to relax my body, appear nonchalant, accepting, open to anything. Maybe it would help. Maybe not. “Just tell me,” I encouraged. “We’re friends.”

He nodded. “I think I should show you instead of tell you. Or maybe just tell, or...”

I sat forward, casually resting my elbows on my knees. “Whatever is easier for you.”

When Greg reached for the button on his jeans, a spasm tightened my gut. As he flicked the button open and lowered his zipper, my eyes widened and he paused, but his resolve returned. He peeled back the flaps of his pants, and in one motion, the blue denim was around his knees. I blinked once, and then

again, my gaze stuck to his groin, a place my eyes had never given but a passing glance on another man. Blue and pink lace? No. The color was powder blue, I knew this because my sister's bridesmaids' dresses had been powder blue. That fact had been driven home whenever one of us men had called them blue and... *So not the point right now.*

Greg wore women's underwear... panties... and I struggled to merge that image with the heavy bulge in the front where his cock and balls rested. On a woman, that area would be smooth. But on Greg... The sight of those panties, those powder blue, silk panties with the pink lace at the top, dried every bit of saliva in my mouth. I tried to swallow, tried to form a coherent sentence, tried to understand why pleasure warmed my groin, tried to pull my gaze from the sight of Greg in women's underwear.

I coughed, forcing my throat to relax. "I... um... you... Are you a cross-dresser?" It was the only term I knew, being uneducated past someone being gay. The deepening distress on Greg's face told me I'd gotten it wrong.

"I don't consider myself a cross-dresser. I like to wear this kind of underwear. I like how it feels. I've worn some other stuff, like stockings and a corset, but I don't want to dress like a woman. I also don't want to be a woman, so I'm not transgender. I think they're pretty, and I like them." A red flush filled his face, and it was the most endearing thing I'd ever seen. The image of Greg in stockings and a garter belt caused me to feel things I'd never felt for a man before. "You don't think I'm gross?"

Gross was the furthest thing from my mind. A hard knot, like a fist, shoved up under my ribcage, and I tore my gaze from his groin in hopes my own would stop reacting to the silk and lace and fucking pink.

The past twenty-five years of my life had sailed along on the status quo, been on course and avoided speed bumps and potholes, been the life of a normal, heterosexual male. I'd veered off that well-known road and sailed straight into the abyss.

Chapter Four

Present...

My gaze was plastered to that black, sheer fabric encasing a perfectly round ass. This was so unfair. I'd struggled for months, wishing away those thoughts and feelings, trying to ignore how my body reacted to memories of Greg in those fucking panties, yet here he was sporting another pair—another dick-hardening pair. My hands itched to touch that sheer material, longed to run them over his warm skin, and that wasn't right. I didn't think being gay was wrong. To me, love was love, but I wasn't gay. I just wasn't.

Suddenly, Greg turned, as if sensing I was there, and I caught a glimpse of the pink pouch of the thong cradling his cock. The only thing that came to mind seeing his hard, lean body was beautiful. I thought a man was *beautiful*. No, I thought *Greg* was beautiful.

When I caught sight of Greg's face, tears readily rolling down his cheeks, mixing with the drops of rain on his skin, all thoughts of that sheer underwear fled. A red mark covered his cheek, bright and highly visible despite the hazy, grey light of the room. Instead of feeling discomfort over seeing those tears, I felt enraged.

"What the fuck?" I growled and rushed to him, unable to avoid scowling. As I neared, he ducked his head, his shoulders shaking, the muscles of his stomach contracting with each jagged inhale and exhale.

Putting my hand under his chin, I gently raised his head. His eyes, desperate for something—I wasn't sure exactly what—searched my face. My focus was on the red mark on his cheekbone, and it took every ounce of willpower I had not to hunt Simon down.

"What happened?" I asked, although I had a pretty good idea, with Simon missing.

With those words, he crumbled before me with sobbing gasps, his anguish so palpable I felt it in my very cells. He looked so lost, arms wrapped tight around his chest, trembling. I was sure that his shivering wasn't entirely caused by the cold water on his naked torso. He was about to fragment.

"Hey," I whispered and wrapped my forearm around the back of his neck, pulling him to my chest. "It's gonna be okay." Hell if I knew that was true, but I'd work hard to make it happen.

He shook his head, past the ability to verbalize his disagreement. He wrapped his arms in tight bands around my back, his warmth seeping through my wet clothing. My pants were soaked and the cold fabric tightened with each passing minute. I forced myself to focus on my anger for Simon, for daring to lay a hand on what was mine.

Mine? Fuck me. Every muscle in my body stiffened at once, and Greg noticed my reaction.

“I’m sorry,” he sobbed, pulling back and swiping at his eyes. “I can’t stop crying. I’m such a baby.”

I shook my head vehemently and noticed his shivering had increased. Going to the dresser, I pulled out a pair of sweats and a fluffy sweater. When I returned to Greg, he shook uncontrollably. “What were you doing out there? It’s freezing.” I helped him into the sweater, and when I tried to help with the sweats, he took them from my hand.

“I’m going to wash my face,” he muttered, and raced to his bathroom.

I sighed, shut the sliding door and locked it. A chill raced through me, and I knew I had to get out of my wet clothes. A warm shower would have been my choice, but I needed to find out what had happened between the time I’d talked with Greg earlier and Simon leaving.

Fucking Simon.

At the bathroom door, I heard the water running. Knocking, I said, “I’m going to change my clothes. I’ll be right back.”

A muffled “okay” was all I got in return. I changed in record time, as fast as I could peel off the wet denim. I stopped in the kitchen, prepping an ice pack for Greg’s face. My anger built again, growing, blackening my insides. The howling wind slammed drops of rain against the windows with renewed vigor. Lost in my thoughts, I realized I’d been gone longer than I’d wanted to be, and within that time, Greg could have reverted to his normal storm reaction. Shit.

In his room, I found Greg sitting in that corner farthest from the window, knees drawn to his chest. I struggled to keep my concern, my worry, from my face. I gave him a gentle smile, my expression the polar opposite of the lump of dread taking residence in my chest. Greg surveyed me for a minute as he usually did whenever he’d been alone and scared during a storm. Without any distractions, Greg would go to a far-off place in his mind, possibly back to an awful moment in the past, which he’d never told me about. When he looked me

over with that critical eye, I assumed he was assessing if I was really there or not. That thought went far to freak me out. But then again, Greg wouldn't talk about it with me, so I wasn't sure if any of what I'd assumed was true.

Greg was silent. I could only wait, hoping he'd give me my due, and decide I was there in the flesh. His eyes widened slightly, and I swore the brown lightened.

“Did you find Sweetums on the brown pillow on the couch?”

For a moment, the statement confused me, and then I rolled my eyes. “Shit, I lost again.”

As I approached him, Greg said, “Get the pink blanket off my bed. The fuzzy one. It's warm.”

Complying with his request, I handed him both the blanket and the ice pack. I was about to sit when I realized in my haste to change, I hadn't taken off my wet socks. After I peeled them off, I took them into his bathroom and draped them over the side of the tub. Something pink in the trash caught my eye. I reached in and pulled out the balled up fabric of Greg's pink and black underwear. Just holding the fabric heated my skin and, instinctively, I placed the panties against my nose and inhaled deeply. The manly musk of Greg added to my visceral reaction. My eyes widened, when I realized what I was doing. I dropped the underwear onto the counter, but before exiting the bathroom, I hesitated. Without further thought, I grabbed the pink panties and stuffed them into the pocket of my sweatpants.

Greg huddled in the corner, covered by his pink, fuzzy blanket, holding the ice pack to his cheek. I longed to climb under the blanket and snuggle as we often did during a storm. Instead, I sat cross-legged before him on the floor. He frowned at the unexpected action. For some reason, I thought sitting close to him was a bad idea. Before he could say anything, I asked, “Did Simon hit you?”

He choked out a gasp and lowered his eyes. A slight nod confirmed what I'd already known. I also knew the why, too. Oh, the man was so dead. He'd never get within a hundred feet of Greg again.

“He had no right to touch you, and when I get my hands on—”

Greg reached out and grabbed hold of my wrist, eyes wide, cutting off my words. “No. No, you can't... He didn't mean it. I was wrong. I shouldn't have just sprung this on him. It's my fault.”

I couldn't stop the growl that escaped my throat. "It's not your fault, Greg. He had no right to touch you!"

Greg shrank back at the force in my voice. I rubbed at the back of my neck. Greg was too sweet, too nice, and Simon didn't deserve to be anywhere near someone so pure.

I lowered my voice. "I'm sorry. It's just... he had no right to hit you. You didn't do anything wrong."

I pleaded with my eyes for him to hear me, to believe me, but he shook his head.

"I just love him." He shuddered.

Those whispered words stabbed repeatedly into my chest, mortal wounds to my soul. I wanted to deny that Simon had an ounce of love inside him for Greg, insist that he was using Greg for sex, until Greg spoke, again.

"It was... this was going to be our first time—*my first time*." Another choked gasp. "I wanted it to be special."

First time? I'd known Greg was a virgin before Simon, but in the five months they'd been together, they'd never had sex? Simple Simon didn't seem like the kind of man to wait five months. Maybe he really did love Greg. But... *no*. You don't strike people you love.

Greg's tears fell again, and I grasped his hand. He held on and my anger relented.

"Tell me what happened."

He shook his head. "Doesn't matter," he whispered. "He thinks I'm sick."

"You're not sick. There's nothing wrong with you. He's the one who's wrong." Greg wearing those panties was hotter than hell to me, but I couldn't speak the words out loud. For fuck's sake, I was straight.

The deep pain in his eyes, marring his face, was endless, and nothing I said could compete. Not now. Maybe in a week he'd hear me, but not now.

"Just remember, I think you're perfect."

Brown eyes met mine, and for a moment, the pain ebbed, mixing with confusion and hope, and then it was gone.

“Not perfect enough for you,” he muttered, and instinctively I asked what he’d said, even though I thought I’d heard every word. “Not perfect enough for him,” he said louder.

Had I misheard the first time?

“He doesn’t deserve you,” I said, and squeezed his hand.

Greg rested his head against the wall. If pain had a name, right then, it would have been Greg Holden. He was swimming in it, trying to keep his head above the murky blackness, fighting to stay afloat. I would buoy him. I would be there, and we would get through this together.

Chapter Five

It was Saturday, and Greg didn't work on Saturdays, but I did. After what had happened the night before, I really wanted to stay home with him, but with a repair list a mile long at work, that was impossible. Before I left, though, I made sure his phone was charged, and that it sat close by, along with the house phone. When I started listing ten different ways that he could reach me, Greg smirked and told me not to drag my ass or I'd be late.

I downed coffee on my way to work, and once there, I kept the pot going. Sleep had been fleeting the night before, as I'd listened for Greg, telling myself that I was only doing so in case he needed something. Guiltily, though, I'd stayed in my room, as Greg had wept, out of fear I'd do or say something wrong. Well, not wrong as much as inappropriate. My thoughts had surpassed appropriate and were into downright pornographic visions of him in those panties. Worse yet, I'd added in a corset and nylons. The thoughts had caused a vicious stomachache and my head hurt and, truthfully, I would have been in the right to call off of work. However, keeping a safe distance from the vulnerable Greg was a smart idea. *Yeah, smart for me.*

Work wasn't much of a distraction, though. I took the time to text Greg often. If he didn't reply, I called. He caught on quickly and answered my texts, probably sick of the incessant ringing of his phone. The fear he'd hurt himself had bored into my brain, even though he'd assured me over and over he wouldn't do anything so rash. He was going to be okay, his reason being that once Simon thought about what he'd done, he would call and apologize for hitting him. To me, there was no fucking apology in the world to make up for striking someone like Greg.

As I replaced a faulty electrical socket in one of the empty top floor apartments, I sat back and rubbed at my forehead, willing the headache to subside. Impossible. Greg had told me he was going to change who he was for Simon, stop wearing the panties, deny what made him happy to get back that bastard he claimed to love. That wasn't love. Love wasn't about changing who you were. Love was about acceptance, flaws and all. Sure, love might make someone want to be a better person, but not a *different* person. I'd never ask Greg to change who he was, and when I'd told him so, he'd smiled gently, cupping my cheek. The summersault flip my stomach had accomplished with

that one touch had been unprecedented, and I'd pulled away. At that point, Greg informed me about his need to be loved, to be in a relationship with someone, to find his Prince Charming. Grinding my teeth, I'd wanted to say fuck Prince Charming and his square jaw and impeccable hair and fancy clothes and fucking white horse. No one was perfect, no one was everything someone needed, but Simon wasn't even close. He didn't know Greg as I did, he couldn't love him like—

That was the thought that had knocked me on my ass and sent me back to Percy's after work, another Corona in my hand. The sky was clear, sun shining, and I was hiding from Greg, like a slimy coward. Tucked behind the same table I'd sat at yesterday, I downed beer after beer, lost in thoughts of pink lace and silk, a gorgeous, wide smile and foreign ground. No map, the language unknown to me, and me just wanting to go back home to what was familiar.

My phone rang. I fumbled to pull it from my jacket pocket. I was slightly buzzed.

Greg.

"Hey," I said, raising my tone a few octaves to sound upbeat.

"Law, you done at work?" Greg sounded better than when I'd spoken with him earlier. For a moment, I contemplated lying and saying no, but I'd never been good at even half-truths.

"Yeah. I stopped at Percy's. I... um... wanted to congratulate Tyson on Molly finally getting pregnant." The lie surprised me. Go figure.

"Oh my, God! That's wonderful! I have to come and congratulate him myself. Stay there. See you in twenty minutes."

I pulled the phone from my ear and stared at the screen. Greg was coming to Percy's. He'd been there plenty of times, most of those times with me, but tonight, so soon after asshole Simon dumped him?

Shoving the phone into my pocket, I wandered back to the bar for another beer. Maybe it was a good thing Greg was coming since I was going to need a ride home. A local band was setting up on the stage. Stephanie was behind the bar with Tyson, prepping for the Saturday night crowd, which would easily swell past a hundred with a band playing. I'd be gone by then, luckily.

"Lawson, back so soon?" Stephanie asked. Her harsh tone told me that her seeming forgiveness from the other day was about to be retracted. Maybe, once she'd had time to think about everything, she'd gotten pissed again.

I nodded and placed the empty on the bar. “Just waiting for Greg. Can I get another one... Please?”

She swiped the bottle away. “Greg hasn’t been here much since he started dating Simon. Can’t wait to see him.” Her grin was wide and genuine.

I wished I felt as confident about seeing Greg. A hard pit of nerves irritated my stomach while I waited. A shrill shout startled me. Greg lay across the top of the bar, arms clutching a red-faced Tyson in a bear hug. When Greg finally pulled away, I was taken aback by Greg’s beaming smile, twinkling eyes, and damn, he’d worn those skintight jeans. I had to suck down a long swig of beer as visions of what he could possibly be wearing beneath them hit me. No. Greg had said no more panties. He was going back to the tights-whities he’d worn previously when he’d feared either Simon or I would find out his secret. Clenching the neck of the bottle tightly in my fist, I imagined it was Simon’s neck. That brought me some self-satisfaction and a grin to my face.

A hand rested on my shoulder, the fingers massaging my muscles. Greg gazed fondly down at me then narrowed his eyes. “How long have you been here?”

I cleared my throat. “Not long.”

Stephanie appeared before us and set a Heineken down for Greg. “About four beers ago,” she said with a wicked grin and walked away.

I’d be paying until the end of time for using her, which was only fair. Maybe I could repair something at her place as penance.

Greg continued to watch me, and I squirmed on the stool, wishing for a black hole to engulf me. What was Greg thinking? Damn, I hope he didn’t think I was avoiding him—even though I was.

“How’re you doing?” I asked, trying to point the spotlight on him.

He sighed heavily and sat next to me. He’d showered recently, his coconut bodywash tickling my nose. Whenever he showered, I always made up reasons to get closer to him, loving that just-showered smell. Clean and innocent, pure. Shit, Greg was purer than I’d thought after he’d admitted he was still a virgin. Of course, he’d saved himself for that one special person. It was so Greg to do just that.

Stop it. You’re not gay.

The smile Greg had worn minutes before fled. "I don't know. I'm not okay, but... I think this will work out. I'm thinking Simon feels bad about what he did and he's afraid to call me."

I suppressed my snort. Wishful thinking was more like it. "Did you call him?"

Greg pushed his beer around on the wood surface of the bar, the sweat from the bottle leaving wet trails. "I tried earlier, but I got his voicemail. I left a message. I told him—"

The door opened, and the loud chatter of voices cut off what Greg said. Suddenly, he squealed—actually squealed—and darted off to the group. Immediately, I recognized Christy Jacobs, who Greg had pulled into a hug. Stan Wilton, her boyfriend, stood behind her, peeling off his jacket. They had another couple with them I didn't recognize. Greg and I had gone to college with Christy and Stan, but I hadn't seen them in over a year. Greg dragged them both to me, and after quick hugs and admonishments for not keeping in touch, we all sat at a table. The other couple, Tasha and Niles, was visiting from out of town.

I settled into a good conversation with Niles about new construction versus old, since he was a general contractor. Despite the distraction, my eyes were glued to Greg, watching for any signs of distress, any inkling he was overwhelmed or needed me. The band had begun playing, and I couldn't hear what Greg and Christy were saying. Once, Greg's lip quivered, and I thought he said something about a fight and that everything would work out. I was sure he'd modified the truth about what had happened with Simon.

Stephanie stepped up to the table, bumping my arm with her hip. She pointed to the empty bottle I clenched tightly, my knuckles white.

"You done with that?" she asked wryly.

I frowned and handed her the bottle. She started to gather the empties, and there were a lot of them, so I rose and grabbed an armful, too, as part of my atonement. Carefully, I deposited the bottles onto the bar, waiting for Stephanie or Tyson so I could order another round. My gaze wandered back to Greg, who laughed out loud at something Tasha had said. I couldn't help but smile, grateful he had the distraction tonight, and equally grateful that I didn't have to try and cheer him up alone in a darkened apartment.

"Oh, shit."

When I turned back to the bar, Stephanie had her hand over her mouth, eyes wide.

I actually looked down at myself, expecting to find a big bug crawling on me. When I frowned at her, she finally dropped her hand.

“What?” I snapped, not bothering to hide my irritation at possibly having screwed up again. Stephanie gazed over to where Greg sat and then back at me. I instantly hated the knowing look in her eyes.

“It’s Greg, isn’t it?”

My brow furrowed further. “It’s Greg, what?”

Stephanie’s features softened, reminding me of my older sister, Ann, who still gave me that caring, motherly look. “It’s okay. But I have to say, it hadn’t even crossed my mind.”

Truthfully, she’d lost me. “What never crossed your mind?” Her vagueness was beyond annoying. Besides, I’d been irritated when I’d walked into the place, and the beer hadn’t even touched it.

“Does he know?” Damn, she was bold.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I braced my hands on the bar, the noise of the music and voices suffocating me as I waited for her answer.

Seconds ticked by, as she seemed to contemplate her words. She leaned forward, a challenge sparking in her narrowed, blue eyes. “Does Greg know you love him?”

Chapter Six

Does Greg know you love him?

That statement circled around my head like a dog chasing its tail, a dizzying motion, helped along by the half-dozen beers I'd imbibed. The song ended, but the sweet sound of Greg's laughter was clearly audible, a laugh I would crawl on my knees through glass to hear. Of course, I loved Greg. We were best friends.

"He's my best friend," I muttered and wanted to expand on that, but instead said, "I'm not gay."

Her look of pity and the sound of Greg's voice crawled under my skin, and I needed air. Rushing away from the bar, I slammed past bodies, needing to escape, needing to breathe, just breathe as I'd done for the past twenty-five years.

Twenty-five years of breathing as a heterosexual male.

Busting through a side door, I forced the cold night air into my lungs. The sharp burn of the cold cleared my head momentarily, enough to realize everything in my life was in flux—a tilting, twirling ride that had started the night I'd seen those damn panties.

A fetish. It had to be a fetish. *Sure, Lawson, lie to yourself some more.* After that night, I'd gone online more than once, seeking out gay porn featuring men in panties, and one thing had been clear. While I'd popped a boner, I hadn't obsessed about those men, hadn't lain awake at night thinking about every part of them. Not how their full, pink lips would feel, how their smooth skin would taste, how it would feel to glide fingertips over their hard pecs and tight abs, how it would feel to push into tight, hot heat. No, those men were nothing compared to Greg.

Oh God, I couldn't handle this anymore. I was ten seconds away from disintegrating into atoms and floating away if I didn't do something. That knot pushed farther into my chest and expanded into my gut and throat, taking over who I was. Chaotic, confusing thoughts bounced against my skull, crashing into one another until they were a tangled mass equaling that in my chest.

Short, heaving breaths, and I couldn't find air or apparently hear anything either because suddenly someone was rubbing soothing circles on my back. I jumped up and there was Christy, her eyes wide.

“Lawson, chill. You’re hyperventilating.” Her steady, monotone voice calmed me as I struggled to regain control. “What’s wrong?”

A half-deranged chuckle exploded from my throat and I almost slapped my hand over my mouth. “What’s wrong? I’m losing my fucking mind, that’s what’s wrong.”

I paced and pulled at my hair, yanking on my collar to give the lump more room. “I’m not gay” raced with my thoughts, although right alongside—giving them a run for their money—were intense doubts about that single truth. All the while, Christy watched and waited. She’d always been such a pain, trying to get me to open up and talk about my feelings. I sneered at her.

“When you’re done with the self-flagellation, could you clue me in as to what this hissy fit is all about?”

Hissy fit? This was a nuclear blast, an atomic bomb of epic proportions, an asteroid ready to plunge the world into darkness and death and—

“Lawson, just stop!” Christy commanded.

My body stilled, which surprised me as much as it seemed to surprise her. “You’re ready to implode. Just talk to me.”

Shaking my head, I tried to move away from her, but her bony fingers grabbed my bicep, digging in tight. The momentary flash of pain was like a wake-up call for my brain.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Christy,” I spat with more force than necessary. She’d only ever been my friend, and I was taking my anger at myself out on her, but at that moment, it was all I had.

“Tough shit. From the moment we sat down at the table, I could feel the tension wafting off you. If you clench your jaw any tighter, you’ll break a tooth. Stan noticed it, too. Please,” she pleaded. Her green eyes were dark in the dim light, but the worry in them shone bright.

“I don’t... I don’t know. What do you want from me?” How could I even begin to tell her what was wrong when I had no idea myself? *Another lie, Lawson. You’re lusting after your roommate. Your male roommate, your best friend.* Shaking my head didn’t rid me of those thoughts, and involuntarily I muttered, “Greg.”

A deep, heavy sigh escaped from her lips. “I always wondered what would happen when you finally accepted the truth.” She crossed her arms. “I was right. Total and complete meltdown.”

My head snapped up. “What?”

She smirked. “We all knew, Lawson. Me, Stan, half the people who ever hung out with you and Greg. We all knew he was special to you. Shit, the way you treated him, looked at him, like he’d hung the moon and stars just for you.”

A sharp pain hit me between the eyes, as if an ice pick had been shoved into my brain, and my hand searched out the wall. Leaning back, I steadied my shaking legs.

We all knew.

“Knew what?” I gasped out, those thoughts back, pinging around my head like an evil pinball game—lights flashing, bells ringing, whistles, and tilts. Yeah, I’d tilted all right.

“That you are in love with him, stupid.”

“B-but... I’m not gay,” I whispered almost to myself.

“Does it matter whether you are or not? You love Greg. *Love* him. You can lie to me all you want, but you’re really only lying to yourself.” The smugness in her tone, the self-righteousness, rubbed my fur the wrong way. She’d always been a know-it-all, a know-it-all who’d always spoken the truth to me, challenged my misconceptions, forced me to deal with shit. Damn, I’d missed her.

“I can’t be gay.” The words slipped out before I could stop them.

She huffed. “Is that what your problem is? I never took you for a homophobe, Lawson.”

“What? No! You know I don’t care about that!” I’d marched in Gay Pride parades with Greg, had attended rallies in other states with him to help legalize gay marriage, and fought alongside him for LGBT rights. I’d done it all for Greg.

“Oh, so it’s okay for other people, but not you?” The anger in her tone bordered on beat-the-crap-out-of-me pissed.

“I don’t know how!” I shouted. “I don’t know how to be gay, all right? All proud and out and shit.”

Hands on my hips, I stared down, seeing the past six years of my life. Six years of lies.

A suppressed snort and I saw Christy bite her lip, a smile forcing its way out. She raised her hands and then the laughter rolled from her. Hearty and loud, she was laughing at me.

I crossed my arms over my chest, glad she found my mental breakdown so amusing.

“I-I’m s-sorry... you... you...”

I pursed my lips and might have found her laughter infectious, but I’d just come to the realization that possibly I was gay... If not outright, then for Greg? Was that even possible? Maybe I was bi? I so didn’t do well with labels.

I waited her out, because while laughing, she was unable to ask me questions about my feelings and crap. Although, this was the least unsettled I’d felt in months. I was no longer dangling over the precipice of some deep, black hole. Now I was just close to the edge, which was crumbling slowly.

Christy gathered herself and swiped at the sparkling tears in her eyes. A final amused sigh and she said, “I love you, Lawson, but sometimes you can be such a guy.”

What the hell did that mean? I was about to ask when she stepped toward me, her hand resting on my forearm. “There’s no way to be gay. It’s no different than loving a woman.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Okay, yes, the sex part can be different, but anal with a guy isn’t much different than anal with a woman.” Seeing the shock on my face, she sniggered. “Yes, I said ‘anal’ and, yes, I’ve done it plenty of times.”

I groaned. “I so don’t want to hear this.” Now I was going to have to scrub my mind clean.

“Does having sex with Greg gross you out?”

Thoughts of Greg stretched out on my bed, naked, hard, in those damned panties, and I immediately had a stiffy. Visions of leaning over him, watching his bliss-filled face as I fucked him... No way was I grossed out.

“It’s dark out here, but I can practically hear you blushing. And you know, not all gay guys have anal sex. Sex is more than penetration.”

“What’s with the Sex 101?” And how could I get it to stop?

She squeezed my arm. “I just don’t want something else to get in the way of you or Greg finding happiness, and you Lawson, make him happy. He watches you, and every time I speak to him it’s Lawson this and Lawson that, and it’s the sappiest shit I’ve ever heard and seen. Enough to give me cavities.”

“Greg talks about me?”

She barked out a laugh. “To anyone who’ll listen, sweets.”

“No. He loves Simon. He said so.”

She furrowed her brow. “Greg needs someone to love, someone to love him, and Simon is there because Greg doesn’t think you ever will be.”

Why didn’t she just rip my heart out with her bare hands? It would have hurt less.

I’d pushed Greg to that fuckhead Simple Simon because my own head had been stuck up my ass.

“Ahh, shit, Christy.”

She nodded. “The plight of the ignorant.” She raised her arm, looking at a nonexistent watch. “And it only took you six years to realize it. Must be a record for a Neanderthal like you.” The words would have been harsh, if her tone hadn’t been so caring. “And look, you’re still breathing. My work here is done.” She rubbed her hands together as if she’d just completed a messy job. Too bad my work was just beginning.

Chapter Seven

The time had come for action. Too bad I had no clue what that entailed. Since that night at the bar, Greg had been more upbeat, yet I still heard him up the next couple of nights. When he didn't think I was looking, he'd let his defenses fall, and that sad, mournful look that twisted deep in my gut reappeared in his eyes. He was trying so hard for me, trying not to be sad and mopey, and that wasn't okay. That's when I started to plan. I'd nixed coming right out and telling Greg I had feelings for him, that those panties had pushed me to realize I'd loved him for years. Also, I had definitely decided that I wasn't even going to think about coming out gay to anyone else besides Greg. That was an entirely different set of fears, which would most likely lead to more meltdowns. One heart-stopping hurdle at a time.

Terrified wasn't the word for admitting I wanted to be with another man. Yet, I had a bigger fear. What if Greg didn't take me seriously? What if he thought I was doing this because of what Simon had done to him? I hadn't brought up Simon all weekend and neither had Greg. Even if I thought Simon was a douche bag, Greg still loved him, or thought he had to because I was never going to love him. He was wrong about that.

My brilliant plan was to court Greg on the sly. Yes, court him. Take him out, have fun, show him I cared for him as more than a friend. In essence, date him without telling him. When I'd informed Christy of my idea, she balked, wanting me to tell Greg the truth. She had a bad feeling about my plan. I had a bad feeling about all of it, but I kept that to myself. I could mess up anything with a little effort.

Monday night, Greg went to a study group thing for one of his master's classes. He'd slowed down his studies, choosing to work so he could pay for his classes and not rack up a ton of student loans. His family had never been supportive of his dreams to get a degree in history, but they wholeheartedly accepted him being gay. I'd always thought their disappointment over his degree choice and not his sexual orientation had been odd.

Taking advantage of Greg's absence, I combed the internet for anything romantic to do in Burlington. Shouldn't be too hard to do, right? My hands froze on the keys. I was planning an actual date with Greg. The gradual unfurling of that knot in my chest was amazing as I thought about an actual

future with Greg. Was it possible to be happy and out and gay? I didn't know, but I was going to find out.

"We're going where?" The bottle of water Greg had been lifting to his mouth froze halfway to his lips. His brow furrowed and he eyed me with something akin to suspicion.

I cleared my throat, my stomach once again performing acrobatics. I pushed the paprika chicken Greg had made for dinner around my plate. I couldn't even look him in the eye. *Don't blow this.* "Someone at work mentioned the Essex Theatre was showing *The English Patient* Friday night. I thought we could, you know, go... and then maybe have dinner on Church Street. Something to do."

He continued to eye me with disbelief, lowering the bottle to the table. Now I knew what they meant about being in the hot seat. Silence prevailed, and I could only wait. Greg's lips pulled into a thin line. "I don't need you to feel sorry for me."

My frown was immediate. "I'm not feeling sorry for you."

"Then I don't need you to entertain me. Don't think I haven't noticed you trying to distract me every chance you get." His tone edged on annoyance, and doubts that I was doing the right thing slammed into me.

I picked up my plate and turned to the sink, hiding my disappointment. "I just thought you would want to see the movie. It's one of your top ten favorites, and instead of watching it on a small TV screen, I thought you'd want to see it in a theater. Sorry if you think I'm crowding you."

I dropped the plate into the sink with a clatter and went to leave when Greg blocked my exit.

"Wait," he said. The weary sigh escaping from him went a long way to diminishing my anger. "I'm sorry. You've been great this week, and I don't know how I would have gotten through it without you. I'm so touchy and I hate it. I hate all of this."

I knew how much he hated that he hadn't heard from Simon. Unfortunately, he still held out hope that Simon felt bad and was afraid to call him. Who was I to break his heart further with what I thought of Simon's silence?

I yearned to hold Greg, pull him in tight, and say everything I needed to say, but that knot in my chest was still a tangled mess. Until I could pick apart the pieces and unravel my thoughts and feelings, nothing would come out right.

“I know you do,” I whispered.

He wrapped his arms tight around his stomach as he always did when he felt vulnerable. “You know what I wish?” he asked, looking away from me.

Oh, God, the wishes. When he was happy, they were filled with hope and optimism and joy. When he was sad, they were pitiful pleas for the world to stop beating him up.

I touched his arm. “What?”

He hesitated before answering and closed his eyes. The hum of the fridge and sound of the traffic outside filled the gaping quiet.

When he opened his eyes, he said, “I wish it would all stop hurting so much.” With that, he turned, leaving me too speechless to reply. When I heard his door click closed and the snick of the lock, I felt as if he was closing me out with the rest of the world.

Greg and I made it through the rest of the week without incident. So far, I'd dragged Greg to the park to throw the Frisbee, to the river to hike, and to the rec park to shoot hoops. Each time, he went graciously after I'd taken the time to nag, and cajole and, yes, sometimes, trick him. But once we were out of the apartment, he'd opened up, actually laughed, and, for the most part, had a good time. A few times, I'd caught him checking his phone, no doubt looking for texts from Simon, and my heart died a little each time. But I reminded myself that he needed time to let Simon go and trust that I was serious. I mean, to him I was straight. Truthfully, I'd decided, for the sake of my sanity, not to overthink the label thing. I needed what brain cells I had to focus on Greg.

Unfortunately, the last few nights Greg had spent studying and working on his thesis, which was a never-ending project. I was pretty sure he was hiding from me and my overenthusiastic need for him to smile and be cheerful. Christy—in one of those rare moments when I actually agreed with her—had said Greg was mourning a loss and needed to work through the pain. Apparently, there were no shortcuts for that. So I backed off, hanging in the periphery, waiting to be needed. I never realized how much I'd thrived on Greg needing me. When that disappeared, I'd become totally lost and pretty sad myself, which is why I held up two tickets to the movie, hoping he'd finally agree to go with me. I hadn't mentioned the movie the entire week but now it was Friday night. I'd be damned if he was going to stay home feeling sorry for himself one more night.

“Come on. You know you want to go.” *Please go with me.*

Greg sagged into the corner of the couch and, while he looked tired and rumpled, he was gorgeous all the same. I'd given up, no longer trying to stop my thoughts of Greg. What I'd found was those thoughts and feelings weren't as scary as I'd thought they would be. One hurdle down, a hundred or more to go.

Greg rubbed at his temple. “I'm tired, Law.”

If anything, I was persistent. “It's a movie. You get to sit in a darkened theater and just chill. And come on...” I grinned and pushed at his leg. “Ralph Fiennes, right? I know what you think of him.”

My heart thudded in my ears as I waited in the silence, watched as a myriad of emotions crossed Greg's face. In the past, waving two tickets to *The English Patient* would have had Greg rushing about all flustered and as excited as a kid on Christmas morning. Now he was still and silent. When a smile tugged at the corner of his pink lips, I knew I had him.

“Okay, you've got thirty minutes to get ready and we hit the road.”

I would have sworn that coming to terms with the idea that I might be gay was going to be the hard part of all of this. Not by a long shot—not yet, anyhow. First, I had to get the guy, and I was pretty sure that was going to kill me before it ever happened.

As Greg and I entered the lobby of the Essex Theatre, a man exiting a movie caught sight of Greg and smiled wide. His grey-blue eyes sparkled. His strong nose and chin and perfect white teeth were the fodder of movie stars. His blond hair was thick and perfectly styled. His wireless glasses gave him that smart, distinguished look. He was probably in his mid-thirties. Confidence and style oozed from every pore, like a shield against slumpy, uncouth peasants like me. I smoothed the front of my blue, plaid shirt. Face it, this man was a member of a league in which I'd never belong.

Greg embraced the man who, in my opinion, held on a bit too long. When he finally relented, Greg said, “Miller Boyd, this is my roommate, Lawson Myers.”

The man gave me a sideways glance, as if unwilling to take his eyes from Greg. That's when I noticed the lust and want in Miller Boyd's eyes. The man had it bad for Greg.

“Miller was one of my undergrad professors.”

Great.

Smart, educated, and most likely well-off. I looked down at my faded jeans and hiking boots, realizing I hadn't even tried to look nice when taking Greg out, hadn't even made an effort. Greg wore an expensive, grey button-up shirt and a pair of black dress pants with black loafers. Me, I looked like I was ready to chop wood.

I shook Miller's soft, uncalloused hand. He was shiny and clean and, in the car world, he'd be a Cadillac, while I would be a rusted-out, economy car. I looked at Greg—polished, almost regal, and shiny, *so shiny*—as the two of them spoke about Greg's thesis and debated the merits of his hypothesis. They referred to famous papers published by people I'd never heard of. And Greg glowed—fucking glowed—whenever Miller declared something Greg had said to be brilliant. To me it had all sounded brilliant, and way above my level of education. And that's when I realized that Greg was a Cadillac, too, and what the fuck would he want with an economy car?

I tuned out the rest of their conversation, waiting with an outward appearance of interest and patience when inside I had a clawing need to escape the torture. Finally, Greg realized we were going to be late for the movie and told Miller good-bye. Another sideways glance and a terse, “Nice to meet you,” and Miller Boyd left along with every ounce of hope I had that Greg and I should be together.

Getting popcorn and soda, we made our way into the darkened movie theater. The moment the first scene flashed on the screen, Greg was enthralled. Surreptitiously, I watched from the corner of my eye as Greg smiled and sighed, as his breath caught even though he knew every line, knew every second of the movie. Tears rolled down his cheeks as Laszlo left Katharine in the cave, desperate to get help, and then again as he carried her lifeless body to the plane. I longed to reach out and wipe away those tears, but no longer felt I had the right, no longer felt I had a chance in hell with Greg. Not with people like Miller Boyd wanting him. How many other perfect people wanted Greg? The thought roiled my stomach.

Greg turned to me as the last scene played out. Lost in my head, I thought how perfect he was and how he deserved someone so much better than me, someone who could feel deeply and love as honestly and openly as he did. Someone who was sophisticated and could show him things in the world I had

no interest in. Someone he could have deep, meaningful conversations with. As a human being, I was so underdeveloped and stunted, not even close to what Greg could be, *would* be, someday.

We stared at one another, our eyes locked, and when I came to my senses, I reared back in my seat. Greg's eyebrows lowered and he reached over and squeezed my hand. The scalding burn raced up my arm and set my blood on fire and my heart racing. I stood, mumbling about the bathroom, and bolted from the dark theater and into the blinding light. Safe in the bathroom, I locked myself in the last stall and leaned my forehead against the cold metal, bemoaning what a fool I'd been. I'd never be good enough. Never.

Chapter Eight

After the movie, I requested a rain check on dinner. Food was the last thing I could stomach at that point. The ride home was silent, no commentary on the movie, none of the comfortable banter Greg and I usually shared. If not for the relaxed, partial smile on Greg's face, I would have thought he was upset or pissed off. Nope. He actually appeared content, satisfied—maybe even happy. Possibly, I'd managed to pull him from the Simon funk. Maybe he was thinking of Miller Boyd. At least the disastrous night may have been good for something.

“So, whatever happened between you and Stephanie? You seemed pretty interested in her,” Greg said, freezing my blood.

“What do you mean?” I asked, my focus on keeping the truck on the road after the abruptness of the question.

Greg turned his upper body toward me, as much as he could while wearing his seatbelt. He stretched his arm over the back of the seat, his hand resting close to the back of my neck. Even though his hand didn't actually touch me, the hairs on the back of my neck rose from the proximity.

“You slept with her, right?”

My hand jerked slightly on the wheel and I shifted in my seat. “Uh, yeah. Once.”

In my periphery, I saw him nod, and the smirk on his face was disconcerting.

“And?”

Shit, why was he pushing this? My humiliating, failed attempt to put Greg out of my mind was the last thing I wanted to share with anyone, much less him. Especially tonight.

“And what?”

“And what happened?” Greg's lilting tone was almost teasing.

Seriously? “I really hope you aren't looking for details or anything.”

A boisterous laughter rolled from Greg and filled the truck cab. I couldn't help but smile for a moment.

His hand bumped against my neck and a jolt flashed through me. Suddenly, I wanted, needed him to touch me. I shook my head imperceptibly. No. That wouldn't be a good idea.

“Please, no details. I just wondered what was going on between you two.”

I shrugged. “Nothing.”

“That’s what I thought.”

I glanced sideways at him, his face partially shadowed, his wavy hair calling for me to run my fingers through its softness.

Now his hair was getting to me.

“What does that mean?” My irritation grew at my inability to stop the thoughts of touching Greg, and suddenly the cab was way too small. I cracked the window for some air.

“What ever happened to Melanie?” he asked, apparently no intention of stopping his inquisition.

I frowned. Melanie was last fall, and lasted all of two dates before she decided our auras clashed or something. I think it had more to do with her comment that she'd had more conversations with her goldfish. “Didn't work out.”

This was quickly turning into the ride from hell.

Again, he nodded. I'd never been so grateful to turn onto our street. Just in time, too, as a drop of rain hit the windshield.

“And Terry?”

I pulled into the driveway and slammed the truck into park. “What is this? A walk down the memory lane of my failed relationships?”

My barked words hadn't even fazed Greg as he continued to scrutinize me with an annoying smugness. I'd had enough and I reached for the door handle. Greg's hand on my shoulder stopped me and the warmth raced straight to my groin. I tried hard to stifle my groan.

“Law. Why didn't they work out?”

I sighed, my hand still on the handle, unable to look at Greg. “I guess because I couldn't give them what they wanted.”

“What did they want?” he asked without hesitation, his voice quizzical but still light, despite how heavy this conversation weighed on me.

What had they all wanted? My heart, of course, but Greg had stolen that long ago without me even knowing he had.

I shrugged again, being the great orator that I was. “When I figure it out, I’ll let you know.”

Without hesitation, I exited the truck. The wind had kicked up, and a few stray drops of rain fell. The back gate banged in the wind. I went over and had to work to hook the latch, which had bent.

I froze as Greg stepped up behind me, too close to my body. He peered over my shoulder, watching as I worked to bend the latch back into place.

“Can you get it?” His warm breath ghosted across my ear and cheek, and my hand slipped off the latch. “You need help?”

“No. Why don’t you head inside? I’ve got this.”

For the love of all that is holy, please, go inside.

I closed my eyes, took in a deep breath, and with great will was able to bend the lock and latch the gate despite Greg practically sprawled over my back.

“Got it,” I declared and turned to find Greg unmoved and still too close.

I raised my eyebrows and shifted uncomfortably, trapped between Greg and the gate. We were near the same height and, despite the darkness, a light shone in his eyes from the large halogen lamp lighting the driveway. I swallowed hard, working to keep all reaction from showing on my face. I wanted to touch him, wanted to pull him into my arms and feel his hard chest against mine, so different from the women I’d been with. Instead, I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my jeans, which reminded me of Miller Boyd and his tailored perfectness.

“Miller was nice. He seems to like you.”

Greg’s frown and blinking told me that my comment had caught him off guard. “Yeah, he’s nice, but we are talking about you.”

“We are?” I asked, wishing he’d step back. The wind whipped his hair about his head, and occasionally, a raindrop hit us. Greg was so focused on me, he didn’t even notice.

He nodded slowly, surveying my eyes, my mouth, my fucking soul. Damn, my gaze kept going to that mouth, wondering how his lips would taste. If I closed my eyes, and kissed Greg, would those lips feel different from a woman's lips? I'd come close to finding out, but now, I couldn't pull Greg down to my level, couldn't make him become something less than what he deserved.

"Yes, we are. Your relationships never last. What was the longest?" Greg tapped his finger against his chin as he thought of the answer. Of course, my answer wouldn't match his. Greg had been my longest relationship.

"Laura. Three years ago. Two months, right?"

I didn't answer, my ability to speak hindered by the tightness in my throat. That feeling of being trapped, like a cornered animal, filled me and the need to escape clawed its way up from my stomach.

Greg pursed his lips and nodded again. "I've always wondered why none of them ever lasted. I thought you just hadn't found that one special person, the one who could capture your heart. But you were distant with all of them. On the surface there was an attraction, but your heart was never in it." He paused, and when his eyes locked on mine, he was there, totally open, bleeding raw hope. But hope for what? It couldn't be me.

"I don't know what you're getting at," I managed to croak out. Sweat coated my palms, my hands clenched tight into fists in my pockets. And in my head was the chant to protect Greg, make Greg happy, help him get everything he deserved. They were silent, unconscious promises I'd made over the years. He was going to be a brilliant historian, teacher, human being, and he didn't need me to drag him down. I didn't have high and lofty goals in life. I was content with my job with no desire to climb any ladders, make more money, or become something more than I was right then. And that was okay for me. Not for Greg. Not by a long shot.

Greg gave me a halfhearted smile. "I wondered why it had failed with all of them. They wanted you, wanted you to fall in love with them. But they couldn't have you. And then I thought, maybe they couldn't have you because you already belonged to someone else."

I flinched and hoped he hadn't seen the subtle movement. "Wh-who would I belong to?"

“I was hoping you could tell me,” he whispered, his eyes softening with more hope. “Is there someone special? Maybe someone you want, who doesn’t know?”

Thoughts crashed about as panic filled my head. It was as if he already knew and was goading me into saying it out loud. What if he laughed at my declaration or thought I was fucking with him? What if he thought my motives were born out of pity over what Simple Simon had done to him? What if I lost my best friend? My only friend.

Immediately, I shook my head as bile climbed into my throat. I swallowed over and over until I was able to answer and say the words that would burn worse than that stomach acid on my tongue. “There’s no one.”

He stared back, absorbing my words, probably searching for any indication they might be untrue. I refused to look away, clenching my jaw tight, unblinking. I saw the moment he realized he wasn’t going to hear anything different from me, and that kicked up my need to flee from what quickly resembled a life or death situation.

“It’s gonna pour any second. Let’s get inside,” I said and stepped to the side. Before he could speak, I was taking the stairs by twos. As I unlocked the door, I heard his footsteps behind me. When I entered the apartment, I continued to flee like the coward I was, until I locked my bathroom door. Without stopping, I turned on the shower and stripped from my clothes, desperate to scrub the filth of lies and deception from my skin. No matter how hard I scrubbed, how hot the water was, the guilt and need covered me.

What was I doing? No matter what I did, I would hurt Greg. I had to talk to him, had to say something, and not just leave him hanging.

I shut off the water, quickly towed off, and grabbed sweatpants and a sweatshirt from my closet. The house phone rang. People rarely called that phone unless they couldn’t get us on our cells. After two rings, the machine kicked on, Greg’s cheerful voice, loud and clear, announced that we were both sorry we’d missed the call and to leave a message. When I heard the muffled sound of Simon’s voice, I froze. What the hell? I couldn’t understand the words, and went to open my door when I realized I was still naked. I struggled to pull on my sweatpants over my moist, freshly washed skin. I heard Greg’s voice as I shoved in a second leg and tipped over against the door. I still struggled as I managed to open my door and stumbled into the hall.

The apartment door slammed.

“Greg!”

No answer.

“Greg!” I raced into the kitchen in time to see the lights of his car as he backed out of the driveway. “Fuck!”

I replayed Simon’s message.

Greg, if you’re there, please. Pick up... I’ve been calling your cell all day. I’m sorry, baby. Please... I miss you. I never—

Greg’s voice came on and, since our machine never seemed to recognize when someone had picked up, it had kept recording.

What do you want, Simon?

I want to apologize. I never meant to hit you. I was surprised. I mean... you were wearing women’s underwear.

You slapped me, Simon.

The tightness in Greg’s voice riled my anger fast.

I’m sorry. Can we talk, please? I’m home. Come see me.

Oh, fuck no! I waited out the silence until Greg audibly sighed heavily. *I’ll be there in ten minutes.*

Chapter Nine

Greg had gone to Simon. The possibility of Simon wanting anything to do with Greg again had never crossed my mind. But Simon had said he missed Greg. Christy's words filled my head.

Greg needs someone to love, someone to love him, and Simon is there because Greg doesn't think you ever will be.

Fuck me twice to Sunday!

"Lawson, you're such a fucking idiot!" I screamed out. Pushing Greg away, I'd pushed him right back to Simon, someone who'd not only emotionally crushed him, but physically hurt him as well. Even if I thought I wasn't good enough for Greg, Simon was the bottom of the barrel.

Racing back to my bedroom, I finished dressing. I dialed Greg's cell as I left the apartment in a another pouring rainstorm, terrified of what Simple Simon would say and do to further hurt Greg. More than that, I was terrified that Greg would buy every word.

On the road, I continually called Greg and left pleading voicemails for him to call me. At a stop light, I texted him and waited. Nothing. If he got hurt, I'd never forgive myself. I loved him, had for years, and the next time I laid eyes on him, I would tell him just that. No matter the consequences.

A crack of thunder rumbled the air and lightning streaked the sky. As I drove, I tried to recall where exactly Simon lived. I knew it was on the same street as the golf course. It shouldn't be too hard to see Greg's car in the driveway, right? But as I drove up and down the street several times, I had yet to spot either Greg's or Simon's car. The dark night made it hard to see anything that wasn't directly under a streetlight.

My jaw clenched so tight, my ears hurt and my gut had that just-off-the-rollercoaster feel. Thoughts of Greg submitting to Simon, agreeing to anything if he'd just love him, brought the sting of tears to my eyes. It was the closest I'd come to crying in over ten years.

I turned my truck around at the end of the street for another pass when my phone rang. I answered with a terse, "What?"

"Well, that's a nice greeting. I was just calling to see how your date went," Christy said, her voice thick with her annoyance.

“I can’t talk now. I have to find Greg,” I growled.

“What do you mean find Greg? Where is he?” Her accusing tone already blamed me for whatever had happened.

I scanned the driveways, but many of them disappeared around the backs of the houses. I was going to have to drive into each one.

“Simon called Greg after we got back from the movie and wanted to talk to him. Greg left before I could stop him.”

A car came slowly in my direction on the road.

“He went to Simon’s? What the fuck?”

“My thoughts exactly,” I said.

As the car came closer, several flashes of lightning lit up the entire area, allowing me to see inside the car as it passed by my truck. It was Simon and he was alone. “Shit, Simon just drove past me and he’s alone! I don’t know where he lives!”

“Corner of Turner Avenue. The white house with a red door. Go find Greg, Lawson, please.”

“I will,” I said and ended the call.

The next road was Turner Avenue, and there was the white house with the red door. I followed the driveway around the back and found Greg’s car. That fuckhead had left Greg alone in this storm.

I pounded on the door, listening for any sound. “Greg! It’s Lawson!” When there was no response, I turned the knob and the door opened. “Greg!”

Without pausing, I entered the darkened kitchen of a house I’d never been in before. I followed the light spilling out of the next room. “Greg, answer me!” I entered the living room. There was a crash of thunder and a whimper caught my attention. Greg was huddled in the corner, eyes glazed over with fear. Had he even heard me?

“Fuck, Greg,” I said and knelt before him. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled, “I won’t ever wear them again. Please let me in, please.” He wasn’t seeing me again. “Please, Uncle Ted.”

Those words froze me. I cupped Greg’s face in my hands, as I always did when he was off wherever. This time was different, however, because he’d

mentioned his uncle. Greg's father had died when he was eight. His mother had married his stepfather, Harry, when Greg was ten. In between those times, Greg's uncle had lived with them. He'd died over five years ago. Over the years, I'd only heard snippets about his uncle, and they'd never been nice.

"Greg," I said softly, rubbing my thumbs over his cheeks, hoping the contact would bring him back. He gazed out of the window at the storm as his breath hitched with sobs. "Greg," I said with more force. "Hey, it's Law."

Greg blinked and frowned and then his eyes focused. When he turned his head and looked at me, I waited as I always did for the recognition. When he sighed, I forced a smile.

"Hey," I repeated.

"What're you doing here?" Greg asked as he took in his surroundings, finally seeming to remember where he was.

"Coming to get you. I had a feeling you needed me."

Another sob and he lowered his head, but I kept my hands on his cheeks. "Simon wanted to talk to me. I was hoping..."

I forced the words from my mouth. "Hoping what?"

He shrugged and raised his head, tears swimming in his eyes. "Hoping he'd realized he was wrong."

I knew he hadn't. If he had, Simon would have been there. "But he didn't."

Greg shook his head and when another crack of thunder rumbled and shook the house, his hands grasped my wrists. "He said he'd take me back, love me, if I didn't wear those 'things' ever again. My uncle..." Greg took in a deep breath. "I never told anyone this before." The raw pain in his eyes gutted me, and I pressed our foreheads together.

"Tell me, please. Tell me what happened. Is it why you hate storms?"

His eyes closed and squeezed more tears out that ran down and clung to my fingers resting on his face.

He chuckled morosely. "My uncle," he said with such vitriol that the hate hung in the air. "When I was nine, he caught me wearing my sister's underwear, parading around my room, showing off in the mirror. He lost it. His eyes, I'll never forget how wild... and so filled with rage they were. He backhanded me hard and ripped the underwear off me... He carried me outside

and threw me on the ground.” He stopped speaking. His chest heaved with his need for air. I held on, willing him to use my strength to tell me everything.

“It was fall, and we were getting the tail end of a hurricane that’d made its way up the coast. It was raining so hard. Thundering and lightning. My uncle told me I was sick. He said I needed to repent and suffer. Beg God for forgiveness. He locked me out of the house. Left me out in the storm. I banged on the door. I pleaded with him to let me in. But he wouldn’t. I was so scared. I ended up curling up in an old doghouse. Freezing. Half-naked. Wet. I cried all night. In the morning, he let me back in, and didn’t say a word.”

“My God, Greg.” His terror now made perfect sense. “What about your mom? She couldn’t have let him do that.” Not his sweet, accepting mother.

His lips shook, but he sucked in a deep breath and then spoke. “She never knew. Back then, she was so lost after my father died that she had to take pills so she could sleep at night. My sister was at a friend’s house for the night, so no one ever knew and I never told them. That was almost fifteen years ago, but when it storms, I feel like I’m back in that doghouse, alone, and I sort of get lost in my head.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He smiled morosely. “I was embarrassed... and ashamed... and scared you’d think the same as my uncle.”

I made sure he looked right at me, made sure he listened. “I’m so glad you told me. You can tell me anything, and I’ll always think that you are the best thing in my life.”

Another tremble in his lip. “Really? The best thing?”

I had to tell him. I had to come clean no matter the consequences.

Chapter Ten

I gasped out a laugh. “You’ve been the best thing in my life since the moment we met, and I’m sorry I didn’t realize that. I’m slow and practically need to be hit over the head to realize something. That’s what you did, you know, when I saw you in those panties.”

His eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

I pushed his knees aside and I worked my way between his legs, getting as close as I could. He looked up into my face with a stark vulnerability that made me feel as if his hopes and dreams and future were in my hands. Way to put pressure on a guy. But this was what I wanted, had taken on long ago. Despite thinking that I wasn’t good enough for him, I was the one who’d always been there for Greg when no one else had. Why didn’t that make me good enough? Isn’t that what Greg needed most... someone to be there for him? Time to man up and grow some balls.

“I mean, sweetie, that seeing you in those panties... You were beautiful, and I was so hard, I had to go and blow my load in the bathroom. And I’ve been jerking off to that image ever since.”

Greg gasped. “But—”

“Just listen,” I said cutting him off. “If I don’t say this, I’m going to lose my nerve.” I took his hands and grasped them tight. When he clutched mine back, I grinned. “You’ve been my life since the first day we met. You’ve always needed me, and I never realized how much I loved that, how much I thrive on someone needing me. But it’s not just that. You get me, you accept me as I am. You don’t push me to do things I don’t want to do. I mean, you were thrilled for me when I got the maintenance job. My family... they were so mad that I wasn’t going to get a college degree and make tons of money but—”

“But that wouldn’t have made you happy, Law.”

I shook my head. “No, it wouldn’t have.”

“I want you to be happy. I want you to do what you love and you love working in that building, fixing stuff, and finding Sweetums. You like talking to people and helping them. You’re a helper and that’s what’s important.”

I raised my eyebrows. “And you’re okay with that?”

“Of course, I am. What more could I want for you besides love?”

There was that word again. I closed my eyes, my heart rate kicked up, my mouth as dry as the desert. “You said... earlier... you wanted to know why my relationships never lasted. You wanted to know who had my heart so that I couldn't give it to anyone else.”

Greg nodded as he chewed on his bottom lip.

I placed my palm on the back of his neck and licked at my lips. “You, Greg. You have my heart. I need you to believe that you're the only one I want. I know there is this whole straight thing, but I've been thinking about this for months, actually wrestling and struggling with it, and beating myself up as well. What it comes down to is this. My heart wants you and only you, but I've been too stupid to realize it until now. I know I'll never be like Miller Boyd, never be successful or refined or cultured, but I'll be here no matter what, support you in everything you do, and I'll love you with every fiber of my being.”

The words hung heavy between us. I'd spoken my heart and could only wait.

After a few stunned moments, Greg smiled, coyly. “I think that's the most I've ever heard you say at one time since I met you,” he said teasingly.

I smirked. “I haven't had anything important to say until now.”

“You definitely are a man of few words and because of that, when you have something to say, I always listen.” Greg rested his palm over my heart. “Tell me,” he whispered.

I clutched his hand against my chest. “I love you, Greg Holden. You stole my heart long ago, and it's yours.”

I lifted his hand and he watched, mesmerized, as I laid a kiss on his knuckle.

Greg, being Greg, sucked in a sob, his eyes glassy. “I love you, too, Lawson. I always have.”

I rested my cheek against the back of his hand. “I'm so sorry I didn't know.”

He shook his head. “Stop. Now is what matters. Will you kiss me?”

I urged him forward and gently pressed my lips to his. The air I'd held in my lungs rushed out through my nose. Lights burst behind my eyes as I moved

slowly at first, learning his mouth, my tongue swiping out and touching his. The tingling in my lips danced like static electricity, and I expected to hear that familiar crackle. My hand tightened around the back of his neck, as I leaned him against the wall, dominating his mouth. He clutched at the front of my shirt, holding on to me as if I might disappear, but I wasn't going anywhere. This was where I belonged, with Greg.

When I'd been kissed breathless, I pulled away, already missing the moist heat, the feeling of home. Greg peered up at me, chest heaving, eyes dilated, lips red, face flushed. If ever there was anyone more gorgeous, I had yet to see them.

After a moment of gazing into each other's eyes, Greg released my shirt, and the look of utter amazement on his face confused me. "You're not freaking out. I expected something more than this," he said, waving a hand at my calmness.

The roar of laughter that poured from me was unexpected. "Oh, believe me, there was tons of freaking out. I'm sure Christy will enjoy telling you about my meltdown at the bar last week." Greg smiled and touched my cheek. "I freaked out about suddenly wanting a guy, but I've realized that nothing about this was sudden, and I decided what's important is that you make me happy."

More tears. The man was like a damned faucet, and I wouldn't have it any other way. "You make me really happy, too," Greg whispered.

I sat back on my heels and looked around the room, suddenly uncomfortable in Simple Simon's house. I tensed. "He didn't hurt you, did he?" Visually checking Greg, I didn't see any marks or bruises.

"Not physically. He couldn't have hurt me any more emotionally than when he'd slapped me. He told me that he forgave me." Greg barked out a dry laugh. "Forgave me for wearing women's underwear and, if I promised never to wear them again, he'd take me back."

"What did you say?" I gritted out. If not for Greg, I'd be out searching for Simple Simon and giving him the beat down of his life.

"I told him to fuck off."

My eyes widened and I smirked. "You did?"

Greg beamed, the pride in his actions shining bright. "I did. I thought, what would Law say right now? And that's what came to mind."

I grinned wide. "You know me so well."

"Then I thought, what would Law do right now?" His smugness told me it was going to be something good.

"Oh? And what did you come up with?" I asked.

"I punched him in the gut. He went down like the weenie that he is."

I couldn't help laughing, and Greg joined in. Tugging on his hands. I encouraged him to rise onto his knees, and we knelt before each other. I nuzzled into his neck, the smell all Greg and so familiar. "I'm so proud of you."

He wrapped his hands around me, holding me tight and we both sighed. "I said I loved Simon but I don't think I really did, not like I love you. I just wanted someone to love me, and I wanted to be in a relationship so bad. I'm pretty sure Simon didn't love me, either." He paused. "You sure you want to do this?" he asked, resting his cheek in my hair.

Wrapping my arms around him, I lifted my head and moved until our mouths were almost touching. "I am *very* sure."

Our lips came together into a scorching, earth-moving kiss that curled my toes.

Greg pulled back slightly. "Let's finish this at home," he murmured against my lips.

I was so on board with that.

After we'd both parked our vehicles in our driveway, we came together at the bottom of the stairs to the apartment, soaked with the rain, hands grabbing and lips grinding, sucking and licking. Slowly, we made our way up the stairs, attacking each other with great fervor. My heart soared and I couldn't get enough of him. What had I done to deserve him? Would he get bored with me? Find someone better? Eventually find my lack of motivation to better myself annoying?

Greg pulled back abruptly and I sought his warm lips. When I opened my eyes, he was scowling. "Stop," he commanded.

I raised my brows.

"You're thinking too hard. I'm sure every doubt you can conjure is flying around inside that handsome head of yours right now."

Still clutched tight in his embrace, I nodded mutely.

“I know you, and you’ve never thought you were good enough for anyone. You’re one of the good guys, Law. People like Simon and Miller Boyd are shiny on the outside, but inside they’re marked and scuffed and aren’t so pretty. You shine from the inside. You, Lawson Myers, are my Prince Charming.”

Fuck if that didn’t choke me up a little. Since I’d known him, Greg had gone on about his prince who would one day swoop in and whisk him off to a fairy tale existence.

I snorted. “Not quite looking the part.”

His brown eyes softened, and what looked back at me I could only describe as love. “Prince Charming isn’t about what’s on the outside.” He pulled back and perused my upper body with his gaze. “But damn, love, you have the looks and the body to go with that heart of gold.”

Heat rushed my face and I looked away, definitely embarrassed at his seeing my discomfort.

“Don’t worry about it,” he insisted and grasped my chin, turning my head. “Once I’ve told you a couple of hundred times, you’ll start to believe it.”

More kissing followed. I got the door open and we stumbled inside. My bedroom came first, and I pushed Greg through the door. He backed up until his thighs hit my bed. He bit at his bottom lip as he watched me stalk closer, peeling off my wet jacket, then my shirt. When I stopped moving, he frowned. I turned to my dresser and opened the top drawer, reaching into the back until my fingers found what I was looking for. Pulling out the silky, pink panties with lace and a bow that I’d stolen from Greg, I rubbed the smooth fabric between my thumb and forefinger. Turning back to Greg, I raised the panties to my nose, inhaling deeply what was left of Greg’s scent.

Walking slowly, I approached Greg who stared intently at the panties I still held to my nose.

“Those are mine,” he whispered.

Nodding, I held them out and said, “Put them on.” My voice was low and growly and I didn’t recognize it. “Nothing else.”

He took them, no doubt wondering how I’d come to have them. Staring intently, I watched as he disappeared into the bathroom. Quickly, I stripped off my remaining clothes and chucked them into the corner. From the same dresser

drawer, I pulled out condoms and a new bottle of lube. Buying that had been quite an adventure.

Climbing onto the bed, I leaned back against the headboard and waited, stroking my hard cock slowly. Butterflies with razor-edged wings scraped at my gut as I waited to see Greg wearing those fucking pink panties that had consumed my thoughts for months. To say I was obsessed was an understatement, but pink panties or not, Greg was what I wanted and needed.

The door to the bathroom opened and I sucked in my breath, my hand ceased stroking and squeezed at the base of my dick, waiting... waiting...

When Greg stepped into the bedroom, the first thing I noticed was his face, flushed pink, maybe from embarrassment, definitely from arousal. My gaze trailed over his chest, his small, brown nipples, his flat stomach, his dark treasure trail disappearing beneath lacy pink swirls. My gaze stopped at his erection, hard and proud in those panties, shifted to the side. At the base of his cock, his balls were encased in satiny goodness. My throat tightened as Greg walked slowly toward the bed, tentatively, until I told him to stop. I licked at my dry lips, my eyes unable to move away from his stunning beauty. Releasing my aching cock, I climbed off the bed and stepped in front of him. Instantly, I was on my knees, my hands clutching his hips, my lips and tongue tracing his silky cock. Greg gasped and his hands were on my head, his fingers in my hair.

The fact that I was mouthing another man's cock kept surfacing in my mind, but when I looked up and saw Greg gazing back through hooded eyes, everything was so right. Sucking a ball into my mouth through the panties, he moaned out loud, his head falling back. A surge of pleasure rushed my own balls as I remembered that Greg had never actually had intercourse before. Suddenly, I wasn't so sure.

When I stood, he raised his head and the look of bliss on his face was heady. I asked, "You've never done this before. Are you sure?"

He snorted. "I've done more than you with guys. I may have been saving myself for my future husband, but believe me, I'm not a true virgin. I've had plenty of things in my ass before. But now that he's here, I want it all."

I didn't know if that made me feel better or jealous. Wait... "Future husband? He's here?"

Greg wrapped an arm around my shoulder, and pushed down the front of his panties. His cock sprang out and he wrapped his hand around both our cocks.

He stroked us, long and hard. Groaning, I pushed into his hand, our skin sliding together, his hand squeezing our heads.

“Yes,” he whispered. “I want to get married. I want it all, the ring, the wedding, the kids... I want it with you, Law. If you’ll have me.”

“Damn... Greg... I will always want you.” If he kept stroking us, no one was going to be fucking anyone. Pulling away, I pointed to the bed as I grabbed a condom and tore it open. “I need you to tell me what to do.” I’d never had anal sex with anyone, and I didn’t want to hurt Greg.

As I rolled on the condom, Greg knelt on the bed, crawling seductively and then stopping and leering over his shoulder at me, a cocksure look on his face. “I may have done some prep in the bathroom,” he said and wiggled his butt at me.

Stepping up, I grabbed the lacy top of his panties and pulled them down his ass far enough to see the red plug in his butt. My eyes closed of their own volition as pre-cum dribbled from the end of my cock. An evil chuckle came from Greg and I was definitely sure now that he was trying to kill me. “Second hottest thing I’ve ever seen,” I said and, in retaliation, I pushed on the base of the plug. Greg arched his back, groaning as I continued to move the plug in his ass. Soon, his noises of pleasure had me on the edge.

“I can’t wait any longer.” I carefully pulled the plug from Greg’s ass, my eyes widening at its width.

“I think you overestimated what you’re getting from me.”

Greg rolled onto his back, pulling his legs up to his chest, his gaping hole on full display. “I think it’s you who’s underestimating. Law, make love to me. Now.”

Never one to argue, I knelt between his legs, and pushed the pink fabric aside. No way was he taking those panties off. I pushed the head of my cock against Greg’s hole, surprised by the tightness. Watching his face intently, I stopped, waiting for any sign I was hurting him. Greg pulled his legs tighter against his chest. “Damn, you’re big. Just go slow.”

He took in deep breaths, as I pushed forward at a snail’s pace, thinking how different he felt from a woman, how much I loved that he wasn’t anything like a woman, except for the panties. I glanced between us, at my cock disappearing into his ass, the pink of the panties, and was mesmerized. Finally, after a

blessed eternity, my groin rested against him. He clutched at my arms and his breath came short and staccato as I leaned down for a kiss. Pulling out slowly, I pushed back in, fucking him in short jabs for a while and then burying myself all of the way in. Whimpers and moans from Greg spurred me faster. He wrapped his arms around the back of my neck, his chest arching, angling against me until he was panting loudly, calling out my name. "I can't believe you're fucking me. It feels so good," he moaned.

"Good" was an understatement. I swore the edges of my vision were greying out, and all I could see was Greg gazing up at me, his face twisted in the pleasure we shared.

"Not going to last long," I groaned, kissing Greg's lips, his cheeks, and his forehead. A jolt in my chest went straight to my cock. Greg pinched at my nipples and the sensation was overwhelming. No one had ever done that to me before. "Oh, God, do that again," I begged, moaning as he squeezed and pulled. I pounded into him, skating toward orgasm. A few more pinches would do the trick.

Bracing myself on my left elbow, I attacked Greg's lips as he continued to fondle my nipples. Damn, he could do that anytime he wanted. Reaching between us, I grabbed his cock and jacked him hard and fast. His whimpers were swallowed between us. His hole clenched tight and his body went taut beneath me. His fingers clamped harder, and I practically shouted into his mouth as I climaxed, flying higher and higher in the bliss-filled moment. Over and over my cock spasmed as his hole grabbed me. My balls were about to be turned inside out when I finally stopped coming. Releasing his cock, I went to wipe my cum-splattered hand on the sheet, but Greg grabbed my wrist. I exhaled noisily as he lifted my hand to his mouth and sucked his cum from my fingers.

"Shit," I murmured as my cock valiantly tried to rise again. When he pushed my hand towards my mouth, I tentatively licked at his white jizz. Salty, bitter. Must be an acquired taste.

"You, Lawson, are a sex god," Greg said, still dazed with his orgasm.

I grunted. "Good enough to keep around?" I whispered, running my fingertips along his jaw.

He nodded. "For a very long time," he said stretching his neck to get a kiss, which I obliged. My cock was half-hard, still inside him, and I was content to stay that way as long as I could.

“I love you,” Greg whispered.

The words squeezed tight around my chest. “Damn, I love you, too, Greg.”

He grinned and his hands caressed my chest. “So what happens next?” he asked, his finger tracing around pecs.

“I was thinking you need some more panties, maybe a corset or two.”

His entire face brightened and his eyes widened. “Oooh, I saw a red silk corset with black bows online with matching panties, a garter belt, and fishnet stockings that have black bows up the back of the legs. What do you think of red high heels?”

I choked and coughed, as the image hit me hard. “Fuck, you *are* trying to kill me.”

He laughed. “Can I take that as a ‘yes’ then?”

“Damn straight, yes. Do they have overnight shipping?” I waggled my eyebrows.

He chuckled. “Hey, Law?”

“Yeah?” I asked cupping his cheek, amazed he was mine.

“Do you know what I wish?”

This time, I didn’t dread hearing what Greg wished. I was pretty sure whatever it was, I could give it to him.

“What do you wish, sweetie?” I asked, pecking his lips.

“I wish we’d live happily ever after.” He smiled, because he knew as well as I did.

“I think that’s one wish you don’t have to make.” That was a given.

The End

Author Bio

*JC Wallace started writing from a young age, but took a break for marriage, kids, and college (in that order). He recently rediscovered his passion and ventured out into the brave new world of publishing with his short, *Waiting for Snow*, and his first novel, *Curiosity Killed Shaney*. At night and on the weekends, JC writes about all things men, believing there is nothing hotter than two men finding and loving one another, whether for a night or forever. An avid reader of M/M romance, JC loves a good twist of a plot, HEA, HFN, or tragic ending. He also writes what his bestie calls HUNK (*Happy Until the Next Kidnapping*). In his daytime hours, JC works with individuals with autism and behavior problems. He is owned by three kids, one grandchild and one on the way, two dogs and one cat. He lives in the beautiful Adirondack Mountains in Northern NY.*

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PLAYING WITH TWO-EDGED SWORDS

By Roger Grace

Photo Description

Two young adult males in Victorian era clothing lean against each other on a wall. At least one is wearing a sword, and he appears to have Latin blood. There seems to be an attraction between the two men in the picture.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We find our moments when we can, though they are few and far between. We mask attraction in enmity as we play this dangerous game. But have we played too long? The line has blurred and tempers flare. We grow impatient with the world we live in. Can we reclaim the knife-edged balance we once relied upon, or will we stumble, fall, and either destroy each other or out ourselves and lose everything?

Sincerely,

Wart

Story Info

Genre: alternate history, fantasy

Tags: mage/sorcerers, aristocracy, spies, students, first time, adventure

Word Count: 10,923

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Author's Note

This story is set in an alternate Victorian era London where magic adds some convenience that earth prime didn't have during that time. While I tried to keep as much as possible with the time, magic changes mindsets and, while homosexuality is still condemned, there is a small minority of about 15 percent who hold a more enlightened view on it, mainly those who practice magic.

The magic in this story is based on elemental affinity. It takes the elemental nature from the *Furies of Calderon* by Jim Butcher and *Elemental Assassin* by Jennifer Estep. The practitioners of magic usually have only one major affinity and a couple of lesser affinities. Rarer are those with two major affinities and rarer still is three major affinities. Fire Affinity, like Rafael has, favor offensive attacks and speed in the sword work, while the Ice, Water, and Earth Affinities of Michael favor a strong and calm defense, wearing down the opponent in the sword work.

As two virgins before they met, it is relatively safe for them to not use condoms as STDs wouldn't be a problem for them. The story is also set in a time before AIDS. So, please, when having sex, protect yourselves.

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PLAYING WITH TWO-EDGED SWORDS

By Roger Grace

Prologue

Rafael and Michael were on a hike during the Annual Winter Excursion from their school. They were off alone on this hike, by Ullswater Lake in the Lake District. Scanning the horizon, they were startled by the growing cloud cover. The clouds were thick and dark gray, and the wind was howling its fury.

“Looks like a big storm approaching quickly!” Michael whispered his eyes going wide as he started to breathe heavier.

Rafael asked, “Think we can make it to shelter before it hits?”

“No!” Sudden and decisive, Michael looked for anything he could use to rig a temporary shelter. Upon seeing a slight rise in the land, he moved towards it, hoping to get out of the wind.

Rafael said, “I can keep a fire going,” as he followed behind Michael.

Against the slight rise, Michael used his Earth Affinity to scoop out a small tunnel. “In here, now!” After Rafael entered, Michael used his Ice Affinity to block off most of the entrance. “Let us head towards the back, where you can get a fire going and not melt the covering blocking most of the wind.”

Just as the fire got started, the boys heard their teacher, an Air Affinity master, in their heads. “*Where are you? This storm is going to be bad.*”

Michael responded, knowing the teacher would hear. “*I created a cave in a rise of land by Ullswater Lake. Rafael made a fire and we are hunkered down.*”

“Stay there and we will get you after the storm is done!”

As the storm intensified, the cave got colder and the fire couldn't keep them warm. As it got closer to night-time, knowing they could not remain awake all night, Rafael and Michael planned what to do.

“We have our packs with the cold-weather sleeping bags. If we join them together we can share our body heat and keep warm,” Rafael suggested.

“That is probably our best option.”

They climbed into the bags as they settled in for the night. Both in their smallclothes, they huddled together for warmth.

Face to face, breathing on each other, they moved even closer, rubbing each other's bodies. Their lips met. The kiss was short, and both jerked back. Even

that slight contact was sending impulses down their bodies and hardening their eighteen-year-old cocks.

“We cannot do this!” Rafael exclaimed, as he remembered his mother’s strict views on anything related to sex.

“No one needs to know what we did while staying warm. Did it feel good?” Michael asked with a grin, as he leaned closer and kissed Rafael again.

“Mike, stop. I do not want to go to hell.”

“Rafe, we will not go to hell for this. I know your mother was Catholic and instilled her views in you, but the Lord commands us to love as we are created to. And as we got aroused from a little kiss, I would say we are created for this.”

“Just hold me, Mike. Let us stay warm and not fight about this.”

“I will, just do not pull away. Anything that happens will be because we both want it to.”

Cuddled together, they fell asleep.

Michael woke up to their hard cocks bumping into each other through the smallclothes, and Rafael’s lips nibbling on his ear. “I cannot resist anymore. Let us kiss and do whatever we need to do to stay close and warm.”

Mike hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” This came out as a breathless sigh.

Michael and Rafael turned their faces towards each other and let their lips slowly meet as they adjusted so that their noses wouldn’t get in the way. The kisses grew in length and intensity. Their hands were all over, stroking and grabbing wherever they could. They reached down and removed their smallclothes so their cocks could be free and touch without a barrier. Rafael tweaked on Michael’s hard nipples, and Michael sucked in his breath and released a groan as his body reacted to the teasing fingers.

Michael’s left hand encircled Rafael’s hard, throbbing dick, lined it up with his own and moved his hand up and down both hard cocks. He kept jerking their cocks until they both came with a passion and fury that neither had ever experienced before. They stayed embraced until they both passed out, spent from their passion and long day.

The next morning, they woke to hear people calling their names. The voices were still a distance away, but closing in. They quickly dressed, and knew instinctively that they would not admit what happened, but would try to hide it.

Michael took down the ice barrier as he called out, “Over here!”

When the group looking for them arrived at the cave, Rafael glared at Michael and growled, “It is your fault entirely. We should have never gone as far as we did.”

Michael replied icily, “I did not hear you complaining as we travelled the road together.”

Chapter 1

The Sword Finals

Every year, St. John's Academy had their sword trials for the seniors. It was an elimination style tournament. This year's final was about to happen, and the two best swordsmen were Rafael Robinson and Michael Taylor-Cooper.

The two seniors stalked in, pride and anger evident with every gliding step towards the sword circle, Rafael with his tanned skin and fiery Latin eyes flaring, and Michael approaching with an ice storm brewing in his blue eyes. The judges checked their swords over before handing them to the contestants, making sure that the swords weren't weakened from all the battles that had already taken place this weekend.

As etiquette demanded, they bowed to each other, then to the judges. While they waited for the signal to start, they made themselves ready.

The flag dropped. Rafael charged with a fast series of slashes and jabs, only to be coldly blocked by Michael's sure and calm defence. Each pass Rafael made seemed to be a blur to the spectators, but Michael seemed to know exactly where each strike was going to land, as his sword was there to parry each attack. Rafael tried to make a complicated slash too quickly, and when it was blocked, the blade started to vibrate with the shock and left him momentarily numb. Michael tried to take advantage of the all-too-short respite, but couldn't maneuver his bulkier sword quickly enough.

The first round was called, and the two fighters moved to their respective sides of the circle for a brief moment to catch their breath. The looks they directed toward each other would have skewered them both if their glares were daggers.

The flag dropped again, and they started off by circling each other, trying to get a measure of each other before they committed to an attack. Rafael, always the more impatient of the two, got tired of playing cat and mouse. He lunged forward, trying to catch Michael off guard. Michael expected something like this, so he stepped aside as he parried the rapid lunge. The momentum of the attack took Rafael to the edge of the circle before he caught himself just in time and quickly stepped away from the edge. Michael was there with a sudden swipe at Rafael's off-weapon arm. Rafael was just barely able to dodge the

attack, but in doing so he got closer to the edge. Michael, seeing this, pressed his attack. Constantly slashing from one angle or another, he tried to keep Rafael off balance, hoping that Rafael would step out of the circle. The round was called just as Rafael was about to step out of the circle.

As Rafael stalked away, his eyes blazed, looking at nothing but where he was going. His eyes lit up as he saw in his mind what his strategy was going to be. Michael centered with the earth to refill his flagging energy; he also came up with a strategy that could work, but carried great risk.

When the flag dropped, both opponents sprang with new determination in their steps. Rafael, as a Fire Master, attacked with his customary speed and grace, while Michael met him with an equal burst of speed but with strength added. He batted aside Rafael's sword and pinked Rafael on the shoulder. Rafael stood in shock, as Michael had never shown such speed with his sword work before. Michael reacted like a dammed river which burst the dam and flooded the area with speed and strength unmatched.

Michael grinned at Rafael and thanked him for a great battle. Rafael mouthed pleasant praises and congratulations to Michael for winning.

With a whisper, Michael asked, "Meet me in an hour at the orchard shed?"

"I will be there," Rafael replied softly.

The hour past and gone, Rafael quietly slipped into the shed hoping Michael was still there. "Mike," he softly hissed.

"Right here," Michael replied from a secluded, shadowed corner.

"Sorry. I got held up by my father, wanting to know how I could lose to you."

They leaned together and shared a quick kiss, knowing that all too soon they would have to separate and be what the world wanted them to be. Their tongues duelled with passion, each trying to go deeper into each other.

"Oh, God, I need you, Mike," Rafael moaned.

"Yes, I need you also, Rafe," Michael agreed with a deep groan.

Their fevered hands were grabbing everywhere, trying to unfasten everything so they could touch each other all over without the obstacles of clothing.

Then there was a great, loud series of barks closing in, and they broke apart and got themselves composed, hoping to appear innocent when whoever was with the dogs showed up.

Soon the dogs were scratching at the door, and Mike recognized the whine of his hound Alistair. Only one person other than he could have led this pack, his father. Edmund Taylor-Cooper, The Earl of Umbria, Dean of the practitioners of Fire Affinity. "Michael, open this door now!" the earl bellowed.

With a silent sigh, Michael did as he was commanded.

When the earl entered the shed and saw Rafael in there also, he said, "Excellent, I can deliver messages to the both of you here. Michael, you are to be under the tutelage of Richard Robinson, the Earl of Blakesley, Dean of the practitioners of Ice Affinity. Rafael, you are to be under my tutelage. I know you will both be a credit to your practices. And, yes, Michael, Earl Blakesley knows that you also have Water and Earth Affinities, and will arrange for lessons to hone those abilities also."

"I am sure we will all see more of each other, so it would help if you settled whatever differences you may have," the earl suggested as he left.

Michael and Rafael shook hands and left, knowing that it would get harder to hide what they had as often as they were likely to be thrown together.

Chapter 2

Going for Sword Master Training

Michael and Rafael, as the top two finalists in the school senior tournament, were guaranteed acceptance in the sword master training if they decided to take it. Both knew that, as latter sons in the aristocracy after the heir and a spare, they would need to find a way to support themselves or rely on their elder brothers to support them. Being sword masters would give them independence and would not be seen as being unworthy of their rank.

Michael and Rafael sat on Michael's bed as they planned what they would do about the possibility of them both being sword masters.

“So, are we going to do this, Rafe?” Michael asked.

“I think we would be fools not to, Mike.”

“Especially if we train for rival schools—then we can meet at competitions and no one would think it strange that we got together to supervise our trainees at the competition and at any hotels for out-of-London competitions,” Michael added.

They asked both of their affinities masters for time off for this purpose, as they knew they could not handle both the training with their masters and the sword masters training. After securing the release from training, they returned to Michael's room to fill out the forms.

The forms they had to fill out were on the desk next to Michael's bed. As one, they went to the desk to take up their forms and started filling them out. Both used the fountain pens that were graduation gifts. They took care that what they wrote was legible and in good form. They waited for the ink to dry, then took them to the foyer to be posted.

Their confirmation and training schedules arrived the next morning. They got together to see what, if any, matches they had in the schedules. They shared Advanced Footwork and Basic Training Tactics, but most of the other courses involved using their affinities to affect the outcome of matches.

The time for the intense training to be sword masters arrived. They both left from their families' London townhouses. Their carriages arrived within seconds of each other, and they walked into the training yard together. The early

morning lessons were the more physically demanding ones of Advanced Footwork and Basic Training Tactics. Both of these had to be completed before the heat of day could make the students and instructors tired and sloppy. It was well known that if errors were not caught early, it was hard to retrain the students correctly. Michael and Rafael were in a group together with six other people, all under a fastidious older woman who ran them through their paces hard and with an attitude of calm perfection and precision. Everyone was making errors, as was to be expected on the first day of training. By the end of the hour-long course, they were all sweating and had only completed one full run through the exercise, as each time an error was detected; she stopped the group and had them start from the beginning.

The Basic Training Tactic had them in separate groups, and was just as challenging as their earlier training. They had to pair up with a partner and take turns trying to teach each other basic moves like blocking, parrying, and simple thrusts, and the one being taught had to pretend they didn't know the moves. Then, the leaders of the class brought in young trainees and showed the class how to train the trainees in the basics.

Then, it was time for a lunch break. After lunch, they were to train with masters of their affinities for tactics that could only be used in training exercises for the class or in sanctioned competitions and exhibitions against other people who could use affinities. Rafael had it easier, because he only had one affinity to learn to use—fire. The first thing he was taught was never to use fire as an attack, only as a defence, unless he was fighting to defend his life. One bonus of Fire Affinity was that it lent quickness to his reflexes and steps. Also, he could make a small shield of fire like a buckler, easy enough for an attacker to avoid but able to protect a vulnerable spot. Rafael was taught how to make this precise and small enough that it could be used, because fire wanted to expand, and keeping it controlled was the first thing to learn when using it in combat.

Michael, with his Affinities of Ice, Water and Earth, had to learn how to decide which one was the best affinity to use for a given situation. The main benefit he got from any of the affinities was Earth's greater strength and endurance. Water, as a healing element, could slow the bleeding from any wounds he received. Ice was a great shield maker, but he couldn't ice up the ground or floor, as a slip with an open sword blade in hand could have fatal consequences.

As the courses progressed, the different affinity classes were brought together so that the students could experience what the other affinities could and could not do legally, and they were also shown what they could do when their life was at risk. They were also taught what, if any, counters you could do. Ice and water shields were good blocks for fire attack, as long as you didn't make the shield too close to yourself, as the steam created could injure you.

During the six months of intensive training, Michael and Rafael only managed a few stolen kisses, quick and tender. They started to snipe at each other, not personal attacks, but geared toward their combat style. Michael was called a plodding turtle of a defender, while Rafael was chastened for his quick, little, nipping attacks. It was clear that they were two of the best in the class, even if their styles were markedly different. They were usually called on to demonstrate the different styles when the classes joined together. What made them so good was that, even though they had their preferred combat style, they could and did use the other combat styles almost as well. In their affinities classes, they were the preferred sparring partner when trying to learn how to fight different styles than their classes' usual style.

Upon graduation from the sword master training, they were both offered trainer positions at two of the most highly-regarded training schools, Rafael at the Blazing Blades School and Michael at the Frozen Fortress School. Michael and Rafael were also told that they could not take any more time away from their affinities training, so they let the masters of the schools know that they could only work mornings or afternoons, but not both.

Chapter 3

Training Sword Students While Learning Advanced Affinity Techniques

Michael and Rafael thought that they were lucky when their sword school owners decided that they would serve best in the morning, leaving the afternoon devoted to advanced affinity lessons with the earls. They quickly learned otherwise. Sword training started promptly at dawn, which meant they had to be up and ready to leave the estate a half hour before dawn. And the earls usually kept them at their studies well into the late evening. The only good part about this was that by the time they went to bed, they were tired enough to easily fall asleep.

The earls and the school owners also knew that, even as they worked the young men hard. They also had to give them breaks so that they could recover from the stress that both activities caused. They got together and planned when they would ease up on Michael and Rafael. The bosses tried to arrange it so that the workers could arrange for little excursions away from London and their bosses. They were also, to the delight of the earls, both quick to master the affinity lessons set before them. The earls and the sword school owners were so pleased with Michael and Rafael's work and teaching that they decided to give them a week off after their second month.

Michael, as one of the more youthful men at the school, usually was the one chosen to train the more advanced students on how to counter the quickness of fire or air styles of swordsmanship. And Rafael, somehow, had enough defensive knowledge that he shared with the Master the duty of teaching the advanced students ways to beat the more stable and defensive styles of earth, ice, and water.

When the youths found out, they both decided to go to the hunting lodges their respective fathers had in the forests around the Norfolk area. They left early on Saturday, having made plans to meet up that night at a bonfire. When they arrived at the lodges, they unpacked their clothes, knowing that local servants had already provisioned the lodges. They each had a short staff of a housekeeper/cook and a butler/valet. The servants at the lodges had a soft spot for these two boys and knew how to keep a secret. They each, having had a light supper and being provided with spiced hard cider, rode to the village

bonfire where they shared a log. Snuggling together on the log, they made plans for the coming week and basked in the warmth of the fire.

Rafael asked, "Where do we go tonight?"

Michael shrugged and produced a long and short straw. "We go to the cabin of the one holding the long straw." He arranged the straws behind his back and set them so that the same length stuck out from his fist. Bringing the fist with the straws forward, he said, "You choose one, Rafe." Rafael pulled one out, and they compared the lengths. Rafael's straw was longer.

They took their horses back to Rafael's lodge. Having determined beforehand that the person whose lodge they were at was the one who would top and determine what happened, Rafael led Michael to the bedroom.

"Strip for me, Michael!" Rafael commanded.

"Yes."

As Rafael watched Michael strip, it brought on a rush of lust and heat. His dick was getting nice and hard in the confines of his breeches. Michael's cock was also hard and when released, stuck out and pointed at Rafael.

"Come to me!" Rafael ordered, as he started removing his clothes.

Michael stalked towards Rafael. Even knowing that Rafael got to call the shots, Michael was still an alpha, and let Rafael know it. Rafael was feeling heady that he could take charge over Michael, who was usually the more aggressive of the two.

"Kneel and kiss my balls!" Rafael growled out.

Feeling a little puckish, Michael replied, "Yes sir!"

"Work your mouth and tongue over them, boy!" Rafael's voice got husky and lower. "Show me how much you want me!"

Michael heated up with this command and started to work the testicles; he licked them with his tongue and worked to get both of the balls in his mouth at the same time. Michael moaned with pleasure as he finally succeeded and started sucking on them as his tongue teased the base of Rafael's cock.

"You are such a horny little boy. So wanting and needing my cock! Beg for it, Mike!"

"Give me your cock, Rafe! I need it so bad. You are making me into a horny little whore for it, please," Michael begged his voice raw with emotion.

“Suck my cock and surrender to me and your need,” Rafael demanded.

With a sigh of pleasure, Michael replied, “Yes,” before his mouth covered the head of Rafael’s penis. Licking and blowing warm air over the cockhead, Michael started pleasuring Rafael. With each suck, Michael tried going deeper down the shaft. He got about two-thirds of the cock in his mouth when it hit the back of his throat and triggered a gag reflex. Easing back a bit, Michael looked up and begged forgiveness with his eyes.

“Just relax and be patient and try again in a bit. It is all right, Michael.”

Michael worked on the shaft for a bit as his body calmed down from the gagging. Thinking of how it felt when Rafael was able to get all of Michael’s cock in his mouth and throat. Pulling off of Rafael’s penis, Michael said, “I want to make you feel so good, but I never have done this before.”

“If you cannot deep throat me, it will not change how I feel. I am so proud of you doing this.”

“I want to try again, but if I cannot, I will just have to practice more.”

Michael dove back onto Rafael’s cock and, working slowly until it was halfway in and then taking a deep breath, he drove his mouth forward and felt Rafael’s cock enter his throat. Michael hummed as he sucked and had to back up a few times so he could breathe.

Rafael, feeling the tension building in his balls, backed out and ordered Michael onto the bed with his ass up and spread. Rafael used oil to prepare Michael, slicked his index finger and slid it into the tight firm hole. Michael tensed up and moaned as he was invaded for the first time.

“Relax, Michael. It will feel so good in a bit. Just ride it out until then.”

Rafael’s finger slid deeper into the chute and soon found Michael’s prostate. Michael writhed and moaned while the finger massaged the nub that shot off such waves of pleasure into him. He didn’t even notice that two more fingers entered him, loosening him up even more. “Fuck me, Rafe! I do not want to wait anymore. Just do it.” Rafael’s fingers slid out, leaving Michael feeling empty. “Fill me, Rafe,” he growled. Michael felt Rafael’s cock at his hole, massaging and teasing it with light caresses. “Now,” Michael moaned with impatience.

Rafael slowly slid his cock in, knowing that even with the prep work; Michael would need time to adjust. He held still when just his head entered the

hole, and he heard Michael suck in his breath as he grew accustomed to the thickness of Rafael's cock. Soon, Michael was begging for more. Rafael pushed in slowly and always checked with Michael if he should continue going deeper. When all of Rafael's cock was buried in Michael's chute, Rafael picked up the pace of his thrusting. Both of them were panting hard and flush with arousal.

Michael groaned, "I am going to shoot soon."

Rafael growled, "So am I. Wait for me to come."

Thrusting frantically, Rafael soon was shooting his cum into Michael, exploding like a dam had burst. Feeling Rafael shooting cum into him, Michael's spunk erupted out of him. They both rode their orgasms until they collapsed, sated and exhausted.

A little while later, they got up, removed the cum-filled sheets, and fell asleep on the bare mattress.

For the rest of the week, they took turns hosting and taking the lead. During the days, they rode and hunted, and the nights were spent pleasuring each other. During their rides, they planned the next stage of insults and slights to cover up their feelings for one another.

Sooner than they wanted, their idyll was over and they returned to London and their popinjay pecking insults and social snubbing. Now they started to get a bit more personal, with hints of bad habits but nothing sexual in nature.

Chapter 4

Visitor from France

While Rafael was with his tutor, the Earl of Umbria, Edmund Taylor-Cooper, there was an interruption. Both knew that it had to be something fairly serious if it caused the lessons to be interrupted. Both men looking up to see Greaves, the butler, announce that a high-level visitor from France had arrived and needed to see the earl immediately.

“Who is it?” asked the earl curiously.

“His card says Lucien De Vries,” Greaves replied gravely.

“Show him in.”

“Very well, my Lord.”

Lucien had an interesting mix of features; he had a swarthy Mediterranean skin tone but pale blond hair of Scandinavian heritage. The De Vries family's monopolies in trade made them very rich and well-travelled. He clearly inherited the best features from his family's ancestry.

“Earl of Umbria, my father tenders his respects through me,” Lucien said with a European flair. “And I tender my respect as a Fire Affinity practitioner to another.”

“What can I do for you, Mr. De Vries?”

“I could use some additional training while I am here for a few months.”

“I do not have the time, but Rafael, who is my most promising practitioner, can help you.”

“Really, what level control does he have? I mean, if he does not have pinpoint accuracy, he will not be of any help.”

Rafael was getting tired of being judged and overlooked by Lucien, so he created a pinprick of flame half an inch from Lucien's nose tip. “Is that accurate enough? It is right where I wanted it—if I was very spiteful; I could have done that right on the tip of your aquiline nose.”

“I see you have a temper as well as some control in placement. Maybe, I could learn from you.”

“Oh I could teach you, but whether you learn is up to you and how much you put into listening to my instructions.”

Edmund chided Rafael with a mild rebuke. “Behave.”

Rafael said, “Sorry, Lucien. I should have behaved better and not replied to your nettling remarks.”

“That is all right. Father always says that I can be a right brat and spoiled rotten.”

No kidding, Rafael thought.

“Rafael, do all in your power to satisfy Lucien’s requests, as long as they are legal and appropriate usage of the affinity.”

“Yes, Dean.”

Lucien made a few more diplomatic overtures to the earl as Rafael gathered his supplies and made ready to leave.

Before Rafael left, he gave Lucien his card, saying, “Contact me and I will work with you.”

Three days later, Lucien visited Rafael at his father’s estate.

“I am ready for lessons. When can I start?”

“Let us go to a workroom, and you can show me what you know.”

“When?” Lucien asked.

“Now,” Rafael replied. Rafael motioned for Lucien to follow him and led him to the back of the house to a shielded workroom for fire magic. “Go on in.” Lucien and Rafael entered the workroom.

“Lucien, can you show me what you are capable of so I can determine what your level of proficiency is?”

Lucien went through the twelve apprentice cantrips and displayed six of the nine journeymen tricks. He flubbed the other three tricks, getting close but just falling short. He also displayed rudimentary understanding of triggered spells. Lucien could create a trigger that would go off when anything touched the trigger item, but couldn’t set one up for a specific species or type of object.

“Okay, we can work on the three tricks, but without specific permission I cannot teach you any more about triggers,” Rafael told Lucien. “I have two

hours now if you have the time, and we can go over how to make your flame fill only a certain area.”

“That will be fine,” Lucien replied.

“Okay. You will find a tumbler on the table. Bring it over here and place it on the wooden bench.”

Lucien did that.

“Now, try to fill the tumbler with flame but do not allow anything to spill out or over. And yes, the only way to accomplish this is to practice until you can do it. I will set a spell that will detect where the flame is and sound an alarm if it is outside the tumbler. Begin.”

Lucien tried and tried. For the first hour and a half, Lucien kept hearing the alarm as the flame escaped his control and expanded beyond where he wanted it. He was getting closer to what was requested, but the fire would always flare up beyond his willed limits. Snapping at Rafael, Lucien demanded, “Show me what I am doing wrong.”

“You are forgetting fire’s nature of expansion and trying to squelch the fire down in the tumbler. You should be working *with* the nature of fire. Fill it only halfway and let the fire expand to fill the tumbler. With the lesser amount of energy you use, it will not expand beyond the tumbler. But you want to be careful that you do not provide too little energy. If you do that it will not expand enough to fill the glass. When it does fill the vessel completely, you will hear a bell chime. Try again.”

“Why did you not tell me before this?” Lucien demanded.

“Would you have appreciated and learned this lesson if I gave it to you so easily?”

“I have to go meet with someone else now,” Lucien said, after getting the bell to chime six times in a row.

After Lucien left, he headed towards a gambling den that catered to a lower class of people. He was going to be buying up the debt of the head valet to the Crown Prince. Then, he would have a good source for information to keep his family in wealth and power. Lucien loved to be able to blackmail people to do what he wanted.

After he secured the debt of almost seventy-five pounds that the valet had incurred, Lucien met with the unfortunate gambler. Lucien told the valet, Ethan

Jarvis, that he would either spy for Lucien or he would have to call in the markers. Ethan reluctantly agreed to spy for Lucien.

Two weeks later, after Lucien produced a document that seemed to be legitimate and signed by Edmund Taylor-Cooper, Rafael taught Lucien more about triggers. One thing Rafael taught him was that to target a certain individual, the trigger had to be able to detect a certain thing that differentiated the target from others around him.

Rafael kept the document with him and, when he got to his father's estate, stored it in his private desk, locked up and secured in a secret drawer.

Chapter 5

An Exhibition and a Meeting with Royalty

A month after the lessons about triggers, Rafael and Michael attended a competition at a royal preserve near York. Rafael and Michael were to be the featured performers in an exhibition of swordsmanship. They both travelled in their school's coaches with the students they were chaperoning.

There were five separate schools entered in the competition and each could only bring five students and one instructor. The judges were from the royal knights.

Each student was ranked within their school group and they would each battle the four other students who had their same rank. It was clear that the competition would be between the Blazing Blades and the Frozen Fortress. After the four lowest ranks had their battles, both the Blazing Blades and the Frozen Fortress teams had two first place and two second place standings in the tiers. Whoever scored higher this round would win the competition, and then it would be time for the exhibitions. *Rafael and Michael had a side wager on the outcome of the competition: the loser would wait in the winner's room, naked and on the bed for the winner to claim.* It came down to which top student won when they battled against each other, because they both won all of their other matches. The student from the Blazing Blades had a quickness that overwhelmed the defences of the Frozen Fortress' student. With three quick lunges, the Frozen Fortress student was pinked three times by the Blazing Blades student.

Then, it was time for the exhibition. All of the students, along with many others, had heard rumours of the great abilities of the two featured swordsmen, and everyone wanted to know if those rumours were true.

Michael and Rafael entered the ring on opposite sides. They saluted each other with their swords before the flag fell to start the match. As this was an exhibition, they were expected to use their affinities to affect the outcome, but had to use them carefully. While a slight injury was okay, crippling or lethal damage wasn't. Michael advanced slowly with a languid grace, while Rafael pranced forward like a stag. Already calling up his ice shield, Michael got set in place for his defence. Rafael was within a few feet of Michael when he started a cheetah-like lunge with his sword, trying to get through the defences before

they could be set up. The ice shield blocked the lunge even as it was melted by the now blazing blade. As the ice shield melted, Michael converted the water into a whirling shield which would deflect the sword thrusts away and quench the fire on Rafael's blade. Michael used his Earth Affinity to grab at Rafael's feet and hold him in place for just long enough to break Rafael's momentum. Not enough to cause him to trip, but just enough that it would affect his speed. Michael saw an opening and thrust hard at Rafael's sword arm, but a fire buckler sprang up to stop Michael's blade. There were a lot of excellent thrusts and feints in this exhibition, and then a slight miscalculation on Rafael's part caused him to overextend himself, and allowed Michael to use Rafael's forward momentum to carry him out of the ring.

When Rafael got back into the ring, he slid Michael an extra key to his room and said that he would be expecting him in two hours. Michael, upon exiting the ring, was slipped a note from a page. Walking to where he could place his sword down for safekeeping, he scanned the note and saw that Crown Prince Edward had requested Michael's presence at Michael's earliest convenience. He managed a quick wash up and change, then Michael hurried to the royal suites at the hotel. Edward greeted him and sent most of his servants off on errands, keeping just Ethan Jarvis and two of his bodyguards in the room.

"Thank you for coming, Michael. I want you to consider becoming a special trade attaché to the new King of France, Henry. I believe that you are related to him."

"Yes, we are cousins. His mother is my father's sister."

"We need to see if Henry will rescind the royal monopoly granted to the De Vries family for trade with British merchants. The De Vries are making a fortune and hardly paying enough for our merchants doing business in France to stay afloat. This means our revenues are down, so our markets are being stagnated. You are the only one with the rank and charm to convince Henry to do this. Please say you will help me."

"I will, my Prince," Michael said.

"Good. You can disguise it as a trip to visit your aunt."

"I will need a couple of weeks to get it arranged. What can I tell my family and friends?"

"We are afraid that you will only be able to tell them that you need to go but not why. We hope this will not inconvenience you or your loved ones."

“Very well, I need to leave soon to pay off a wager.”

Michael hurried to Rafael's room to get ready for their chance to spend some secret time away from the pressures of society and be themselves, to let the obligations and requirements fall away, so that they could be lovers and not antagonists.

When Michael entered Rafael's room, he quickly stripped and staged himself on the bed for Rafael's viewing pleasure. He played with his cock to get it hard and ready for whatever Rafael wanted to do with or to it.

About ten minutes later, Rafael entered the room to see Michael naked in all his pale glory, waiting for him on the bed. Michael's cock was standing at attention, just begging to be devoured. Rafael didn't even bother removing his clothes. He just went to the bed, grabbed Michael's cock at the base and kissed then sucked the head in his hot, moist mouth. Michael moaned with pleasure at the feelings coursing through his body.

“Suck me harder, Rafe!” Michael commanded, even as he begged with his pale blue eyes darkening with arousal.

Pulling off Michael's penis, Rafael responded, “Mike, you know that as the winner of the bet I have control tonight. Just relax and let me take charge of this.”

Rafael smiled and his eyes grew a deeper shade of hazel as he breathed over Michael's cock then swallowed it into his mouth.

“Oh God, yes!” Michael exclaimed, before he started to whimper and moan and lost the ability to speak.

Rafael sucked the entire dick into his mouth and throat. His head was bobbing up and down on the cock as he lifted up enough to let him breathe every few seconds. The throaty moans and whimpers incited him to make this last a while so he could give Michael the pleasure he deserved. Michael felt Rafael's tongue all over his cock. Lasting for about ten minutes, Michael started shooting into Rafael's mouth and throat. After Rafael swallowed all of the cum, he stripped and had Michael spread his legs so they could fuck facing each other.

Rafael got the lube and teased Michael's taint and lubed both Michael's hole and his own cock. Trying to get Michael ready for the rest of the night, Rafael slid a finger into Michael's hole and slowly stretched and opened the entrance until he could insert another finger. He kept stretching the opening

until Michael could easily take three fingers in it. Michael moaned and pleaded for Rafael to fuck him. Soon Rafael's fingers left Michael's ass and his cock teased its way in until he found Michael's prostate and then started thrusting in and out faster and harder. The only sounds Michael could make were moans and yips of pleasure as Rafael made love to him and started kissing him in time to every thrust. "Love you, Mike," Rafael kept repeating, as his cock opened and explored Michael's ass. Soon enough, both men felt their balls tighten and tingle as they got ready to come.

"On three, Mike. We will come on the count of three!" Rafael demanded.

"Yes!" Michael moaned out.

"One," Rafael counted with a deep thrust into Michael. "Two," he continued, as he pulled out for just a bit. "Three!" he growled, as he plunged his cock all the way in and exploded his cum into Michael. Michael came at the same time. They fell onto each other, spent with passion. They slept together, and when they got up, Michael told Rafael about having to take a trip to France to visit family there.

Chapter 6

The Plots Advance

Rafael didn't say anything at first, just thought it over and brooded about what it could mean. He was afraid that Michael didn't want to be with him anymore, and this was his way to stage a way of trying to leave without actually leaving the relationship. Rafael let this state worry him until two days before Michael was to leave for his trip. They had arranged to meet to have a last encounter before Michael left for Paris.

"Michael, why are you going to Paris? Why now?" Rafael asked when Michael sat at the table of the private club they had booked.

"Rafael, I wish I could tell you more, but there are good reasons for this trip, and I am taking it on behest of another. Please do not think bad of me that I am constrained from telling you more than this."

"Mike, do you not trust me?"

"Rafe, if it was just me that would be affected by this, I would tell you. But there are others who could be harmed if I did not go, or if I let you know the reasons for the trip. Not that I think you cannot keep a secret, it is just that the more people I tell, the more chance there is for the wrong people to hear about it."

"You are just saying that so you can leave me and let time separate us," Rafael sulked.

"No, Rafe, I assure you I want us to be together, but I have to do this task on my own."

"You are leaving me because you cannot face what society will do to us. If you want to leave me, just do it—do not take this trip."

"I swear on my affinities that I do not want to leave, but I am the best person available to accomplish the task I need to do. And once it is accomplished, I will hurry back to you and tell everyone about us if that is what you want. I love you, Rafe, but I have to do this."

Rafael asked, "Are you running away from our problems by going to visit your aunt, Michael? How can you be so selfish?"

“There is more to this trip than I can tell, but I am not running away. There is more at stake than I am free to tell.”

“Fine,” Rafael snarled, as he left the club. “Do what you have to, but do not expect me to be waiting for you.”

Michael stared blankly at Rafael’s disappearing figure and wondered how this happened.

Meanwhile, Ethan Jarvis finally got a chance to meet with Lucien De Vries and let Lucien know about what the Crown Prince had asked Michael to do.

“Tell me again what you heard, Ethan!” Lucien demanded.

“I said that Crown Prince Edward asked Michael to be a trade attaché to Henry to negotiate for the removal of your family’s monopoly on British trade. It seems that Michael’s aunt is the Queen Mother of France, and Michael will be using a family visit to disguise the fact that this is going to be a diplomatic trip.”

“This is good. If I can prevent this, I will release you from half of your debt to me.”

Ethan shuddered and felt dirty; knowing that what he just did harmed his country and probably would cost people their lives. He hurried back to the palace, and in his room, cried and agonized over it. Ethan felt trapped. He knew he should tell the Crown Prince what he did, but he was too afraid to confess.

Lucien used his other contacts to find out how Michael was travelling to France. When he found out that Michael would be using the dirigible to travel, Lucien arranged to get on that dirigible to set up a trigger spell that would go off when a person with a lower body temperature got to within six inches of the trigger point by the necessary. He already determined that Michael was going to be the only person with Ice Affinity on the dirigible. Lucien paid off his contact and let the man know that he was expected to remain silent.

Rafael tossed and turned this night and the next, agonizing at what he did, but not wanting to back down, his pride too great to appear to be in the wrong. *Why could I not just let him know what was bothering me and wait for him to return? How will I live if we are not together anymore? Too late I realized that I love him and that I would do whatever it took to be with him. Please let him come back safely so I can make up for it.*

His father realized something was bothering Rafael and tried to get Rafael to tell him what was wrong. Even though he appeared to the world to be made

of ice and have no feelings, he loved his family dearly, and it pained him to see any one of his children suffering. All Richard could get from Rafael was that he made a mistake and wasn't sure if the person he wronged would forgive him.

Chapter 7

An Explosion and Truths Revealed

Michael was waiting for the dirigible to start loading, his fingers tapping on the arm of the plushy, upholstered chair in the VIP lounge. He rechecked his diplomatic credentials and, putting them away, he remembered Crown Prince Edward using his persuasive talent to convince Michael to become the trade attaché to the new French King, Henri.

'Michael, it has to be you. No one else has the rank, charm, connections, and knowledge to get this done. A bonus is that your aunt is the new King's mother, letting a family visit be a disguise for the diplomatic trip. We cannot let the De Vries monopoly strangle our trade anymore. Still, you will have to be careful. If the De Vries discover who you are before you can present yourself to the King, they will try to prevent you from reaching the King.'

Michael heard the boarding call for the dirigible and, as a VIP, he was allowed to board before the other passengers who didn't have that status. Combing his fingers through his hair, he boarded quickly. He took his assigned seat close to the rear, where he could keep his eyes open and scan for trouble. He checked the porthole by his seat and noticed that a board was nailed over it. He looked around to find a place to sit, where he could gaze out and keep track of travel progress. It looked like the best place was close to the rear exit and the necessary. It had a good-sized window to look out into the sky.

Finally, the dirigible passengers were loaded and it could lift off. The cabin seemed to be about half full. He felt the lift as the air and fire mages worked together to heat the air to provide buoyancy without damaging the dirigible's fabric skin. Waiting for the blimp to start cruising after reaching a suitable altitude, Michael scanned the passengers to see if anyone looked out of place. He heard a whirr as the mechanics for forward propulsion kicked in. He knew from previous dirigible trips that just at the start of the trip were the greatest chance for the dirigible to move unsteadily as the crew made adjustments so that everything would proceed more efficiently.

Waiting for a while, as the dirigible lurched through the adjustments, Michael tried to figure out what was happening with Rafael's and his relationship. Lately, the antagonism they used to cloak their love seemed to get

sharper and be more personal. Michael knew that he still needed and wanted Rafael, yet little things could set them off. He hoped that the time they were apart would make their hearts grow fonder.

Michael stopped reminiscing and moved towards the window so he could view out. As he neared the window, Michael felt a brief tingle of magic flaring up. Instinctively he tried to use ice and water magic to smother the fire he felt blooming by the exit. Unfortunately, the water and ice became steam which burned Michael's body, even as the flames caused by the magic were contained and smothered, leaving only minimal damage to the dirigible as the flight crew fought to bring it down safely.

The landing was rough, but not a crash. It landed on a field close to Dover. The air mages sent out an emergency call for help as there were some injuries sustained, Michael's being the worst.

There was only one water mage/medic on the crew, and his healing abilities were minimal—fine for minor scrapes and bruises and motion sickness, but next to useless with the burns that left Michael unconscious.

When the emergency calls went out, an official sent a message to Edmund Taylor-Cooper, Michael's father. Edmund was instructing Rafael at the time. Edmund blanched at what was sent to his mind by the air mage the official used. Rafael sensed something was wrong and asked what it was. Edmund said that the dirigible Michael was on had an accident near Dover, and Michael was unconscious and not responding to the treatment the onboard medic was providing.

Edmund cut the lesson short, saying he had to make arrangements to get there as fast as possible. Rafael knew that his father, as Michael's teacher, needed to know. So he asked permission to inform his father and said that he knew that his father would help in whatever way he could. Getting the permission, Rafael hurried to his father's estate.

Reaching it, he asked if Greaves could let his father know that Rafael needed to speak to him with great urgency. Waiting in the receiving room for Greaves' return, Rafael started pacing.

Rafael remembered his last words to Michael. *“Are you running away from our problems by going to visit your aunt, Michael? How can you be so selfish?”* And Michael's reply was, *“There is more to this trip than I can tell, but I am not running away. There is more at stake than I am free to tell.”*

Greaves cleared his throat when he returned. "His Lordship will see you in the parlour. Master Robert is also there. Follow me."

Rafael rolled his eyes at the formality his father, the earl, required. Following Greaves, he hurried through the main hallway to the parlour. Greaves knocked on the parlour door and introduced Rafael with proper solemnity.

"What do you need, Rafael?" the earl enquired.

"I am informing you that your student, Michael Taylor-Cooper, was in an accident on his dirigible flight to Paris to visit his aunt. He is injured and not responding well to the treatment the onboard medic is providing. I do not know the extent of the injuries, but he is near Dover. I need to get there as soon as possible."

"Why? I thought you could not stand him."

"Robert, can you keep what is said here confidential? If not, I need to ask you to leave."

Robert responded, "How serious about this are you?"

"The repercussions, if this got out, would ruin Michael. I do not care what happens to me—I am able to make this decision but Michael is not."

"I give my oath that what you say here will not be told to anyone without your permission."

"Father, Robert—Michael and I have been lovers for the last three years, since that trip senior year where the blizzard stranded us. We have acted as enemies to cover up the relationship. If either of you feel the need to disown me for the shame I bring you, so be it. Michael is fighting for his life, and I could never live with myself if I was not there providing whatever comfort I can. I am suspending my part of the misdirection. I love you both, but I have to do this."

"Of course you do, Rafe," Robert replied. "I will stand by you, society be damned. I am not going to stop loving my baby brother because society cannot mind its own business and has to judge those who are different harshly."

The earl said, "Rafael, I do not think anyone ever told you about it because so few people know this, but in this one instance, your love and Fire Affinity can help Michael recover. Part of the problem with healing an ice mage is that their body has a natural body temperature lower than others, and a fair amount of healing energy is wasted bringing their body up to average temperature for

humans. If you can use your power to gently raise his temperature, then more energy of both his and any treating medics can be used to cure his body. I was not going to mention this because of the anger you always seemed to have towards Michael, and doing this is best achieved with someone who has a strong non-blood family connection. We will get you there as fast as possible. You will have to convince Edmund of your sincerity by yourself.”

Chapter 8

Healing and Investigation and Capture

Michael had been transferred to the Saint Arthur Hospital for Burns, as approximately two-thirds of his body was covered in them. Michael's energy was directed towards keeping his body temperature stabilized and fighting off infection. He came in and out of consciousness, until the doctors placed him on drugs to force him to sleep. Michael's family and Rafael had come down together. Rafael was able to speak privately with Michael's father, Edmund.

"Sir, I feel you should know that I have loved Michael for the last three years. I have learned that by using my love and my fire energy to keep Michael's body temperature at the correct level, the healing energy of Michael and his medics can be used to more effectively heal his injuries."

"And how does Michael feel about you, Rafael?" Edmund asked.

"Do I have your word that you will treat Michael no differently until he is fully recovered?"

"You do have my solemn word."

"We have been lovers since that senior trip to Ullswater Lake, and pretended to be antagonistic when in public to prevent society's condemnation. We did have a fight because I was feeling insecure about his trip. He hinted that there was some danger—that if a certain party found out the reason for the trip, that party would act to prevent it."

"Rafael, do you know anyone else who could have created a trigger based on body temperature? I am told that it was a triggered spell. I know of only three people living in this country who could have created it—the mentor who taught me, you and me. My mentor is invalid and cannot leave his home, and I know I did not set it. With the antagonism between you two, I briefly considered it might have been you, but I know even if you hated him you would not blow up a dirigible."

"You mean you did not write a letter telling me that I could teach Lucien more about triggers than he already knew?"

"What are you talking about?"

“I was given a letter, from you, which was signed with your signature, saying I should teach Lucien whatever I could about triggers. I told him before that I would need permission from you to teach him more than he knew.”

“Interesting, because the message I got from Crown Prince Edward stated that Michael was on a mission to see to the end of the De Vries monopoly on British trade. I would say we have a suspect,” Edmund mused. “So we need to get you situated for helping Michael heal while I get the investigators on the right track.”

After two days, Michael’s body recovered enough to awaken. He was surprised to see Rafael in the room with him, holding his hands. He gasped out, “Rafe, what if someone sees us?”

“It is okay, Mike. Our families and the staff know and they support us. At least, they know I am in love with you. The only ones who know how you feel about me are our fathers and my oldest brother, Robert. If you want to pretend that you are still straight and want to hide what we are, I will understand and let you. But if our families support us, what society thinks is nothing to me. I will always be where you need me, and will do whatever and face whatever I have to.”

“Rafe, the spell was triggered, set for me especially as the only ice mage on board. The reason I was going I still cannot reveal fully, but it was a diplomatic mission, and if the family it would most hurt found out, they would have done this to stop me no matter who else died.”

“Shhh, your father knows the reason for the trip and is taking care that the investigators know who to look into. In fact, he is due here shortly to update me on the investigation.”

With a knock, Edmund entered to see Michael awake, and he and Rafael were holding on to each other. “Michael, it is so good to see that you are awake and healing well. And that you are with Rafael. So should I set society abuzz with the news of your partnership?”

“You truly don’t care that I love Rafael and that this would bring shame to the family?”

“Michael, as your brother-in-law-to-be, Robert said to Rafael and repeated to me, ‘Society be damned if I am going to let anything interfere with me loving my baby brother.’”

“I love you, Rafe. We are in this together and society can damn us to hell for all I care. I nearly died, and all I could think about is being with you and that I nearly drove you away.”

Edmund said, “I think this ended well. We captured Lucien, and he tried using his fire to get away before I stopped him and threatened him. He is being questioned under lock, key, and magical dampeners. They did not need me to direct the inquiry that way. As soon as Edward’s valet heard about the dirigible explosion, he admitted to being blackmailed by De Vries and telling him that you were going on the trip and would be an attaché. According to Edward, after consultation with my sister, Genevieve, and Henry, the rest of the De Vries family has been confined and the monopoly was ended.”

“If you can tell the rest of the family about Rafael and me, I would appreciate it. We will answer questions after I am feeling better.”

Epilogue

Two weeks later

Michael finally was able to leave the Saint Arthur Hospital for Burns. With a suitable entourage of family and friends surrounding him and Rafael, they exited to the cheers of said entourage. The Crown Prince himself was there to commend Michael for his bravery in containing the damage of the dirigible explosion to the detriment of his wellbeing. He also shook hands with Rafael and commended Rafael for taking diligent care of a hero of the realm. The two earls made a joint announcement that they were pleased that their sons were in love with each other and committed to being together, and that Michael and Rafael had the full support and love of their families.

Edmund and Richard smiled even more as they met privately with Michael and Rafael with two pieces of news. First, that Michael and Rafael were going on a cruise on Richard's personal yacht, and second, they were gifted with property from Edmund's vast holdings where they could build a house and farm.

Rafael smiled at Michael as he said, "We played with the two-edged swords of love and hate and survived better than could be hoped for."

The End

Author Bio

I am a forty-five year old gay male who has always dreamed of writing stories to be published. I work for a major fast food chain as a crew trainer. You can always find me reading or active in my church. I have a very supportive family and church that I love. I was blessed with the privilege to write two stories for this event.

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A POINT OF HONOUR

By K. Mason

Photo Description

In a clearing within a wood, a long haired young man, wearing black hose and tunic with lacing up the sleeves, kneels on his left knee. His head is bowed over his hands, which tightly grip the hilt of a plain long sword, which is held in front of him, tip down on the ground. It appears as though he is showing submission to whoever is standing in front of him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The man in the picture has a difficult choice to make, and whatever he decides will influence many lives. Who is he, and what led him to where he is now?

I'd love to read a story set in the Middle Ages, with plot that isn't solely focused on the relationship. Explicit sexual content and tension are beyond welcome, but please no non-con scenes or BDSM.

Think steel, blood, sweat, and forbidden lust. ;D

Sincerely,

Agnes

P.S.: I'd prefer it not to be too angsty—people were tough back then ;)

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: outlaws, knights, reunited, friends to lovers, outdoor sex, frottage, first time, HFN

Word Count: 29,177

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A POINT OF HONOUR

By K. Mason

August 1204

The screams of fear, pain and anger faded behind him as he galloped through the woods. Soon, all Stefan could hear was the steady beat of hooves on hard ground and the pulse of his own blood as it rushed past his ears. Bent forward over his horse's neck to avoid being hit by low hanging branches, he trusted his mount to follow the almost invisible poachers' path through the trees. He gripped the reins in one hand, but made no attempt to steer. The other grasped the heavy burlap sacks which he had tied together and hung just in front of the pommel of the worn leather saddle, the contents clinking occasionally with the movement of the horse.

By the time the trees thinned out and he began to slow the horse, first to a bone-jarring trot and then finally to a walk, daylight was fading. Above him, the sky had turned an inky violet and the first stars had begun to appear. Both he and his horse were breathing heavily as they drew to a halt at the edge of the wood and surveyed their surroundings. There was no one in sight or hearing.

"Good boy." He patted the horse's neck in approval before nudging him back into a walk and turning him onto the worn track that led towards Elmton Bluff, and the caves that passed for home.

The outer boundary of the small village of Elmton, which stood on the opposite side of the river from the limestone escarpment which housed the caves, was marked out by a row of open sided barn sheds. Stefan could hear the lowing of cattle waiting to be milked as he approached. Beyond that, a cluster of wooden houses, barely more than shacks, had been set up haphazardly. In the twilight, Stefan couldn't see the smoke of the cooking fires that he knew would be rising through the thatching of the dwellings. He could just make out a larger, denser, plume of smoke on the far side of the village. The trademark sign of the smithy, the most important building. In the distance he could hear the faint but steady hammering of steel on steel, a sound that more than anything made him feel at home—a reminder of days when he lived in a castle, not a cave.

Suddenly, he heard the clatter of horses approaching at speed from behind him. Turning back off the track, Stefan dug his heels into his own horse's flank and they plunged into the shelter of a spinney of young beech trees. As soon as they were under cover, he pulled his horse up and swung back round to face the road. Stefan reached for the sword that sat in the battered scabbard on his left hip, his hand resting lightly over the hilt.

As the riders came closer, they began to slow, finally drawing to a halt on the road level with where Stefan hid within the trees. He could hear the low murmur of voices, but couldn't catch the words. Cautiously, Stefan made the call of an owl, hooting twice then waiting for the count of three and calling once more. He was answered almost immediately with the same signal in reverse. Dropping his hand from his weapon, he swung down from the horse and led it back towards the road, where five men waited, still mounted.

"My Lord, how like you to be first back." The dark haired man at the back of the group gave a mocking bow from atop his horse as he spoke.

"And how like you to be last, Drake," Stefan replied sarcastically, with a slight inclination of his head.

"Oh, don't start the pair of you." The leader of the group fixed each of them with a glare from under his thick, dark eyebrows as he spoke. Stefan and Drake both mumbled something that could have been taken as an apology. The other man swung down from his horse and gathered the reins in his gloved fist. "Let's get the horses in and settled."

The others followed his example and dismounted. The six men led their horses around the outside of the village to the last barn and tethered them to the wooden fencing. Like Stefan's, four of their horses had burlap sacks resting over their withers. As the men lifted them, some were obviously heavier than others. A couple of the men slung theirs over their shoulders and began to untack their mounts. Stefan held his in his hand, gently hefting it up and down so the contents gave out a series of metallic clinks.

"Leave them," the leader of the group commanded, dropping his saddle over the fence. "Wilf will send some of the boys down to deal with the tack and turn them out into the meadow." He smacked his hand against his horse's neck, with a dull hollow sound as leather met heavy muscle, before turning away and walking towards the river.

The others followed him, Stefan staying as far away from Drake as possible. There was no love lost between him and the older man, who constantly mocked

the fact that, despite his noble upbringing, he was no more than a common outlaw. It was he who had bestowed on him the nickname “My Lord”, shortly after their first meeting.

The arched wooden footbridge crossed at the narrowest part of the river. As they reached, it two young men carrying torches were just stepping off onto the grass.

“Wilf send you down to see to the horses?”

“Yes, Booker,” the tallest of the pair replied quickly.

“Good lad.” Booker reached forward and ruffled the thatch of mousey brown hair.

The youngster gazed up at him with something close to reverence. Stefan smiled inwardly; he knew that look. He’d seen it before on other young men, new to the group, being tested to see if they had what was needed to earn their place and stay. Hell, he’d probably given Booker the same look himself in the early days, when he was desperate to belong, when he wanted nothing more than something that felt like family.

He wondered idly how long it would be before Booker took the lad to his bed. It was part of Booker’s methods to promote loyalty and trust. He never took anyone unwilling; it was all done in comfort. For Stefan, it had only been a few months after joining the group before he’d been pulled into the pile of stolen furs and blankets laid out on the ground in the back of Booker’s small, private cave. The man had held him close, all the time asking if this was what he wanted, before slowly removing his hose and shift. Then he’d run his calloused hands over Stefan’s body, finally removing his undergarments and stroking his member with rough fingers, until he spilt his seed into Booker’s palm.

There was no expectation of anything in return, but Stefan had wanted desperately to please the older man. So he had taken the hard, heavy erection into his own hand, still soft and childlike in comparison to those that had played him. Hesitantly, he’d begun to stroke, then, encouraged by the noises Booker was making, he tightened his grip and began to move his fist with more determination. When the warm and sticky fluid gushed over his fingers, Stefan felt a warm rush of satisfaction. Booker had taken him into his arms and held him overnight. He’d spent more than a few nights with Booker since, but he’d never told anyone that the first time was how he celebrated his seventeenth birthday.

Booker led the way up the steep path towards the large opening in the rock face. Outside, another half dozen men worked as they waited. Three were sharpening an untidy selection of swords and axes that lay on the ground around them, the metal grating with an unpleasant noise over the surface of the whetstone. Another two were helping feed the fire, over which a large pot hung on a thick piece of green wood. Two women held skillets over the flames. The elder had streaks of grey in the black hair that was pulled back from her lined face. The other, a slight, young woman, with a patch over her left eye. Stefan's mouth watered at the smell of the frying meat, even as his stomach grumbled its complaints. It had been a long time since he'd broken his fast with only a hunk of day old bread soaked in goat's milk.

Booker strode towards the older woman and grabbed her round the waist, bussing her soundly on the mouth as she turned her head towards him. He skipped back with a laugh as she aimed a slap at him with the heavy wooden spoon, grease splattering on his tunic.

"You can pack that in if you want feeding tonight," she threatened.

"Sarah, my love, you wouldn't be so cruel?" Booker grinned. Reaching out, he tapped her familiarly on her backside as she gave him a final glare and turned back towards the fire.

Leaving her to her cooking, he sauntered over to the last man of the group. He sat on a rock by the fire, a book open on his knees and a pen in his left hand. Though Wilf was almost as old as Stefan, he looked much younger. Large blue eyes looked out from under the shaggy blond hair that surrounded a pale face; the bridge of his nose was sprinkled with freckles. His right arm, withered and limp, hung against his body, only the tips of his twisted fingers showing below the shortened sleeve of his tunic. He looked over at the approaching men expectantly.

"Well then, what have you got for me?" he asked eagerly as Booker approached, the rest of the men following him.

One by one, the men opened the rough sacks they carried and tipped the contents out onto the ground in front of him, before stepping back out of the way.

"Nice," the man almost purred as his eyes inventoried the goods.

His bag now empty, Stefan wandered over to the rock-face behind the fire. On a ledge, at hip height, was an open barrel of small beer. Taking a wooden beaker from the pile beside it, he dipped himself a cup of the sun-warmed brew.

He didn't realise how dry his throat was until he started to drink. The first cup did much to ease his thirst; he barely tasted the bitterness of the cloudy brew as he gulped it down. Dipping out a second drink, he carried it back towards the others and perched on one of the rocks scattered around the fire.

As the last of the bags were emptied, the young man suddenly jerked his head up and stared coolly at the man who held it.

"And the rest, Tripp," he said quietly.

"That's all of it," Tripp replied evenly. He stepped back as he spoke, his hand still clutched round the bottom of the upturned sack.

The rest of the men fell silent, an uneasy tension spread through them. More than one man's hand strayed automatically to whatever weapon he carried.

"Problem, Wilf?" Booker asked calmly, making his way back to the front of the group.

"I hope not. Tripp here seems to be having a small problem letting go of the goods."

"Let me see if I can help." Drake stepped up behind Tripp, his left arm reaching round and grabbing Tripp's wrist, hard. Tripp hissed as Drake continued to apply pressure to the joint. He tried to step away, twisting his arm up sharply to break the restraining grip. As he moved, Drake's other arm dropped over his right shoulder. The short dagger he held in his hand came to rest against Tripp's throat.

"Drop it," Drake said coldly.

No one moved. Drake squeezed more tightly on Tripp's wrist; at the same time, the point of his dagger punctured the skin just below his Adam's apple. A single drop of blood welled up and began to run down his neck. Tripp began to turn white, his captured hand shaking.

"Drop it," Drake repeated. With a growl, Tripp flung the bag towards Wilf and struggled to get free. Drake didn't let go, instead he pushed the blade deeper into Tripp's neck.

Only Wilf moved. Putting aside the book and quill pen, he picked up the bag and upended it. Four large silver coins tumbled out to join others on the ground in front of them.

Without a word, Booker walked up to Tripp. Drake let him go and stepped back quickly as Booker raised his hand and casually backhanded Tripp. Tripp's head jerked sharply backwards with the force of the blow.

“You’re gone,” Booker said with finality. “I told you when you joined us, this is a joint enterprise. We don’t steal from each other. We work together. You had your chance.”

“We’re thieves and outlaws for Christ’s sake! Of course we steal from each other,” Tripp said angrily as he looked round the group. “Most of you would steal from your own mothers given half a chance.”

“No,” Booker said flatly. “We wouldn’t. We may be thieves, and worse, but we don’t commit murder, we don’t rape, and we don’t steal from each other.”

“Honour amongst thieves. You really believe that?” Tripp interrupted.

“My group. My rules,” Booker continued as though Tripp hadn’t spoken. “Collect your belongings. Drake, Aidan, see that he’s at least five leagues away before you return.” Booker turned away, not waiting to see if his commands were followed, and strode into the cave. Sarah whispered something to her helper as he passed and then followed him inside.

“Come on, lad.” Aidan, the oldest of the group, rose to his feet from where he’d been sitting next to the fire. “You heard the boss.”

“I want my share first,” Tripp demanded, stepping quickly towards where Wilf had started to sort through the spoils of the day’s work and drawing a knife from his own belt.

Without thinking what he was doing, Stefan started to move. He stepped directly between the two men and drew his sword. Holding the point low in front of him, his grip loose on the hilt, he waited.

“Get out of my way, boy,” Tripp snarled. “I will take what’s mine.”

“Don’t be foolish,” Aidan cautioned as Tripp stepped forward again, hefting the knife in his hand.

“Move.” Tripp’s arm thrust forward as he spoke, the blade slashing towards Stefan’s face. Stefan feinted to the left; at the same time, he brought his sword arm up, knocking Tripp’s arm away. The longer reach of his weapon gave him the advantage.

“You aren’t a murderer, remember?” Tripp said as he raised his knife again.

“I’d call it self defence,” Stefan said with a grin as he lunged forward, striking at Tripp’s hand with the flat of the blade and sending the knife spinning into the grass.

“Enough!” Drake barked from behind them. “Put your toy away, My Lord. And you.” He aimed a hard kick at the back of Tripp’s knee. “Get your stuff, or I’ll run you off without it.”

Stefan stepped back, but didn’t immediately re-sheath his sword. Drake, running out of patience, grabbed Tripp roughly by the arm and twisted it behind him, marching him away towards the cave. Aidan followed slowly in their wake. The tension ebbed out of the watching men, and a buzz of chatter started up as they returned to what they’d been doing.

Stefan finally put his sword up and took a seat on the rock next to Wilf, who, completely unruffled by the turn of events, continued to write details of their haul in the book on his knees.

By the time Booker and Sarah emerged from the cave, the two young men had returned from tending the horses. Sarah and her helper, Nell, began to dish out bowls of thick barley and vegetable pottage, served with a piece of braised rabbit on the top. The men helped themselves to slices of warm, heavy rye bread and beakers of ale. For a while, the only noise in the camp was the crackling of the fire, and the dull clink and scrape of the wooden spoons they used.

“Right, Wilf,” Booker said eventually, laying his bowl aside. “What have we got?”

“It was a good day.” Wilf’s eyes brightened as he spoke. “We’ve coin enough to buy food and necessities for at least three weeks. There are a couple of bolts of cloth that won’t fetch any useful sort of price, but we can probably make use of them. Some silks, which should fetch a good price. The jewellery and silver plate we’ll need to fence. I’d suggest that’s taken even further afield this time.” He paused for a moment to think, before continuing. “You said the caravan was going from Cambridge up to York, so I’d suggest perhaps we try Litchfield. They’re building the new cathedral so there’ll be traders passing through. I suggest we try to set up an agreement to exchange goods with one of the traders coming from Chester way.” He looked down at his inventory again. “Other than that, there are a couple of daggers but no other weapons. I suggest we keep those for now. They’re not decorative so won’t fetch anything much.”

“Very well,” Booker said with a nod. “Tomorrow then, Madoc, Cerdic and Edwin, you take yourselves off to Litchfield with a selection of the goods and

see what you can do. We'll take coin for them, or a straight trade for items we can sell closer to home."

"It's a fair distance to travel, and setting something up might take us more than a day, particularly if we don't want to raise any suspicions." Madoc's accent gave away his Welsh ancestry.

"Fine." Booker nodded in agreement. "But if you aren't back in three we'll come and look for you. Hal, check in the village and see if there is anything they need. Then, you and David take Sarah and Nell over to Worchesope in the wagon. We should stock up on provisions whilst we've a chance."

"We'll need to stop at the Priory to speak to the Infirmarer, and I should buy some herbs and more salve from him whilst I've a chance," Sarah added.

"Very well, Drake and Aidan won't be back till around dawn so they can stay here tomorrow with Wilf and the boys." Wilf nodded in resignation. He rarely got the opportunity to go further than the village; his withered arm and pale blond hair made him far too easily recognisable. "Ralf, Stefan, you two are with me. We'll be leaving early for Doncaster."

"Fine," Ralf replied with a sideways glance at Stefan, who nodded. Despite wanting to ask why they were going there, Stefan knew better than to waste his breath asking questions.

"Good, now I'm calling it a night. Boys, here." He snapped his fingers and the two boys came scurrying over from the far side of the fire. "Do as Aidan and Wilf tell you tomorrow, but make sure that we've enough wood for the fire and that Sarah's cooking pots are all clean."

"Yes, Booker." The pair replied in chorus, sounding unbelievably young to Stefan's ears.

"Good, bed now, the pair of you." He reached out and patted them both on the arm as they scurried past him into the cave. Looking at the men around the fire he added, "Tidy up out here, then get your rest." He held out his hand to Sarah, "Coming my love?"

"Nell, you turn in too," Sarah said as she rose to her feet and took Booker's hand. The younger woman followed them into the caves.

Stefan sat for a while watching the fire as it died down to embers. Gradually, the men began to collect their goods for the following day from Wilf, before drifting away into the caves, some singly, others in pairs. There were no fixed relationships amongst the men; comfort, and release, was taken

wherever it could be found. The only exception was the women. Sarah was exclusively Booker's helpmate and, in addition, she was fiercely protective of young Nell's virtue. Woe betide anyone whose hands, let alone other body parts, strayed too close to the girl. Sarah was fast with a short blade, as many who had pushed their luck could attest to.

"Are you staying out here all night?" The wizened fingers of Wilf's right arm brushed lightly against Stefan's shoulder; he hadn't even heard him approach.

"I guess not," Stefan said, as he rose to his feet. "Do you want company tonight?"

"That would be nice," Wilf replied with a grin and headed towards the mouth of the caves with Stefan following him, glad of a friend with whom he could share himself without expectations.

The early morning cloud had long since burnt away, leaving only a few wisps of cloud in the clear blue sky above them. By the time they turned their horses off of the Great North Road and onto the track that ran alongside the River Don, it was beginning to get uncomfortably warm. Stefan had already thrown back the hood of his woollen travelling mantle. His long straight hair was tied at the nape of his neck with a leather thong, and the exposed pale skin on his forehead and nose was beginning to prickle, suggesting it was starting to burn. Booker had remained characteristically close mouthed about the purpose of their journey, but Stefan had noticed that, aside from a handful of coins, he'd not brought anything with them to trade.

They weren't the only travellers on the road. Goods wagons loaded for market trundled along the path, which was marked out only by the well-worn, hard packed soil surface. It was crossed too often for grass to grow. As they got closer to Doncaster itself, they passed teams of drovers, their herds of heavily coated sheep meandering slowly and haphazardly in front of them. Dogs darted amongst them, trying to keep the flocks moving forwards.

Stefan's horse fidgeted impatiently under him as they stood in the queue waiting to cross the bridge that lead up to the Boar's Gate, one of the five entrances to the walled city. Passing through the fortified gateway, they moved onto Market Street, their horses' hooves skidding slightly until they got used to the cobbled surface. The main market was being set up in the forecourt that surrounded the Church of St Mary Magdalene. The livestock were herded into

pens to one side of the square, while at the others vendors and merchants set out booths to display their goods. The noise and bustle continued to grow as sellers cried their wares to a background of bleating sheep and squawking poultry. Booker kept his horse moving forward, leading Stefan and Ralf straight past the chaos and out the other side.

Turning onto Baxtergate, they pulled their horses up in shock. This had once been a busy street of bakers' shops, where had risen the homely smell of fresh baked bread. Instead, all that remained were the charred, skeletal frames of the wooden buildings. In places, they'd been reduced down to almost nothing, just piles of timber littering the ground, spilling out into the street itself. Here and there, amongst the ruins, children darted in and out of the debris, their faces, hands and legs coated in soot and ash.

"Merciful God," Ralf whispered as he stared at the devastation.

"I hope he was," Stefan replied sincerely.

"Come on," Booker said impatiently, nudging his own horse into a walk again. "I'm meeting someone before noon at the Inn on Frenchgate; he said he wants to put some business our way."

"Business?" Stefan asked as he moved his horse forward to join Booker's. Ralf followed, still surveying in horror what was left of the street. Their horses' hooves stirred up clouds of ash as they walked.

"Yes, he's offering a commission for us to recover something for him. He sent word via the smithy last week for us to meet him here today, if we were interested. He'll be in the back room waiting."

"And you trust him?"

"He gave the usual passwords in the message," Booker said with a shrug, then put his hand to the short dagger that hung at his belt beneath his cloak, "and I'm not going in unprepared."

"What do you want us to do?" Ralf asked.

"The Inn is close by the junction with Silver Street. If we ride past and can't see anything amiss, then, Stefan, you and I will leave our horses with Ralf and go back into the inn, separately. You go in first, get a drink and then find a seat in a corner of the back room. The man I'm meeting will be sitting alone and have a set of dice on the table to identify himself. If you can, get close enough to listen."

"So you don't trust him then."

“I don’t know him. So I am taking no chances. But needs must, and he’s offering good coin for the work. I’ll follow about five minutes after you. If you think there is anything wrong, anything at all, don’t stop, come straight back out.”

“Fine.” Stefan replied curtly.

The Inn was the last building at the end of the road. A sign with a crude painting of three dirty yellow crowns on a green background hung over the open doorway. Riding down the street, Stefan was struck by the fact that around him people were talking in the Norman French of his childhood home, not the English that he’d gotten used to speaking amongst Booker’s men over the last five years.

“The man you’re meeting, he does speak English?” Stefan asked as they rounded the corner into Silver Street.

“Yes, it’s one of the reasons for meeting here. This part of the city is mainly Norman traders, so anyone overhearing will probably not understand much of our conversation.”

They drew to a halt by a large, stone water trough and dismounted. The horses had their muzzles in the water before Stefan and Booker handed Ralf the reins.

“If we’re not back in an hour, take the horses out of town and go south. Stay off the roads. Don’t stop and wait for us. If we don’t catch up by nightfall, head back to the Bluff,” Booker ordered. Turning to Stefan, he added, “The same goes for you lad, any trouble get yourself out; we’ll meet up later.”

Stefan nodded as he pulled the hood of his cloak up over his hair. Turning away with a final pat to his horse’s neck, he walked slowly back along the street, taking care not to draw attention to himself.

The Inn was hot and stuffy. Swirls of dust danced in the thin shafts of sunlight that fell through the dirty glass windows. The air smelt and tasted stale. The main room was filled with around a dozen tables; bench seating and low stools had been set up around them. Despite the hour, a good number of patrons appeared to be already well into their cups. At one table, a spirited trade was underway, with goods spread out in front of the men sitting there as they haggled noisily. Carefully Stefan scanned the room, but nothing seemed unusual or out of place. Signalling to a weary looking bar maid, he handed over a silver penny in exchange for a tankard of ale. Pointing through to the back

room, he indicated where she should bring it before heading through the low doorway that separated the two rooms.

This room was smaller and darker. The windows, set high up in the whitewashed walls, gave only scant light. No fire burnt in the large, stone fireplace that took up half of one wall. There were four tables in the room, and only two were occupied. At one of them two young, finely dressed men sat, both of whom looked not only decidedly out of place in these surroundings, but a little the worse for wear. At another table a solitary man sat with his back against the wall, as he negligently tossed a set of dice in one hand. The tankard of ale in front of him appeared untouched, the slight foam of the head still visible over the rim. Stefan couldn't see the man's features, as the hood of his cloak shadowed his face. The cloak itself was open, and beneath it Stefan could make out a lighter coloured surcoat cinched at the waist with a heavy leather belt. The belt angled downwards slightly on the left side, which gave Stefan the impression that the man was armed.

Moving past without stopping, Stefan took a seat at the far corner of the next table over. After the bar maid brought over his drink, he thanked her and took a mouthful of the ale, the sour brew causing his mouth to twist into a grimace. Pushing the tankard away, he slouched down in his seat and let his head fall forward, pretending to fall asleep.

It wasn't long before he heard someone else enter the room. Tilting his head slightly and looking through his eyelashes, he saw Booker pause in the doorway and scan the room before casually walking over to the table occupied by the dice-tossing man.

"May I, Wilhelm?" he asked. Not waiting for a reply, he placed the tankard he was carrying down, pulling out a stool and settling himself on the opposite side of the table.

"You wager, Booker?" The other man asked as he cast the dice again onto the wooden table top. Booker nodded, confirming his identity, before he produced a battered leather coin pouch from under his cloak.

"The stakes?" he asked.

"Best of three, silver penny a game, highest roll wins."

"Your coin?" Booker asked as he shook out a small pile of pennies onto the table. The other man grunted as he produced a handful of mixed coins.

It was impossible for Stefan to hear the conversation between the two men. They spoke softly, their voices further hidden beneath the clatter of bone dice against wood and the clinking of the moving coins.

Eventually the game ended and Booker gathered up the pile of coins now resting on his side of the table. Standing, he lifted his tankard and saluted the other man before draining the last of the contents.

“Good game,” he said simply to the other man before he turned and left.

Still feigning sleep, Stefan waited for the other man to leave. It wasn't five minutes before he tucked the dice and remaining coins away under his cloak. Pushing back from the table, he stood and raised his right hand to reset his hood. A heavy gold ring glinted as it moved through a shaft of light from the windows. Stefan had to suppress a gasp of surprise at the sudden sense of déjà vu. He'd seen that ring before, or a likeness of it.

Stefan had an overwhelming feeling that he was missing something. No sooner had the man left the room than he stood up and followed. Without looking behind him, the man walked confidently down the street. Stefan kept in the shadow of the buildings, his hooded cloak gathered tightly around him, as he trailed behind. They were nearly at the Hallgate entrance to the city when the man stopped suddenly, outside a livery stable. On the opposite side of the road, Stefan kept walking, trying not to be noticed. Darting into the entrance of a nearby alleyway, he stopped and risked a glance over his shoulder. The man had gone.

Cursing under his breath Stefan waited, watching the street to see if the man would reappear. Ten minutes later and the stench that rose from the refuse left in the alleyway was making his stomach churn. He was about to give up and see if he could find Booker and Ralf before they left the city, when five armed men on horseback exited the livery yard. In the middle, no longer wearing the nondescript travellers cloak but instead a deep red cape, marked out with the badge of the Earl of Somerset, was the man he'd been following.

“Whoreson!” Stefan swore as he watched them go.

By the time Stefan returned to Silver Street, Ralf and Booker had gone. Following Booker's earlier instructions, he headed south, staying off the Great North Road and travelling along footpaths and game trails that wound their way through the woodland. He skirted around the edge of the busy town of Tickhill

and, with an eye to the position of the sun, continued to the southwest. It was late afternoon before he reached the small hamlet of Oldcotes.

There was little movement around the cluster of wooden framed cruck houses which formed the centre of the village. At this time of day, nearly all would be out tending the fields and livestock that made their livelihood. A few very small children played alongside scrawny chickens, who scratched in the dust searching for food.

As Stefan reached the first cottage, a woman came to the doorway with a child of about two, red faced and crying, riding one hip. In her other hand she carried a heavy metal skillet.

“Good day,” Stefan said pleasantly, stopping several feet from the doorway.

“What do you want?” she asked bluntly, eying him with suspicion.

“I’m just passing through, on my way home, to Elmton.” Stefan paused. The name of his own village was known hereabouts, not least as the base for Booker’s camp in the bluff. He was relieved when the flinty glare he was receiving changed into a slightly warmer smile.

“Are you Stefan?” she asked, to which he nodded. “Do you know our Wilf then? Can you describe him?”

“Yes, blond hair, freckles and a crippled right arm. How do you know him?”

“I don’t,” she said with a shrug. “But you do and that’s what matters. Two men came by earlier with three horses. They said someone might be following and that, if they looked as you do, and were able to describe Wilf, as you did, then you were Stefan.”

“Did they leave any other message?”

“Nah, but if you follow the path there,” she pointed over Stefan’s right shoulder out of the village, “you’ll find the river. They said they’d water their horses and rest for an hour or so.”

“Thank you.” Stefan dug in the pouch hanging from his belt and drew out a small silver half-penny and tucked it between her hand and the child she held.

Booker and Ralf were sitting at the water’s edge when Stefan found them, the horses cropping grass close by.

“What kept you, boy?” Booker asked as he reached them.

“Slight detour,” Stefan replied. “I followed your man out of the Inn and saw him leave the city. By the time I made it back to Silver Street you’d gone.”

“You followed him? Why?” Ralf asked.

“I wanted to check something,” Stefan said blandly.

“Were you spotted?” Booker asked sharply, and Stefan shook his head in response. “Fine, let’s get home. We’ll discuss it later.”

By the time they reached the Bluff, night had fallen. The sky had clouded over and big, heavy, drops of rain were falling, bouncing off the limestone plateau outside the caves. Sarah had the fire pit in the central cave going, her ever-present cauldron of pottage on a hook over it. Stefan sank down on to a seat fashioned from a fallen tree trunk, dragged into the cave and rolled against the wall.

“Here.” Wilf waved a beaker of ale in front of him. “Long day?”

“Yeah, and it’s not over yet.”

Wilf raised an eyebrow at Stefan’s response. “Problems?” he asked, but Stefan only shook his head as Wilf took a seat next to him.

Everyone had returned, except the three men who’d headed to Litchfield with the jewellery. After they’d finished eating, Booker rose from his seat beside the fire.

“We’ve got a commission,” he announced. “I met with a man today who, for a price, wants us to help him recover something that belongs to his lord’s family. Five days from now, a coach will be travelling the Great North Road from Nottingham to York, carrying with it two young boys who are being held prisoner by Lord Sans-Terre.” Stefan jolted suddenly at the name, sitting bolt upright and hissing through his teeth. “We’re to retrieve the boys and take them to safety, at Peveril Castle.”

“Peveril?” Wilf whispered to Stefan. “That’s one of Derby’s castles isn’t it?”

“Yes, which is odd given that the man wasn’t one of Derby’s men,” Stefan replied. Booker glared at them for a second before continuing.

“They’ll be in a carriage with a couple of servants and a guard of around six armed men. If we can distract the guards, then a couple of us should be able to slip into the carriage and get the boys out. They’re young enough that doubling

up on horseback won't mean carrying too much weight. I think the best place for an ambush would be early on in the journey, probably around Ranby."

Stefan rose to his feet. "Booker, I think we've got a problem," he interrupted.

"Why? It seems a simple enough job?"

"Yeah, perhaps a little too good to be true maybe," Stefan couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "Do you actually know who you are working for? Or who Lord Sans-Terre is?"

"We're working for the man who's paying us," Booker replied, a hint of anger in his voice.

"And that is?"

"The Earl of Derby, his man was carrying his seal."

"Seals can be forged," Stefan said bluntly. "Did he give you any other evidence of his identity, or say whose children they were?"

"No, he seemed honest enough. He said the children were Derby's sister's."

"Christ's sake, Derby doesn't have a sister," Stefan snapped.

"And of course, My Lord Stefan here knows all about the nobility," Drake mocked. "What with him being of such a high station and all that. Not, of course, being a disowned bastard."

"Drake," Aidan growled warningly. "Let him continue."

"I told you I followed the man after you met with him, and he's not one of Derby's men. When he rode out the city, he was wearing the badge of a different lord. He's one of Somerset's men."

"Somerset? But..."

"Yes," Stefan interrupted angrily. "And Lord Sans-Terre, God's blood, you really have no idea do you? Do you want to hang for treason, have your head put on a pike above The Tower gates?" Booker stepped back as Stefan surged towards him, angrily waving his arms. "Lord Sans-Terre," he continued. "Sans-Terre is Norman, not Irish. In English, Sans-Terre means without land, lacking land. And Lord Lackland," Stefan watched the colour drain from Booker's face, "is the common nickname for our king."

Booker fell back heavily onto his seat. Around him the men looked on in silence, their eyes flicked between where Booker sat and where Stefan still stood, his face flushed with anger.

“The boys, did that man give you their names?” Stefan asked.

“Yes.” Booker nodded weakly. “Richard and Oliver, he said they are about ten and twelve years of age.”

“The king’s natural sons then,” Stefan replied bleakly. “You’ve been paid to kidnap the king’s sons.”

“What’s the problem? They’re just bastards,” Drake needed.

“Bastards or not, they’re part of the royal family. Under the king’s protection.” Stefan didn’t rise to the bait. “It looks like Somerset is setting up Derby, but you do what he wants and we’re going to be the ones caught in the middle. Somerset and Derby, they can buy their way out of trouble, or leave the country. But for us, no, it will be a very short trip to the gallows or the block.”

For a long while, the crackling of the fire and the hiss of the rain from outside was the only noise in the cave. Eventually Booker rose to his feet and stormed angrily away into his own part of the caves.

“What the hell do we do?” Wilf eventually asked, breaking the silence.

“What we’ve been paid for. A job is a job after all,” Drake replied with a shrug. “We’re outlaws anyway, most of us have a price on our head.”

Some of the men voiced their agreement whilst others disagreed and soon a spirited discussion was under way. In the midst of it, Stefan slipped out of the cave and into the night. Keeping close to the edge of the bluff, he made his way round to a sheltered alcove and sank down against the cold damp stone.

He’d done many things since he left home that he wasn’t proud of; hell he’d met Booker one miserable December day when he’d foolishly tried to pick the man’s pocket whilst shivering with cold. He rubbed his right wrist at the memory of Booker’s strong grip around it...

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Stefan struggled as the man pulled his arm up behind his back and marched him behind a stinking midden.

“That was foolish,” the large man growled.

Stefan was terrified. He’d managed less than four months of trying to survive on his own. At first, it hadn’t been too bad; he’d stayed in the woodland and on the moors. Food had been plentiful; nuts and berries he found in

abundance. He even managed to snare a rabbit or two for meat. What started out feeling like an adventure had changed as autumn turned to winter, when finding food and shelter had become harder, driving him into the town.

He'd tried to beg, but been driven away each time by either upright citizens or more established beggars who didn't want him working on their streets. For the last week, he hadn't eaten anything more than a few crusts of bread and a couple of half rotten apples he'd managed to find in the gutter. He was cold, starving and desperate when he decided to try and pick the man's pocket. His first attempt and he'd been caught. He cowered, expecting a beating or to be turned over to the sheriff like the common criminal he was. For a long time the man had said nothing, simply looking him up and down.

Then he asked gruffly, "What's your name boy?"

Stefan told him, beginning to feel less afraid of a beating and more concerned by the man's appraisal.

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen," Stefan had replied, his teeth chattering.

"Well then, I think I can probably make use of you." The words had Stefan struggling in the man's grip. "Steady lad," he'd cautioned, as he yanked Stefan against him, his free arm going around his chest and holding him tightly. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Stefan continued to fight against him, until overcome with exhaustion and cold, he gave up and sagged limply in the man's arms.

"Now then, that's better." The man spoke calmly, much as grooms speak to a panicked horse. "Do you have any belongings you need to collect?"

Stefan shook his head. He now carried his whole life with him. Long gone were the reminders that he'd taken from home, traded for meagre amounts of food, or a night with something other than the sky over his head. He only had the clothes on his back, a short knife that was tucked inside his hose and a small silver ring sewn into the hem of his tunic.

"Let's get out of here, shall we."

The man didn't release his wrist, and Stefan was kept close by his side as they made their way out of town. As they walked along the side of the road, he slipped and stumbled in the mud, water seeping through the worn-out soles of his boots. The man kept him upright and tugged him closer to his body. As they

approached a small grove of trees, the man drew to a halt and to Stefan's surprise, made a hooting noise, like an owl. He waited a pause, then repeated the call.

An echoing reply came from the trees, and shortly after a man appeared through them, leading two sturdy horses. He looked at Stefan in disgust.

"Another stray, Booker?" he asked as he handed the reins of one of the horses to the man still holding him up.

"Later, Drake," Booker replied, as he released Stefan and swung up into the saddle. For a second Stefan swayed, dangerously close to keeling over with exhaustion. "Here." Booker gripped his arm and pulled him up behind him.

Years of riding made it automatic for him to swing his leg over the back of the horse and settle behind the saddle, his arms holding tight round the man's waist.

Stefan didn't remember much of the journey, lulled into sleep by the cold, the motion of the horse, and the low sound of the men's voices. Occasionally, he'd open his eyes and look around, but all he saw were trees, which all looked the same.

He woke with a start when the horse came to a stop.

"Come on now, sleeping beauty, off you get." A hand tugged at his arm and Stefan found himself pulled gently from the horse by an older man, whose silver hair and beard were cropped unfashionably short.

"Go on lad, go with Aidan," Booker urged, pushing him away with a gentle shove.

Stefan followed the man without taking in his surroundings. It was enough of an effort to place one foot in front of the other.

"Here, this way." The man put a hand on Stefan's shoulder and steered him forwards into a cave, where a group of men sat round a roaring fire. "Sarah, can we get a mug of gruel please, and Wilf, we need a couple of blankets," the man said as he kept Stefan walking.

Stefan was steered into a small secondary cave, where a couple of greasy tallow candles gave off a black, acrid smoke along with a dim light. In one corner was a pile of dry straw.

"Here, take this." Aidan took the thick, roughly woven homespun blankets from a boy a few years younger than Stefan, who had followed them.

“Sarah’s bringing the gruel, I couldn’t carry it,” the boy said with a rather bitter smile, nodding towards his right arm. Stefan stared at the deformed arm, which hung useless and twisted below the cut off sleeve of his tunic. Flushing as he realised how rude he was being, he looked away quickly.

“Sorry,” he said in apology for his rudeness. Aidan wrapped one of the blankets around his shoulders. The other he spread out over the straw.

“What for? ’Tisn’t your fault,” the young man said with a shrug.

“Out the way, Wilf,” a woman’s voice said from just outside. Wilf gave Stefan a cheerful grin and ducked out to make room for the woman. She looked Stefan up and down before handing him the mug of thin, watery porridge she was holding. “Drink,” she commanded. The wooden mug was warm in his hands, the liquid inside warmer still as he slowly sipped it.

“Thank you,” he said, handing back the empty mug. He’d been tired before, but with the warm food inside him, he found himself struggling harder to keep upright.

“One with manners, that’s a change,” the woman said with a grin as she reached out and took the mug.

“Stefan, my name’s Stefan.” His voice seemed to be coming from a long way away.

“Time to get some rest.” Aiden gently pushed him down onto the blanket covered straw, gently patting down his body as he did. “I’ll be taking this for now.” He took the knife from Stefan’s belt. As the man’s hand found the lump, where the ring was sewn into Stefan’s tunic, Stefan lurched upwards, catching the man’s wrist in his hand.

“No!” he exclaimed sharply pushing the man away.

“Steady, lad, it’s okay. A trinket, I take it?”

Stefan nodded sleepily, his hand now curled tightly round the bunched up fabric that held the ring. He didn’t hear the man leave.

When he woke the next day, he found Booker perched on a three-legged stool watching him.

“Thought you were going to sleep the whole day through,” he said reaching out and tousling Stefan’s hair.

“I’m sorry,” Stefan started to apologise, but Booker held his hand up and shook his head.

“You needed the sleep; you’re no good to anyone if you’re exhausted. Come now, I’ve brought some clean clothes I think might fit. Get yourself changed, and come out and meet my men properly.”

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Stefan smiled at the memory. They were a mismatched group. Some, as Drake had said, carried prices on their heads, but others simply wanted to find a different life, a better life, from the one they’d been born to. They didn’t always get on. Some men came and went, but it was a good life—he’d found a family of sorts. Something he never thought he’d have again.

They did have a code of honour, not the one he’d been brought up with, but one that he found he could live with. Booker had morals and standards, and though they might not always be conventional, he lived by them. As a result, his men did too. He was loyal to those with him, and that loyalty was returned, with no little degree of respect. And he didn’t renege on a contract. If he accepted money to do a job, then that job would be done. They were a band of men for hire, and the work they were hired to do wasn’t always on the right side of the law, though, sometimes, it could be argued that it was for the common good.

Stefan’s gut clenched unhappily at this thought. For Booker he’d lied, stolen, fought and killed; not murder, but in self defence. However, this was treason. This was to take action against his king.

Stefan stared out into the blackness of the night trying to reach an accommodation between his heart, which would follow Booker loyally wherever he led, and his mind, that screamed at him that the plan was utter folly, doomed to failure that would destroy them all.

He didn’t hear the soft footsteps approaching, and jumped with a start as Sarah, her cloak wrapped tightly round her, sank to the ground beside him. In the darkness, he could just make out the frown that creased her brow and the tight lines around her unsmiling mouth.

“I don’t want to lose him,” she said softly. “I don’t want to lose any of you, but this job, this plan...”

“Is dangerous,” Stefan finished her sentence.

“Is worse than dangerous. It’s fatal.” She shuddered. “I’ve been with him for nine years now; I couldn’t imagine my life without him. Yet if he goes through with this, then that is all I can see for my future.”

“I don’t know if I can help him,” Stefan said honestly. “If he’s set on this, I won’t be able to change his mind.”

“And worse, you’ll follow him into it.”

“I don’t know,” Stefan admitted. Sarah’s head turned sharply towards him as she stared into his face.

“You’d desert him? After all he’s done for you?”

“It’s not that simple, Sarah.”

“No, I suppose it’s not.” They both returned to staring out into the night, the heavy drops of rain hitting the ground the only sound. Eventually she continued, “Did anyone ever tell you how I came to be here?”

“No, and I never asked. Booker made it clear from the start, I didn’t have to share my history with anyone unless I wanted to, and they didn’t have to share theirs.”

“And yet you told us?”

“Well, yes, I was sixteen years old and feeling very sorry for myself. What young person of that age doesn’t feel as though the world owes them something? By sharing my story, I got more attention than I’d ever had before.” Stefan’s mouth twisted as though he’d bitten into something sour. “I’ve grown up a bit since then.”

“Yes, you definitely have.” Sarah’s hand slipped over to take Stefan’s. “Booker rescued me,” she continued. “It was one evening, in the spring. He came through the village where I lived with my husband. He saw my husband beating me outside our home, not with his fists but with a leather strap. It wasn’t unusual; my husband drank too deeply, and I never did know when to keep my mouth shut. It never took much to set him off. Booker got between us; it took a single punch to lay my husband out cold. The rest of the village had never lifted a finger or voice to help me, yet here was this stranger that wasn’t going to stand by and watch. I left with him the same evening.”

“With no regrets?”

“Everyone has regrets. But if I had to do it over again, I’d make the same choice. Life has been good to me here. I’ve got the family I never thought I’d have, particularly with Wilf, Nell and the youngsters.”

“Doesn’t it bother you that he’s not faithful, that he takes others to his bed? That he takes men to his bed?”

“Booker has a big heart, and he chooses to share the love he has with his men as well as with me. So no, it doesn't bother me. Besides which, it's a woman's lot in this life. We're property of our fathers till we marry, then property of our husbands. They can do with us as they will. I've never known a man to be faithful. Booker has never raised a hand to me in anger. He treats me with respect. That he shares his bed with others is a small price to pay for the freedom I get from being his woman. And I don't want to lose that freedom.”

“Is that all it is, freedom?”

“No,” Sarah said with a rueful laugh. “I do love him.”

“I am not sure I even know what love is.”

“Really? You've never been in love?”

“I don't think so. There was someone once...”

“But you couldn't follow your heart?” Sarah said softly.

“No.” Stefan reached with his free hand into the neck of his tunic and withdrew a silver ring that hung from a leather cord around his neck. “I never had a chance to,” he whispered.

Sarah gave Stefan's hand a gentle squeeze and rose to her feet.

“Good night, Stefan. I hope you come to a decision you can live with.” She turned and disappeared into the night.

Dawn was beginning to break when Stefan woke. He rose gingerly, his back muscles protesting at the movement, his joints cracking. He walked quietly back to the cave and into the small area where Wilf slept, curled up under a pile of blankets and furs. Placing one hand over Wilf's mouth, Stefan shook him gently to wake him.

“Hush,” he cautioned as the other man startled awake. Wilf went to push himself up, but Stefan shook his head. “Just listen,” he said. “If Booker doesn't go ahead with this plan, someone else will. Somerset has gone a long way to set this up for Derby to take the fall. We can't win. Go ahead with it and we're dead men walking; back out now, having taken the money, and our odds of survival aren't much better. We need help, and I think I might be able to get us all out of this.”

“How?”

“There's someone I know, and trust. I need to speak to him first, to see if he'll help.”

“Someone from your life before?”

“Yes.” Stefan nodded. “I’m going to try and get a message to him. Don’t tell anyone anything yet. I’m going to Blyth Abbey; I should be back by sundown.”

“What am I meant to tell the others?”

“I don’t know, make something up.” Stefan grinned. “Tell them I was in urgent need of confession.”

Stefan rode in to the abbey’s busy forecourt just as the bells summoning the monks to Sext began to ring. Hitching his horse to a tethering post near the abbey’s stables, Stefan made his way into the church. He entered the chapel amongst the lay brothers and monks who had ceased their work to attend the office. With them, a handful of people not in religious garb, either locals or guests of the abbey, followed through the heavy wooden door.

Despite the warmth outside, the air in the church was damp and cold. Drawing his travelling cloak more tightly around him, Stefan slipped into a pew at the back and waited whilst the precentor led the choir of monks through the service. After the Kyrie Eleison and blessing, Stefan waited in his seat as the sparse congregation filed out.

The monks followed in a sedate procession. Behind them, a group of younger men, wearing shorter grey tunics rather than the floor length black, hooded habits of the older monks, filed down the aisle with slightly less solemnity. A couple of them were barely more than children, but most appeared to be close to manhood. Stefan shuddered at the sudden realisation that, five years ago, one of these soon-to-be monks could have easily been him.

As they passed, Stefan rose to his feet and followed them outside, his eyes watering at the sudden change from the dim candlelight to midday sunshine. As he stood in the open doorway of the church, an elderly monk bustled up to him, smiling.

“Good day, may I be of some assistance? I am Brother Francis, the abbey’s guest-master.”

“Thank you, Brother,” Stefan replied politely. “I was just going to see to my horse. I only arrived just before the service.”

“One of our lay brothers will see to him for you. Do you have business here or are you just passing through?”

“I have business here. I need to speak to your Prior, if he will grant me a brief audience.”

The monk looked at Stefan curiously, as though he couldn't match up the roughly clothed, longhaired young man with the cultured Norman French he spoke. “Prior William should be able to see you this afternoon, in the meantime will you join us in the refectory for our meal?”

“Thank you, that would be appreciated.”

Brother Francis led him past the church and around the open sided cloister to the refectory. Trestle tables were laid out in long, neat rows, with benches on either side of them. Already the monks were taking their places at the tables. Stefan was directed to a table at the far end of the room, where a couple of young men, not in religious uniform, were sitting on one side.

“Our guest table,” Brother Francis advised. “If you'll be seated, I will advise the cellarer that you are joining us for our meal.”

“Good day,” he greeted his dinner companions amiably as he dropped onto the bench at the opposite end of the table from them, his back to the far wall so he could observe the rest of the room. His recent past had made him cautious, and he didn't feel at all comfortable, even in company such as this, at not being able to observe a crowded room.

The food was served by some of the novices, under the direction of two monks, one of whom ladled out bowlfuls of a thick, savoury stew. When his portion reached him, Stefan found it included large pieces of well-roasted pork. It was accompanied by a small, flat loaf of crusty bread with a cross carved in the top and a beaker of watered wine.

Stefan offered his thanks to the young man who served him and quickly tucked into his meal, breaking the bread into pieces and using them as a scoop. The room ate in silence whilst a lone monk stood at the lectern and read aloud from the Rule of St Benedict.

As the meal ended, the monks began to file out. The novices cleared away the dirty crockery. One elderly monk remained to supervise them, moving from table to table as he checked their work. Turning to the guest table at the end of the hall, he stopped suddenly, his hand flying to his mouth, his eyes widening with shock.

“Stefan? Stefan fitz Warren?” He shook his head as though trying to clear his vision, not believing what he was seeing.

Stefan rose quickly to his feet and approached him. "Brother Thomas," he said with a small bow of his head. Smiling softly at the older man he added, "It's been a while."

"A while? That's all you can say, child? I've thought you dead these past five years!" Thomas exclaimed as he reached for Stefan and pulled him into a rough embrace.

The novices had ceased working and were staring at the two men. Unnoticed, Brother Francis, the guest-master, had returned to the hall and, with him, the imposing figure of the Abbey's Prior.

"Brother Thomas," the Prior said sternly, making his way towards them. The older man released Stefan immediately, stepping back and turning to face his superior.

"Prior William, my apologies. May I introduce you to Stefan fitz Warren of Gainsborough."

"Just Stefan, Father. I don't have the right to the name anymore, and I never had the right to the title."

The Prior raised one eyebrow slowly at Stefan's statement. "Brother Thomas, as Master of the Novices, may I suggest you get your charges settled into their afternoon tasks and then come and join us in my office."

"At once." Brother Thomas turned and started herding the group of highly curious novices out of the refectory.

Prior William led Stefan back around the cloister to his small office, tucked in behind the scriptorium and library. A large, heavy oak table took up much of the room, its top covered with papers. On the stone wall above the Prior's chair, a heavy wooden crucifix with a carved image of Christ hung. A small fire burnt in the fireplace to keep the chill out of the room, and tallow candles provided the only light.

"So," the Prior began as he took a seat behind the desk, leaving Stefan standing on the opposite side. "What brings you here? May I assume that you aren't just passing through?"

Stefan didn't answer immediately, weighing up what to reveal to the Prior. "I came seeking help," he said eventually. "I need to get a message to someone."

"And you think we can help you with this?"

“I am hoping so. I, well, my, erm, employer, we, that is to say...” Stefan stuttered to a halt, unsure how much he should reveal.

“Come now, let us treat this office as the confessional. I am a priest; anything you say in here will be kept in the strictest confidence.” Stefan nodded but didn't immediately speak. “Why don't you start at the beginning? Tell me of how you know Brother Thomas.”

“He was my tutor, years ago.”

“So you are a Gainsborough then?”

“By coincidence of birth only, Father.” Stefan gave a rueful smile.

“You are baseborn?”

Stefan nodded and continued, “I am my father's firstborn, and my mother was a servant girl. He was just eighteen years of age when I was born, and she even younger. She died shortly after my birth, of milk fever, and her family wanted nothing to do with me. My father took me in, acknowledged me. I was brought up in Gainsborough castle, as his son.” The Prior said nothing but smiled encouragingly at Stefan to continue. “I was four when he married for the first time. His new wife was happy to have me as part of her family, even after she had her own children. Two girls, Eleanor and Marie, my sisters. When I was nine, my stepmother took a fatal fall from her horse. That was when Brother Thomas became my tutor. Until then he had been a monk, at Skendleby Abbey, but, before he had been called to serve God, he had been one of my grandfather's men and for a time tutored my own father. I believe my father prevailed upon him and his superior out of family loyalty.

“I knew that I could not be my father's heir, so it wasn't unexpected when he announced he was re-marrying when I was thirteen. His second wife was the Earl of Gloucester's youngest daughter. I'm afraid there was a mutual dislike from the start. I found out, not long after she came, that my father had neglected to mention he had a bastard, let alone that I lived with him as part of the family.”

“I can see how that could have been a problem,” the Prior said dryly.

“Yes, well, it wasn't a good time. We argued at first, much to my father's annoyance. After a few hidings, I learnt just to keep out of her way. My schooling had more or less stopped by then, and I was spending more time with my father's squires and his new wife's youngest brother, Benedict. He had accompanied his sister at the time of her marriage, and then stayed to take a

place as one of my father's men. He was seventeen and hoped to gain his knighthood. He took me under his wing and helped teach me weapons and swordsmanship. We'd take the horses out and ride for hours over the wolds, sometimes being gone all day from the castle. He was my first true friend." Stefan smiled as he recalled the memories.

"And Brother Thomas?"

"When my lessons stopped he was no longer needed as a tutor. After all, my sisters didn't need an education. He stayed for a while as an advisor to my father, but then returned to the Abbey. When he transferred here, he stopped by on his way to tell us where he was going."

A gentle knock on the door interrupted them.

"Herein," Prior William called out and Brother Thomas entered the study.

"Father." He nodded respectfully to his superior.

"Good, thank you for joining us, Brother. Stefan has just been telling me about his history, and how you were his tutor."

"Yes." Brother Thomas smiled fondly at Stefan. "He was a good student, a little unruly at times, but then what youngster isn't?"

"Quite so." Prior William nodded his agreement. "Now, you mentioned that you thought Stefan had been dead for the past five years?"

"Yes," Brother Thomas replied. "I'd been here a little over a year when a messenger came to the Abbey searching for him; you won't recall that, it was before your time. Anyway, apparently he'd run away from Gainsborough some weeks before and no one knew where he'd gone." He glanced at Stefan as he continued, "I asked Benedict to let me know if and when you returned, but no word ever came back."

"Benedict?" Stefan said in shocked tones. "Benedict came to look for me?"

"Yes." Brother Thomas looked puzzled. "Is that such a surprise, the pair of you were always close."

Stefan couldn't help the colour that rose in his cheeks. "We were. At one time we were as close as brothers."

"So what happened? Why did you run? And where have you been?" Brother Thomas asked.

"It was because of my stepmother," Stefan continued. "One afternoon, shortly after my sixteenth birthday, Benedict and I were out in the tilt yard

practicing when her maid came with a summons for him. I was annoyed at the way he just dropped everything and went to her, so I followed to find out what was so important. She was in the formal gardens, sitting on a bench under the rose arch. It was quite simple to get close enough to see them, overhear what they were saying, while not being observed.” Prior William raised an eyebrow at this confession and Stefan hurriedly continued. “The first thing I saw was them embrace, and then she guided his hand onto her stomach as she told him the midwife had confirmed that morning she was with child, and expected to deliver in around five months or so. Benedict congratulated her, and said he hoped that she would have a son. Then she said... She said,” Stefan closed his eyes as he continued, “that her husband, my father, was so pleased with her, that he’d finally come round to her way of thinking. That a bastard son was an embarrassment, and should not be brought up as one of the family. He’d agreed that I should be sent away. They’d arranged for me to go to Lincoln, to become a novice at the Abbey there. I wasn’t to be told, I was just going to be taken there, leaving at dawn the following day.”

“And so you ran?”

Stefan nodded miserably. “I waited until nightfall. Took what I could carry, a couple of changes of clothes, some bread, a handful of coins. Then I went to the stable, intending to take my horse, but Benedict caught me.”

“He didn’t stop you?”

“No, he didn’t even try,” Stefan sighed. “I told him what I’d overheard, that I had no intention of becoming a monk and being hidden away, forgotten, in a cloister for the rest of my life. He heard me out, and asked where I was intending to go. I didn’t have a plan, so I told him I would seek out my mother’s family and that they would take me in. He believed me, but he wouldn’t let me take my horse. He said, in case I was stopped as a horse thief and couldn’t prove he was mine. He said he wouldn’t want to see me hang.”

“So where did you go?”

“South, at first anyway. I wandered around the countryside for a while with no destination in mind. Some nights I would find shelter in a hamlet or croft, but for the most part, I slept outside in the woods. I eventually ended up in Tickhill, just before winter started in earnest.” Stefan paused, considering how to continue. “I fell into the company of a group of men from Derbyshire, and I’ve been with them ever since,” he said vaguely.

“But you’ve returned now? What do you intend to do? Return home? You’re a grown man now; you’ve no need to fear being sent away anymore.”

“Certainly no one could force you to join the order or take vows as a monk against your will. Though I don’t believe that it is that bad a life.” There was a certain level of censure in the Prior’s voice.

“My apologies, Father. I was but a sixteen-year-old boy, about to lose home and family. I am sure that it is a fine vocation for those who are called to it. But it is not for me.” Stefan began to pace up and down in front of the Prior’s desk. “I will not return to Gainsborough, but I do need to get a message to someone there.”

“Your father?” Brother Thomas guessed.

“No, to Benedict. I need his help. I am sorry, Prior William. I cannot reveal more about what I need his help with; it wouldn’t be fair on your conscience or safe for either my companions or me.”

“And you think Benedict will help you, no questions asked?” Brother Thomas asked.

“I hope so.” Stefan stopped pacing and reached for the leather cord around his neck. Pulling it over his head, and resting the ring that it held on the palm of his hand. “When I left, Ben gave me this,” he said softly. “He told me, that if ever I needed him, wherever and whenever, if I could get a message to him with this ring as proof that it was me, he would come.”

As the two men stared at the silver signet ring that balanced in Stefan’s palm, Stefan’s mind replayed another gift that Benedict had given him that night. After shutting his horse back in its stall, Benedict had pushed Stefan gently against the wall of the stable, his taller frame covering Stefan’s. He’d held Stefan’s wrists still by his side and without saying anything, he pressed forward and kissed him firmly on the mouth. Not a formal kiss of peace, or a kiss of farewell or greeting, but a lover’s kiss. The last words he’d said before he’d turned and rushed out of the stable were, “Stay safe.”

“And what message would you like to pass to him?”

“That I need to speak to him. I cannot explain why as it would put people in danger. I thought that someone could pass him the ring so he knew the message came from me, and ask him if he would meet with me. It would have to be soon, very soon.”

“Danger? I will not have one of my brothers harmed on your behalf.”

“They will not be harmed if they don’t know anything. Just ask Ben to meet me, the day after tomorrow, two hours before sunset, in Gamston Woods.”

“I am not sure I like this. Are you adamant that you can't tell us more before we become involved?”

“I would if I could Father,” Stefan said, shaking his head. “I wouldn't ask for help, from Ben or from anyone else, if I didn't think it was a matter of importance.”

“Please, Prior William,” Brother Thomas interceded. “I can go to Gainsborough, it wouldn't be out of order for me to call on a family I have long known.”

“You are willing to act solely on this boy's word?”

“Yes, Father. I know this *man*.” He emphasised the word making Stefan smile. “I taught him many things when he was a boy and one of those was to be honest and act with courage. I trust him.”

Prior William looked from one man to the other as they stood in front of him, both watching him intently.

“Very well,” he said finally with a nod. “Tomorrow at first light, Brother Thomas will ride to Gainsborough with two of the lay brothers to pay his respects to your father and his family. If Benedict is there, he will pass your message. The rest is up to Benedict.”

“Thank you, Father,” Stefan said with a sigh of relief. Turning to Brother Thomas, he pressed the ring into his waiting hand. “I am in your debt, Brother Thomas.”

“No debt is owed, Stefan. I am just relieved to discover that you are alive and well,” he replied, before adding with a slight smile, “As I am sure that Benedict will be.”

Wilf was balanced on the railings of the open sided barn as Stefan turned off the footpath and rode his horse under the shelter. Hopping off his perch, he took hold of the reins from under the horse's mouth in his good hand, as Stefan dismounted. Handing them back to Stefan so he could tether his mount.

“Booker's not pleased,” he warned.

“Not pleased, angry, or downright furious?”

“I think he'll hear you out. It was quite a spirited discussion he and Drake had this morning when they discovered you were gone.”

“I am sure that Drake wanted to run me through on sight when I returned.”

“Something like that,” Wilf admitted. “The others weren’t as vocal, or potentially as violent, as Drake; but some were less than happy that you’d gone without explanation. It split down about fifty-fifty, until Sarah got involved.”

“Sarah?” Stefan said in surprise. Although she was in charge in relation to domestic matters on the bluff, Sarah didn’t generally get involved in the business side of things.

“She was the one that talked Booker round to giving you a chance to explain.” Wilf gave his peculiar lopsided shrug.

“Well, I’d best go put their minds at rest that I haven’t betrayed them.”

“You’d hardly have come back here if you had,” Wilf said practically.

They walked up to the bluff side by side in silence. At the top of the path, Booker and his men had taken up station in a row in front of the fire, watching them approach.

“Luck!” Wilf whispered out the side of his mouth as he stopped moving, letting Stefan walk the last few yards towards the other men alone.

No one spoke. Stefan could see the tension in the men’s faces and posture. More than one of them remained armed, which was not usual once everyone was in the camp. He also noticed that Aidan, standing between Drake and Booker, had his left hand clasped tightly around Drake’s right wrist, preventing him from reaching for his weapon.

“You’d better have a damn good explanation for where you’ve been,” Booker growled.

“I have,” Stefan said as calmly as he could. “Will you hear me out?”

“Why should we?” Drake spat. “For all we know you could have sold us out, just be waiting for the sheriff to turn up.”

“Drake has a point,” David added in a measured voice. “Are we in danger?”

“No more so than you were this morning.” Stefan replied coolly. “I wouldn’t betray you. You are my family.”

“Family! That’s rich coming from a bastard whose own kin didn’t want him. I always knew you and your noble blood, your fancy ways, would ruin everything we have here.” Drake fought against the firm grip Aidan held him in. “I say we deal with him now, pack up and get out of here whilst we can. Leave him behind for the crows.”

“Enough,” Booker shouted, cutting Drake off. “I said we’d give him a chance to explain before we did anything.”

“You might as well come and be seated and discuss it in comfort,” Sarah called from beside the fire. Her tone made it clear it was slightly more than a suggestion, and the six men facing Stefan broke ranks, though Aidan still held onto Drake. Stefan followed them to the fire, with Wilf behind him. Nell and the two boys were nowhere in sight.

“Explain,” Booker said shortly, as he took a seat on one of the rocks. Stefan eased himself down onto an old tree trunk that served as a bench opposite him.

“I did a lot of thinking last night,” he began. “You’ve taken Somerset’s money and I know that you will want to honour the agreement.” Stefan paused and Booker nodded his agreement. “But what he’s asking you to do, us to do, is commit treason. I have done many things for you over the last five years that have broken the law, but you’ve always been clear where our limits lie. For a bandit chief you are surprisingly moral, Booker.” Stefan smiled at the older man. “You’ve taught me, and all of us who stay with you, to have morals too. And treason, like murder, is a line I won’t cross.”

“So you sold us out.” Booker’s words were more a statement than a question.

“No, but I think I know of a way to get us out of this. I also don’t want any harm to come to you, to any of us. Backing out of the contract, or simply not fulfilling it, isn’t an option either. It will give Somerset and his men a reason to hunt us down and destroy us. Either way, we wouldn’t survive this.”

“So you’ve a different plan?”

“I’m working on it. We have to seem to have been taken in by Somerset’s man and to recover the children, but without committing treason. For that I need help from someone who might be able to get an audience with the castellan at Nottingham, and then, hopefully, whoever is in charge of the children’s journey.”

“And of course you know someone that can do that?” Ralf asked in amazement.

“Yes.” Stefan nodded. “There is someone, from my past, who might help us. I went to Blyth Priory today to send a message to ask him to meet me.”

“What did you tell them?”

“Nothing, I just asked for a meeting. I didn’t say anything about why.” Stefan shrugged. “It’s a long shot I’ll admit, but if he agrees, then I will be in Gamston Woods to meet him the day after tomorrow before sundown.”

“I don’t trust you,” Drake said bluntly. “What’s to stop you from selling us out?”

“How about honour, or friendship, perhaps loyalty?” Stefan suggested mildly. Drake snorted with disgust.

“And if he does agree to help?” Booker interrupted. “What if he can get you an audience with the castellan. What then?”

“That part I haven’t worked out yet,” Stefan admitted. “But even if I have to go and confess to the plot, I would do it without giving you away. I would do that for all of you.”

“Who is it you are meeting?” Aidan asked curiously.

“I would rather not say,” Stefan hedged.

“Someone you trust though?”

“With my life,” Stefan replied quickly.

“Well, Booker, what do you think?” Aidan asked their leader.

“We give Stefan the benefit of the doubt,” he said, then with a shake of his head continued, “I don’t see how he can get us out of this, but I am willing to let him try. He’s right about one thing though, I can’t give back the money we’ve been paid, and, because I’ve taken the money, I am duty bound to do what I’ve been paid for. No man need join me though, unless he wants to, but if Stefan fails, then I will go ahead with the ambush as planned.”

The late afternoon sunlight fell in narrow shafts through the heavy canopy of leaves as Stefan sat dozing, his back against the moss and bark covered trunk of the sturdy oak tree, waiting. He’d left the Bluff early, to escape the dark looks and comments from some of the others as much as a need to get to the rendezvous on time.

Yesterday had not been a comfortable one. Booker had barely looked at him, let alone spoken. He’d sent Drake away with Aidan and Hal, supposedly on an urgent errand, as soon as they’d broken their night’s fast—which was probably for the best given the not-so-veiled threats Drake was still making. When the three who’d been to Litchfield returned shortly before the midday

meal, Stefan had taken it upon himself to see to their horses, whilst they accounted for their trading and Booker brought them up to date.

That evening, he'd eaten a solitary meal on the far side of the fire, subjected to dark looks from some of the others. Only Wilf, who had had his own work to tend to, had spared any time for him.

"Booker does trust you," he'd said, coming to join him after they'd eaten. Stefan had only grunted in response. "It's true," Wilf had insisted. "He's just feeling a fool for being taken in so easily by Somerset's man, and he's worried about what to do for the best. If he didn't trust you he'd not be letting you go off tomorrow on your own."

Stefan wasn't convinced but he'd just nodded and not argued. Standing and squeezing Wilf's good shoulder gently, a silent thank you for his support, he took himself into his chamber in the cave for the night.

The early start and solitary ride to Gamston had helped clear his head, and put him in the right frame of mind for his meeting with Benedict. It had been five years since he'd seen him. As he waited, his mind went back to the first time they'd met...

March 1196

It was long past the time when he should have been in bed, but Stefan had overheard the castle steward talking to Brother Thomas. His father would be coming home tonight, bringing with him his new wife. His younger sisters had willingly gone to their chambers with their nurse after supper. Instead of following, as he should have, Stefan had hidden, curled up in one of the embrasures which lined the passageway outside the solar, above the great hall. From here, he could see out over the courtyard of the castle, to the main gate. His excitement at the prospect of seeing his father, who had been away for nearly six weeks, was dwindling quickly, along with any feeling in his fingers and toes as a cold wind blew through the arrow slit and chilled him.

Despite the cold, he must have fallen asleep. The sound of footsteps approaching up the circular stone stairway leading to the solar startled him awake. Glancing outside, he saw that darkness had fallen and torches had been lit in the courtyard. Despite the long journey, his father's dark bay stallion was still fighting the groom who was trying to lead him to the stables, while the castle servants were unloading wooden chests from the bed of a wagon.

Cautiously he peered out from his hiding place. His father came into view first, a tall, heavy set man with dark eyes. His hair, which had once been the same red-brown colour as Stefan's, was clipped short, emphasising the grey in it; his chin and upper lip were clean shaven. He was dressed for the road, in a dark tunic and hose covered by a short travel cape. On his feet, he wore stout leather boots, the metal of the attached spurs glinting in the torchlight with each step.

A young woman walked next to him, her arm lightly linked with his. The hem of the long mantle she wore trailed on the floor behind her. From his concealed spot, Stefan took the opportunity to observe his new stepmother. She looked much younger than his father. Her skin was pale, like new milk, her face framed by dark hair, which fell in two long plaits over her shoulders and down past her waist. Dark eyes darted this way and that, but from the sour expression on her face, it appeared that she didn't find Gainsborough Castle, her new home, to her liking. His father was talking to her quietly and didn't notice Stefan as they passed.

Trailing behind them came three of the castle's servants, two of whom were carrying a trunk, while the other carried a tray with a flagon of honey coloured mead and a couple of drinking cups. Bringing up the rear were two of his father's squires. Both were a couple of years older than Stefan, the children of local landowners, sent into service with the hope of achieving a better station in life. With them walked another young man, a little older and some inches taller than the squires, whom he didn't recognise. He had the same dark hair and eyes as his father's new wife, but unlike her, he looked around him with lively curiosity rather than distaste.

As his father pushed open the door to the solar and ushered the party in, Stefan slipped from his hiding place and followed.

"These are our private rooms, my dear," he heard his father say. The room was bright and warm. Not only were there lamps lining the walls, but a fire had been lit in the large carved stone fireplace. On the walls hung a series of heavy tapestries, helping to keep out the cold that seemed to seep through the masonry. The room was lightly furnished. A couple of overstuffed chairs on each side of a low wooden table had been placed in one corner, and along the opposite wall was a bench with a padded, fabric covered seat. The two servants carrying the trunk moved towards the far end of the room, separated by a decorative wooden screen, behind which was the door to his father's sleeping chambers.

His father led his new wife over to one of the chairs and solicitously helped her be seated whilst the third servant set out the flagon and glasses on the table in front of her. As his father turned round to address his squires, Stefan tried to dart sideways, to hide behind the open door. He didn't quite make it.

"Stefan!" his father exclaimed in surprise. Sheepishly, Stefan stepped out into the middle of the room, not daring to meet his father's eyes.

"Who is this?" The woman had risen to her feet and was staring at him with an unfriendly expression. The servants made a swift exit from the room, followed by the two squires, waved away by Stefan's father.

"Elise," his father said with a sigh. "This is Stefan—my son."

"Your son?" Elise looked angrily between Stefan and her husband. "But I thought you said you had two daughters. You never mentioned a son."

"No, I didn't. Stefan is my son, but not my heir."

"Oh, he's a bastard," Elise said dismissively, turning away from Stefan entirely and laying her hand on his father's arm. "He'll be sent back to his mother then," she said with finality.

"Father!" Stefan gasped in shock.

At the same time as his father said, "It's late. We'll discuss it in the morning."

"My lord, perhaps Stefan can show me to my chambers?" the dark haired young man asked politely, stepping forward from where he'd been observing at the side of the room and laying a hand gently on Stefan's shoulder.

"Of course." His father nodded absently. "Stefan, the steward has put him in the north guest chambers."

"Thank you," the young man replied. "Good night, Sir, Elise."

Stefan found himself turned around and ushered gently, but firmly, out of the room. The stranger closed the heavy door behind them before letting go of him.

"Well, then, you're a surprise," he said with a grin.

"Who are you?" Stefan asked rudely.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he replied with a mocking bow. "I am Benedict fitz Robert of Gloucester, and given that my older sister has just married your father, I guess that makes me your step-uncle."

“Step-uncle?” Stefan frowned. “But you can’t be more than a few years older than I am.”

“I’m almost eighteen, which makes you, what? Twelve?”

“I’m thirteen,” Stefan snapped, glaring at him.

“Of course, do excuse me. That extra year makes a huge difference.” Benedict’s eyes sparkled with mischief, but seeing Stefan’s unfriendly expression, he stopped. “I’m sorry; this can’t be easy for you. A new stepmother and all that.”

Stefan shrugged. Truth be told he hadn’t really thought much about it until now. His previous stepmother he barely remembered, his own mother not at all. His father’s other women came and went without him really noticing. This was different though—a new wife, the daughter of an Earl. She’d have expectations and plans for their future, plans that clearly didn’t involve him. He should have realised that.

“Hey,” Benedict interrupted Stefan’s thoughts. “Come on, you’ve got to show me to my chamber, remember?”

“Of course, this way,” Stefan said numbly, leading him down the corridor to the stairs.

They made their way down and through the great hall, which was now deserted, save for his father’s two large mastiffs which looked up lazily from where they slept in front of the hearth as they passed. At the opposite corner, they passed through an open archway and began to ascend another flight of stairs.

“Here,” Stefan said eventually as they reached the top. Pushing open the door in front of him, Stefan led the way into a small chamber. The wooden framed bed, hung with curtained drapes, took up most of the room. To one side, a cabinet held a ewer of water. Beside it sat a dusty travel bag. A small door on the far side of the room led to the garderobe.

“Thank you,” Benedict said with a smile, and Stefan couldn’t help but find himself smiling shyly back. “You’d best go find your own bed too. It’s very late.”

“Of course, my lord, Sir,” Stefan replied, suddenly at a loss for how to address the other man.

“Not a Sir, at least not yet, and definitely not my lord, that’s my father’s title.”

“Sorry,” Stefan said, trying to smother a yawn that crept up on him suddenly. “Goodnight.” He turned and headed towards the door.

“Ben,” Benedict said behind him. “My friends call me Ben.”

August 1204

Friends. Yes, they had been friends. When his father decided that Stefan had done enough book learning and the time was right for him to start learning the art of warfare, he had been put into Ben's charge. For nearly three years they'd spent most of their time together with Stefan acting as his squire. Ben had taught him how to handle sword and lance, how to ride in battle and how to shoot a long bow. They'd spent days out in the countryside hunting for game and nights sleeping under the stars.

Stefan suddenly jerked fully awake. Around him the woodland had fallen silent; all birdsong had ceased. Slowly and carefully he rose to his feet, keeping his back to the tree trunk and scanning the area around him. He heard the sound of the horses' hooves, dulled by the mulch of the fallen leaves that covered the ground, before he saw them. Three riders approached down the old game track.

Stefan's heart rate sped up at the site of the first of them. He would have recognised him anywhere. Five years had given Ben's body a chance to fill out. His shoulders were broad beneath his travel cape and the chain mail shirt he wore was tight, giving an indication of the muscle beneath it. His face had lost the last of its youthful softness, but the features, and the expression of mild amusement, were as familiar as ever.

Ben drew his horse to a halt around fifty yards from where Stefan stood, still hidden in the shelter of the trees, and signalled for the other two men to wait, mounted, behind him. Nudging his own horse forward again slowly, he approached, alone. Stefan took a deep breath and stepped out from the trees onto the edge of the path.

It couldn't have been for more than a minute that the two men stared at each other, but for Stefan at least, it seemed like much longer. He found himself unable to speak; his mouth had gone as dry as the desert sands. Then slowly he drew his sword and sunk gracefully to his knee, the point of the blade in the ground before him. With his head bowed in submission, his long hair fell around his face, mercifully hiding the sudden and unexpected tears that had filled his eyes.

He didn't hear Ben swing down from his horse and approach. He jumped as a warm hand covered his around the hilt of the sword.

"Stefan," Ben's voice was deeper than he remembered. Staying on his knees, he looked up through his hair into the smiling face of the other man. "It is really you then?"

"It is really me." Stefan nodded as he slowly rose to his feet and sheathed his sword.

For a few moments they stood face to face, neither moving nor speaking. Stefan suddenly realised that he no longer had to look up to look into Ben's eyes.

"Five years, Stef. Five years, and not one single word," Ben said eventually, his tone chiding.

"I couldn't," Stefan replied with an apologetic shrug. "I wasn't ever going to be able to go back. I'd lost my family and my home. I needed to move on, to forget about my past."

"I didn't even know if you still lived. For months, I searched for you every time I left Gainsborough. I asked at every town or city I visited, but never once did anyone give me even the smallest hint that they knew you, that they'd even seen you." Ben's hand brushed Stefan's hair away, his thumb tracing across his cheek. "In the end I gave up searching, but I never gave up hoping that you'd come back," he said softly. "Until yesterday that is."

"Yesterday?"

"Yes, you see when Brother Thomas asked to speak to me in private and then handed me the ring. Well, all I could think of at first was that you'd died."

"Oh," Stefan caught Ben's wrist and drew his hand away from his face, twisting their fingers together, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Once he'd explained, told me you were alive and needed my help, it was all he could do to stop me riding off to find you straight away."

"And now?"

"Part of me wants to beat you into the middle of next week for frightening me like that," Ben confessed. "But more than that, I am curious as to what you need my help with. Brother Thomas wouldn't say."

"It's a long story, and it will be getting dark shortly. Perhaps we should go find somewhere to set up camp for the night first?"

“Fine.” Ben nodded. “You came on foot?”

“No,” Stefan replied, shaking his head. “My horse is back in Gamston village. There is no inn there, but your men should find shelter for themselves and the horses overnight. If they follow the track for another mile or so they’ll reach a fork. If they take the left path that will lead them to the village. Ask for Dickon, the wainwright.”

Ben nodded and beckoned the two men forwards. Swiftly he gave them instructions and after removing the travel bag from his saddle, handed over the reins of his own horse to one of his men. Stefan and Ben stood, side by side, watching until the two mounted men disappeared from sight.

Picking up his own pack, Stefan led the way off the path and deeper into the woodland. Eventually they came to a small, shallow brook, which they followed downstream until they reached a clearing where the trees were set back from the water’s edge, leaving a small, grassy cove.

“Here.” Stefan dropped his pack to the ground. “This will do. You dig a fire pit while I get some wood.”

As Stefan walked back into the woods, Ben looked round the area before tossing his own bag to the ground and freeing his hunting knife from his belt. He then set to work, cutting the turf to make a safe fire place.

By the time Stefan returned, with his arms full of dry wood, the pit was ringed with smooth stones from the edge of the brook. Carefully he laid the fire and set about lighting it, striking the small flint he carried against his knife edge to create a spark. Ben dug around in his pack for trail rations of cured, dry meat, some hard cheese and even harder bread, which they shared as the sun sank slowly behind them.

As they’d set up their overnight campsite and eaten, they’d hardly spoken, but when they settled down, side by side, wrapped in their long travelling cloaks, Ben turned and asked. “Five years, Stef. Where have you been? What have you been doing?”

Stefan stared up into the night sky, where stars were beginning to appear, in silence for a few minutes before he started to speak.

“When I left I had no clear idea of where I should go; I just ran. I spent the first few days not far from the castle, but then I found myself heading northeast towards the coast. So I did what I told you I would and sought out my mother’s family. I knew that she came from Glandford Brigg and that her family still

lived there, so I set about finding them. It took about a fortnight to get there, by which time I was tired, hungry and footsore. I spent my first night huddled in the shelter of the Buttercross in the town square trying to keep warm and dry. It took me three days of asking before I came across my uncle at the market, trading bolts of cloth that his weavers had produced. I explained who I was, that I was his sister Hawsie's son, but he didn't want to know me. He told me that he had no sister, that my mother had been cast from the family for her shame, and that he most certainly didn't want anything to do with a by-blow like me." Stefan lapsed into silence, staring blankly into the flames as he remembered that harsh sting of rejection.

Ben shifted sideways, moving closer to him, their arms touching from shoulder to elbow, their legs from hip to ankle. "What did you do then?" he asked gently.

"I wandered, lived off what I could find, and when I couldn't find anything, I begged." Stefan turned his head away, suddenly feeling very ashamed of his past actions, actions that went against all that he'd been brought up to believe, actions no knight would stoop to, even in the harshest of times.

"You did what you had to," Ben said, as though guessing where Stefan's train of thought had taken him.

"I did," Stefan agreed. "I reached Tickhill at the start of December, but without a clue how I would survive the winter. There were others on the street, those who sold their bodies for food or a warm bed. I was afraid that I would have no option but to join them, but I was saved by an unlikely benefactor who took me under his wing and into his, well, home and family, of a sort. I have been working for him ever since." Stefan paused in his recounting, torn between wanting to tell Ben everything and not wanting to face his possible disapproval of Booker and his men. Instead, he asked, "So, what happened after I left Gainsborough?"

"Your father was furious when you couldn't be found the next morning," Ben began, pulling his knees up and wrapping his arms around them. "I didn't tell them I knew anything, just watched as his men searched the whole castle. The delegation from St Catherine's Priory had come to escort you back to Lincoln. They weren't at all impressed by your disappearance and made it quite clear to your father what they thought about the waste of their time. I believe he had to pay them a percentage of what he'd intended to send with you to the Priory to placate them. My sister was more pragmatic," he continued bitterly. "You were no longer there, so her problem was solved. She persuaded your

father not to send men out into the countryside to search and not to inform the sheriff that you were missing. I thought you'd come back, you know. I didn't even believe you'd get as far as your mother's people. I just thought you'd camp out until you'd calmed down and then you'd return. I think it must have been about two weeks after you left before I realised that you had left for good."

"Was that when you went to look for me?" Stefan asked.

Ben looked sharply at him. "How do you know I came to look for you?"

"Brother Thomas told me a couple of days ago, when I went to Blyth Priory. I rather shocked him I'm afraid, turning up like that all of a sudden. He said that after I left, you went to him to see if he'd heard from me."

"Yes, one night I spoke to your father and suggested that you might have gone to your mother's family. I'm afraid he told me that they would not want you. He said that they'd been horrified when Hawsie had discovered she was pregnant and didn't want the scandal of a bastard child, so they had sent her back to him. The only other person I could think of, who you might go to for help was Brother Thomas. But you didn't?"

"No, I suppose that I could have done, but I was sure that his loyalty to my father would result in him sending me back if I did."

The fire crackled in front of them, behind them the leaves of the trees rustled in the gentle breeze and were accompanied by the occasional song of the night birds. For a while neither spoke, then Stefan asked tentatively, "My father, he is well?"

"Yes, older, obviously, and he suffers from stiffness in his joints in damp weather. He went with my father to the King's Lenten Council earlier this year and intends to travel to London for the Christmas Court. He intends to take Eleanor with him, she's fifteen now and he's seeking a husband for her. Marie was sent to the convent at Sempringham last spring as a novice." Ben turned his head to look at Stefan before adding, "Your father and my sister have three children of their own now. The eldest, called Isabelle after the Queen, will be five soon and after her came two boys, Henry is three and Arthur just a few months old."

"And you? What have you been doing?"

"These past five years I've been busy serving your father, and the King. I stayed at Gainsborough at first, but then my father summoned me to France to

go with the King's army. After the French King summoned him to Paris, I stayed with his company as a man-at-arms. I fought at Mirebeau, when he captured Prince Arthur and the rebels, then I was part of the guard that accompanied the Lady Eleanor to Bristol Castle. By then I'd rather lost my appetite for warfare, so I sought leave to return to my sister. I've been settled there for the last eighteen months."

"You've a wife and children now?" Stefan wasn't sure why, but it felt like he was swallowing gravel as he asked.

"No," Ben replied softly. "Neither wife nor child."

Ben looked directly into Stefan's eyes as he finished speaking, and Stefan couldn't help but feel that there was more unspoken than said in that final sentence. For a second, neither could tear their gaze away, and heat bloomed in Stefan's cheeks. He suddenly felt he was sixteen again. His mind flashed back to standing in the stable of his father's castle whilst Ben held him fast against the wall and kissed him. The hoot of an owl from the woods behind them broke the tension. Stefan gave a shaky laugh and looked away.

Ben said, "So, why now? Your message said you needed help."

"I do need help. Or rather, the man I work for does." Stefan sighed, not sure how to explain what he had become involved in over the past five years, or what Ben would think of it.

"Go on," Ben prompted.

"The man who rescued me that winter, well, he's a good man, but an outlaw." Stefan held up his hand to stop Ben from interrupting. "I am part of his group, and yes, an outlaw too. We have a base in the heart of Derby's lands, and use the woodland there as cover. We have rules, we aren't assassins and we don't take anyone by force. We trade the goods we've... obtained, and try to survive that way. We also take commissions for retrieval work, normally jewellery or money." Stefan didn't dare look at Ben again; he didn't want to see the look of what he feared would be contempt or disgust on his face. "We live simply as a community, as a family. There are a few who come to us with a price on their heads, but there are others who come to us because their families, villages, society doesn't want them.

"My best friend was abandoned as a baby because he has a withered arm. His family had no use for a cripple and no money to feed someone who would be of no use to them. He was found out in the woods where he'd been left and brought to the group, who raised him, fed him and clothed him for no return.

They taught him to read and write, and now he acts as both scribe and accountant for us. These men might be on the wrong side of the law, but it's due to circumstance, not for sport or out of evil."

"Go on," Ben urged as Stefan paused. Stefan explained the situation that Booker and his men found themselves in and the plot by Somerset to have them kidnap the king's natural sons and deliver them to Derby. As he finished speaking Ben whistled softly through his teeth.

"Dear God, what a mess," he said, shaking his head.

"Isn't it just," Stefan replied. "And this is why I need your help. Your family is in good standing and their name known. I was hoping that you would help me get into Nottingham Castle to speak to the castellan, or whoever has charge of the children. I have to stop them travelling to York the day after tomorrow. If I can't, then my friends, my new family, well, it will be the end for us all."

"Hey!" Ben wrapped his arm around Stefan's shoulder and pulled him towards him as he finished speaking. Stefan turned his head into Ben's shoulder, breathing in the smell of chain mail on leather and the underlying scent of the man himself. Ben's hand slipped from his shoulder and rubbed gentle circles around Stefan's back, his fingers tangling in the long hair, occasionally ghosting across the bare skin at the back of his neck, which made Stefan shudder.

"I'll help you in any way I can, Stef," Ben said gently. "Tomorrow, we'll go to Nottingham and see what we can do."

"Thank you."

Stefan looked up into Ben's face. His expression was serious, but his eyes, with the firelight reflected in them, were soft. Stefan brought his hand up to the side of Ben's face, scraping his fingers on the short stubble that covered his chin and jaw. Ben's hand slid up further around Stefan's head, taking a handful of the long hair and holding tightly. Stefan gave only a shallow gasp before Ben's mouth was on his, their lips clashing with no finesse and a great deal of sudden urgency. The kiss was hard, almost bruising to begin with, but it gradually gave way to something softer as Stefan parted his lips and Ben's tongue took possession of his mouth.

Stefan pushed into the kiss, and at the same time Ben sank backwards onto the ground, taking Stefan with him. His other hand snaked round Stefan's waist under the travelling cloak and hefted him up so he was lying half on top of Ben

and half on the ground. Their legs tangled together as the kiss continued. When they broke apart, both found they were panting lightly.

Stefan pressed closer, rolling slightly and feeling the hard ridge of Ben's shaft against his thigh. His own groin had a matching, aching hardness. As they began to kiss again, Stefan reached down and started to untie the fastening on Ben's hose, working the laces loose enough to edge the garment down to his hips. As Stefan's hand circled the now-exposed length of Ben's cock and began to move lazily up and down, Ben pulled back out of the kiss.

"Stef!" He gasped, shaking his head slightly.

"You want me to stop?" Stefan stilled his hand.

"No, just, I want to see you too."

"That's not a problem," Stefan grinned as he pushed away and sat up, turning his attention to unlacing his own hose and peeling the garment down his legs. "Better?" he asked, turning back to Ben, whose eyes were tracing up the strong muscles of Stefan's calves and thighs before they came to rest on the shaft rising out of a nest of coarse red hair. He nodded and pulled Stefan back towards him, one hand returning to his hair, the other resting on the taut muscles of his arse.

Stefan rolled further onto him, gripping his hip with one hand for purchase, the other snaking behind Ben's neck and pulling him forwards so their lips met again. As their tongues duelled back and forth into each other's mouths, Stefan began to rock his hips, grinding their shafts together. Ben's hand tightened on Stefan's backside as he began to rock his own hips in response, thrusting upwards from the ground. Their rutting fell into a rhythm, gradually speeding up as the friction brought them both closer to release.

With a gasp, Ben broke the kiss, his head falling back heavily into Stefan's hand and his back arching as he sprayed cum between their bodies. Stefan continued to grind his own hips until he reached his own climax, and then he slumped down, his head resting in the crook of Ben's neck as he fought to catch his breath. As the sticky mess cooled between them, he could feel both their heartbeats hammering in their chests.

"Sweet Jesus," Ben cursed softly, his hands falling from Stefan's body and coming to rest on the grass. Stefan rolled over, coming to rest lying beside him on his back, staring up at the sky.

Sweat prickled on Stefan's skin as it cooled in the night air. His breathing slowly returned to normal. His mind wasn't quiet though. He'd had other

lovers, but had never felt the sense of rightness that had come over him from being with Ben this way.

They set out at first light, after an icy dip in the brook. They headed first to Gamston village to collect their horses and Ben's squires, eventually reaching the outer ward of Nottingham Castle shortly after Terce. Passing through the wooden gate and into the outer bailey, their horses began the steep climb up to the castle itself, which stood high on the hillside over the town.

As they rode under the first portcullis of the main gate, they were halted by a troop of six heavily armed guardsmen.

"State your business," the lead guard demanded tersely.

"I am Sir Benedict fitz Robert of Gloucester, and I am here to see the castellan," Ben said, sitting, stiff backed, in his saddle and coolly staring the man down. He nudged his horse forward a couple of steps, causing the guard to give ground. He swiftly signalled to the other guards and the inner portcullis was raised, giving them access to the castle's bailey, busy with people going about their daily work.

"I think you'll find Sir Alexander in the great hall, my lord." The guard gave a short bow as he stepped to one side to let them pass.

Stefan and the two squires followed Ben into the inner bailey. Almost immediately two grooms appeared at their sides and offered to take charge of their horses. Signalling for them all to dismount, Ben accepted the offer and instructed his squires to go with the grooms and see to their mounts.

"Sir Benedict? Since when?" Stefan asked with a raised eyebrow as soon as they were alone.

"A couple of years now," Ben said with a shrug. "But a knighthood is a pretty hollow thing when there is no land or money behind the title."

"What, and you've no thoughts of an heiress with land?" Stefan joked.

"After last night, I think you know the answer to that one," Ben said with a warm smile. "No, I think I shall be a hired sword for my liege lord for a while."

They crossed the courtyard and strode through the doorway leading to the great hall. At this time of day, the hall was busy with servants starting to set up the tables for the main meal of the day which, would take place in a couple of hours. High ranking lords and their ladies, judging by their clothing, gathered in

groups here and there around the room. The high vaulted ceiling helped to make their footsteps echo as they crossed the stone floor, moving towards the fireplace, over which hung a large coat of arms.

Beneath this, an elderly man, his hair longer than was fashionable and almost completely white, was discussing something with a servant. As he noticed Ben and Stefan approach, he dismissed the servant and swiftly crossed the hall to meet them.

“May I help you?” he asked.

“I am Sir Benedict of Gloucester; this is my companion, Stefan. We are looking for the castellan, Sir Alexander. We have a matter of some importance to discuss with him,” Ben said.

“You’ve found him,” the old man advised dryly.

“May we speak in private, my lord? It is a matter of some delicacy.”

“Very well,” Sir Alexander said. “Follow me please.” He led them towards a low doorway at the side of the hall and through into a small antechamber.

A fire was lit in the hearth and in front of it, two young boys were playing jacks while to one side, partially hidden by an ornate carved wooden screen, two men sat at a low table engrossed in their game of chess. Sir Alexander shepherded them to another vacant table on the opposite side of the room and bade them be seated. Once settled, he asked.

“So, Sir Benedict, what is this delicate subject you wish to discuss with me?”

“I am lead to understand that the king’s natural sons are currently within the castle walls and will shortly be travelling to York.”

“That is correct,” Sir Alexander replied. “The travel plans are well known, as their father intends them to spend some time this autumn in the tutelage of the Bishop of York.”

“Recently some information has come to my knowledge that there is a plot to abduct the boys, though I do not know to what end.”

“One moment please.” He paused as one of the two chess players rose and moved to the boys playing by the fire. With some general moaning, they abandoned their game and followed him out of the room. “Where exactly did you hear of this?” the castellan demanded once they were out of earshot. “Can you identify those involved? How long have you known this?”

“I was informed of it only yesterday,” Ben began.

“If I may speak, my lord?” Stefan interrupted. “It was I who informed Sir Benedict of this plot.”

“And you are?”

“I am Stefan fitz Warren of Gainsborough, though I am estranged from my family and have not spoken to them for five years or more. Sir Benedict is not only a very close friend but also my stepmother’s brother. Will you hear what I have to say?”

After a brief, ambiguous glance towards the remaining chess player on the opposite side of the room Sir Alexander prompted, “Speak on.”

“I was in Doncaster a few days ago, seeking work, when I was approached by a man seeking to employ me and my men.” Stefan began, carefully avoiding mention of Booker or any of his men by name. “He wished to contract us to recover two children, who he said were the Earl of Derby’s sister’s sons and who were being held against her wishes by an Irish lord. He offered us a significant amount of money, half in advance and half on delivery, to obtain the children and take them to his liege lord at Peveril Castle.

“He gave details of the boys as being Richard and Oliver and the lord as Lord Sans-Terre. I believe, because of my current status, he did not think I spoke Norman French nor that I was aware of his majesty’s other titles or the common surname of the king’s natural children.”

“Derby you say?”

“That was whose man he said he was, and that is who we were paid to deliver the boys to, yes.”

“But you don’t think he spoke the truth.”

“No, my lord. After our meeting, I arranged for him to be followed, and before leaving town, he changed his apparel. He left the town wearing the badge of the Earl of Somerset.”

“I see.” Again, the old man glanced towards the other man in the room as he spoke. “Your man would be able to identify him again?”

“Yes, or I would be able to.” Stefan assured him.

“Very well, I shall take steps to ensure that the...” The castellan’s words tailed off at the scrape of the wooden feet of a chair being pushed backwards.

“I think I wish to hear more of this plot.” All three of them turned to the dark haired, well clothed, man who had spoken; Benedict gasped audibly.

“Your Majesty,” he said formally, making a low bow. Stefan immediately followed suit.

“Tell me, Stefan, was it?” the King asked mildly looking him up and down as Stefan nodded in response. “Who do you work for?”

“Sire, I don’t,” Stefan began but stopped almost immediately as the King held up his hand and shook his head.

“If I am any judge you are about twenty years of age, yet you talk as though you are the leader of a band of men. Come now, I am no fool. Again I ask, who do you work for?”

“I am one and twenty years old,” Stefan admitted, “and I work for no one of noble birth, Sire. I am part of a company of freemen who make a living by, shall we say, alternative means.”

“Alternative means?” The King smiled, and Stefan was put in mind of a dog curling his lip just before attacking. “Such as robbery, maybe banditry, murder for hire, that sort of thing.”

“No, Sire,” Stefan hedged. They didn’t murder, after all.

“So tell me, why should I trust you? You come here making accusations of treason against one, if not two, of the highest ranking noble men of the realm, with, I might add, no evidence to back you up.”

“I came because it was the right thing to do, Sire. I will admit that to survive the past few years I have perhaps not always steered completely clear of criminal activity, but it was done for survival, a means to an end. Can you honestly say that you have never done something similar?” There was a challenge in Stefan’s question. The King didn’t reply, simply waited for Stefan to continue. “This though, this was not survival. This was politics, treason, and my men and I would be caught right in the middle. We have rules, standards if you will, as a group. What is more, there comes a point where a man must draw a line in the sand between what he will and will not do, and for me, I had reached that point.”

“A point of honour, maybe,” the King mused.

“Yes.” Stefan nodded. “A point of honour. I could never be at peace with myself if I allowed this plot to go ahead, not only is it an act of treason, but particularly, I don’t like the thought of your children being used this way.”

“Even though they are bastards?”

“I am a bastard myself, Sire, so no, you could in fact say I have a sympathy for their position.”

“Very well.” The King nodded and returned to his seat, leaning back he steeped his fingers in front of him and continued. “So the question now is, how do we put a spoke in Somerset’s wheel?”

“I think perhaps that simply delaying the boys’ departure would work,” Sir Alexander interjected.

“No Alex, I think not. This plot is clearly intended to make a breach in the regard I have for Derby, though what he has done to Somerset I don’t know. I think we can do better than that. And I want the truth behind this. I am not prepared to leave loose ends.”

“If I may, Your Majesty,” Ben interrupted. “I have an idea.”

“Go ahead, Sir Benedict.”

“Why not let the plan go ahead and kidnap the boys.”

“Ben!” Stefan exclaimed at the suggestion.

“No, Stefan, let him continue.”

“Well Sire, I think that Stefan and his men should meet the coach and take the children as they are meant to do, then convey them to Peveril. I would question whether Somerset truly trusts them and may have set his people to watch. In which case, if they don’t go ahead as agreed, and by that I mean they have to be seen to actively ambush the coach and remove the boys, they could be in trouble. I have no doubt that Derby will be surprised by their arrival in the Peak, but I am sure that Somerset will also have at least one person there to bear witness, intending to run to you with the tale. Only, perhaps if you were already there?”

“Interesting idea,” the King conceded.

“You would risk your sons?” Sir Alexander asked. “Perhaps we could use a couple of younger squires in their place?” The King nodded at this suggestion.

“No, absolutely not,” Stefan said flatly.

“What is your issue with the idea?” the King asked.

“My men’s safety, I don’t want to put them in danger.”

“I would guarantee their safety.”

“With respect Sire, not even you can make such a guarantee,” Stefan said hotly. Ben laid his hand on Stefan’s arm and gently squeezed, reminding him to keep hold of his temper.

“Sire, if I may make a suggestion?” Sir Alexander interrupted, and when the King inclined his head to him continued. “Sir Benedict’s plan has merit, but I can understand Stefan’s reservations. Perhaps if Sir Benedict were to join the guards travelling with your sons it may help assure Stefan that we would try to ensure that no harm would come to his men.”

“Would that work?” Ben asked, meeting Stefan’s eyes with his own. “Would you trust me to make sure that no harm came to your men?”

Stefan sighed, closed his eyes for a long moment and then opened them again before answering honestly. “Yes, I would trust you with anything.”

“Very good gentlemen, then let us hammer out the fine details of the plan and set things in motion,” the King said with satisfaction.

“Well?” Booker demanded as soon as Stefan set foot back on the Bluff.

“Really, Booker, can’t you see the lad’s exhausted?” Sarah bustled to the front of the group of waiting men. “Tait, take his bag and Nell, get him something to drink. Here,” she guided him to a seat by the fire, “rest your body while you talk.”

The men gathered round him, waiting expectantly. Sarah was right; Stefan was exhausted. It had been a long and emotional couple of days since he’d left them. Parting from Ben earlier had been more difficult than he had expected, considering after five years apart they’d only been together for twenty-four hours. But in that time they’d spent a lot of time talking, catching up on the past and discovering the present. Neither of them had spoken of a future though, and that had left a gnawing, empty feeling within Stefan. Now was not the time to dwell on that. Now he had to try and sell the King’s plan to Booker and his men. He took several long gulps of the watered down beer he was offered before he spoke.

“The job stands. Tomorrow, as agreed with Somerset’s man. We ambush the coach and take the King’s sons to Peveril.”

“So you achieved nothing?” Drake interrupted. “Why does that not surprise me?”

“Patience, Drake, he’s not finished,” Aidan said. “Go on Stefan.”

“At least, that is what it will look like to anyone who might be watching us,” Stefan continued. “The coach will be guarded by six men on horseback, and driven by two others. Two boys will be alone inside the coach, not the King’s sons but stand-ins. The aim is to make it look like an ambush, the guards know their job is to let the boys be taken, but at the same time not making it seem too easy. The boys also know what’s planned; they will struggle, but not much. Whatever you do, do not harm them. When we’ve got them, we ride for Peveril Castle through the Peak Forest. Both the boys ride well, and are small enough to double up without slowing the horses. Most of the guards will chase us for a while, but they will really be making sure we aren’t being followed, and if we are, will deal with it.”

“Most of the guards?” Booker asked sharply.

“Yes, two will be joining us. One is my friend, the one I went to see, who arranged for me to get into the castle. They can be trusted. I give my word.”

“And that’s it? We just deliver the boys to Derby and walk away? Do we still get paid?” Drake demanded.

“Not quite. Yes, we get paid, but Derby will know we are coming.”

“What? You’re telling us that he knows he’s being framed with abduction of the King’s sons and you think he won’t try to warn the King or the sheriff beforehand?”

“The King already knows,” Stefan said drily. There were gasps of shock at this from some of the men. “Whose plan did you think this was?” he added before anyone spoke.

“You met the King?” Wilf’s eyes widened as he finally realised the implication of what Stefan had said. Stefan nodded and was about to continue when Booker spoke.

“Six guards and two other men, we’ll need at least eight of us then,” he said thoughtfully. “I’ll take volunteers. There are still risks to this and no one need join in if they don’t wish to. Stefan, I am assuming you will need to be there?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Okay then. So, six others.”

“I’m in.” All of the men, including Wilf, spoke at once and Booker smiled at his men.

“I’ll take Hal, Ralf, David, Edwin, Drake and Madoc. Aidan, I want you to stay here and take charge. You know what to do.” The words “if we don’t come back” weren’t spoken aloud. Aidan nodded his agreement.

“I want to come with you,” Wilf said stubbornly.

“Don’t be daft, you can’t fight. You’d be no use at all.” Drake sneered.

“You aren’t really fighting though are you? For once my arm won’t matter.” Wilf rose to his feet and glared at the older man defiantly, but Drake only laughed at him. “I want to come. There is no reason why I shouldn’t,” Wilf continued hotly.

“Enough,” Booker said wearily. “Wilf, if you want to come, you can, but you stay out of any fighting and keep well out the way.”

“Thank you,” Wilf said with a grin even as Drake started to protest. Booker held his hand up and continued.

“We leave at first light tomorrow; we need to be in place in good time. Cerdic, you and Aidan and the boys can get the horses ready for us. Sarah, you and Nell pack us some travel rations. Now get to your beds, all of you, it’s going to be a long day.”

The horse fidgeted under him, scraping his front hoof against the ground and swishing his tail, as Stefan held him still amongst the trees at the side of the Great North Road. They’d arrived at Ranby in good time, riding from the Bluff in small groups and approaching from different directions. Now they waited and watched.

Beside him, Stefan could almost feel Wilf’s excitement as he fidgeted nearly as much as the horse.

“Calm down,” Stefan warned in a low voice, leaning forward and taking hold of the reins of Wilf’s mount.

“Sorry,” Wilf whispered, though he didn’t look at all as though he meant it.

“Remember what Booker said; when we first go in, you stay here. Keep watch and don’t get in the way,” Stefan reminded him.

“I know,” Wilf replied, rolling his eyes. Stefan held his hand up for silence as he heard approaching horses. They watched the road, but it was not their target. Instead two friars mounted on mules rode past without noticing their presence.

“What’s he like?” Wilf asked once they were clear.

“The King?”

“No, the person you went to meet. The person from before you came to the Bluff.”

“Ben? He’s well…” Stefan paused as he considered how he could describe him. “He’s a knight, and my friend,” he said eventually, really not knowing how to explain what Ben was to him. Inside, just thinking of Ben, made him feel warm, safe. It was not something he could tell anyone else, even Wilf.

Wilf made a humming sound, his head cocked to one side and a slight frown on his face as he watched Stefan.

“What?” Stefan asked.

“Be quiet!” The words were hissed from about ten yards away, where Madoc waited with Edwin. Stefan grimaced but didn’t press for an answer.

Stefan was dozing in his saddle when he heard the sound of approaching horses, and not just horses, the creak of a turning wheel accompanied them.

“This is it,” he whispered, pushing his horse in front of Wilf’s, and staring out into the road.

Two guards were at the head of the very small procession. Immediately behind them came the carriage, a fairly plain, wooden, enclosed affair, with the curtains at the windows closed. The two men seated on the driving platform were clearly armed. At each side, level with the door to the carriage, rode the next two guards, including Ben. The final pair brought up the rear, some yards behind.

As the carriage approached, Stefan drew his sword and pushed his horse forward, walking out into the middle of the road and turning to face them. From the other direction, Booker did the same. Beyond the last guards, he saw Drake and Hal take their positions behind them.

“Halt!” Booker called as he spurred his horse forwards. The carriage drivers pulled on the reins sharply, the horses rearing slightly in the traces and snorting as they came to a sudden standstill. The six guards drew their swords as the other four of Booker’s men came out from the tree line. Drake whooped and kicked his horse forwards, brandishing his sword as he fell on one of the guards.

Stefan held his position as the guards at the front rode forward to meet them. None of the men carried shields, or wore more than light chain mail; a

misplaced sword stroke could cause serious, if not grievous, injury. As he raised his own sword to meet the oncoming blade, Stefan felt a rush of adrenaline. As much as he knew this fight was only for show, suddenly it felt extremely real. The sounds of clashing steel, shouts of men and the occasional scream from one of the horses around him faded into the background as he concentrated on his opponent. They parried, stroke for stroke, using their horses as weapons as well as their swords. Stefan winced as his leg was hit by the powerful forequarter of the horse, pinning it to the saddle, even as he twisted his arm and slashed across the guard's upper arm. The guard backed off, a thin trail of blood running down to his elbow.

As he did, Stefan took the opportunity to look around. Booker was still engaged with the other forward guard, Madoc and Edwin were on foot, Madoc using a quarterstaff and Edwin a short sword, against the men who had been on the coach. The horses that had been pulling the coach had been cut free and bolted from the scene. At the back of the coach, one of the guards was exchanging lazy sword blows with Hal, but Drake was slumped over his horse's neck, his sword hand empty. The guard he'd been fighting had dismounted and was holding onto not only his own horse, but Drake's as well.

Stefan trotted over to the side of the carriage where Hal and Ben were swinging their swords ineffectually at each other. At his approach, Hal fell back and turned his horse away, to cover them should anything interfere. Ben smiled tightly at Stefan but didn't speak as he sheathed his sword. Stefan did the same before Ben pulled open the door of the carriage. The two boys tumbled out onto the hard packed dirt, the smaller landing heavily on his knees and crying out.

"What the hell?" Stefan gasped, realising that these were no stand-ins.

"The boys had other ideas about someone else taking their places," Ben said sourly. "They can be quite persuasive once they set their minds to it."

"Father agreed, eventually," Richard said with a smirk as he reached down to help his brother to his feet.

"Here," Stefan said holding out his hand. Oliver grasped the offered hand and Stefan pulled him up behind him. His slender arms didn't reach all the way around Stefan's waist, so the youngster grasped onto the belt of his tunic.

"Richard, your turn," Ben said, holding out his hand to the older boy, who swung himself up with some self-assurance behind him.

"Ready?" Stefan asked.

The boys nodded as Ben said, "Yes, hold on tight."

Stefan turned his horse away from the carriage and urged it forward into a canter, at the same time he shouted over his shoulder, "Run!"

Wilf was waiting for them, and as they approached, he kicked his own horse on to join them. The three riders wove amongst the trees, chasing the sun, which flickered through the branches as it started to sink towards the west.

There was always the sound of horses galloping behind them. After a while, the horses began to tire and they slowed them to a walk.

"We need to find water for them," Wilf said.

"Yes, but not much. We don't want them bloating. There is still a way to go." Ben replied.

"You must be Stefan's friend?"

"Yes, I'm Benedict."

"He's Sir Benedict fitz Robert of Gloucester, really," Richard piped up from behind him.

"My lord," Wilf acknowledged looking slightly shocked.

"And you must be one of Stefan's men?"

"Stefan's men?" Wilf shook his head looking at Stefan in puzzlement.

"Long story," Stefan replied. "Ben, this is my friend Wilf."

"Pleasure to meet you Wilf," Ben replied. "And what he means by long story, is that he told the King yesterday that they were his men to keep everyone else's names out of it."

"Typical," Wilf snorted. Ben raised his eyebrow and Wilf continued, "He's always had this really strong streak of honour. Which, when you're part of a group of outlaws, can be damned inconvenient at times."

"I do not!" Stefan denied hotly.

"You do. Why do you think Drake hates you so much? It's not just the fact that you are both bastards of noblemen and that you were acknowledged and got brought up by your father with all the privileges, whilst he and his mother were turned out to beg on the streets by his father. No, it's because you always do what you believe to be the right thing, not always the best thing, but the right thing."

"Sounds like Stefan," Ben said amiably.

“Quiet!” Stefan suddenly interrupted them, holding up his hand. “This way.” He pulled his horse deeper into the trees, the others followed.

“It’s okay,” Wilf said soothingly to the younger of the two boys, who was looking a little wild eyed.

“Boys, if I say jump, get down as quickly as you can from the horses and stay back here. Wilf, you stay with them. Are you armed?” Ben asked.

Wilf bit back the laugh that threatened to escape him at this question and shook his head.

“We are, Sir Benedict,” Richard said. “Father insisted we both carry knives just in case.”

Suddenly, an owl called, and Ben and the boys looked round in confusion as Stefan smiled. Dropping the reins, he held his hands up to his mouth and hooted in response and minutes later three riders came into sight.

“Booker,” Stefan said as they halted before them.

“Well done, lad, we’re safely away. They stopped following us about five leagues back. Hal and Ralf led some of them off in another direction. Madoc stayed to see to Drake.”

“Drake didn’t make it?” Stefan asked, his eyes widening in shock at the news.

“No,” Booker said with a shake of his head. “The guard was trying to defend himself and Drake’s horse shied; he took a blade to the throat. It would have been quick.”

Stefan’s throat tightened at the news. As much as there had been a mutual dislike between himself and Drake, he was still one of their group, of their family. Drake had never trusted Stefan, and all that he could think was that he had been right not to. After all, it had been Stefan’s plan that had led to his death.

“I’m sorry, Booker,” he said sincerely.

“No lad.” Booker shook his head sadly. “What’s done is done. He knew what he was getting into, he knew the risks. He went out fighting. We’ll mourn our loss and celebrate his life later. Right now we’ve work to do.”

“Come on, we should keep moving if we are to reach Peveril before nightfall. We will be out of the woodland soon and onto the open moorland once we pass Dore,” Ben suggested.

They rode, mainly in silence, across the heather and grassland moor. Imposing gritstone escarpments rose above them in places, as they followed the path of the Hope Valley toward Castleton.

The sun was sinking behind Mam Tor, the mountain that dominated the skyline to the west, as they started up the steep rise leading to the castle itself. Torches had already been lit around the bailey. They were waved through the gatehouse and passageway into the main courtyard by the guards on duty.

Ben and Stefan helped the boys from their horses and then dismounted themselves, as did the others.

"I'll stay with the horses," Edwin volunteered as they secured their mounts to a tethering post in the shadow of one of the curtain walls.

A young squire dressed in Derby's livery approached them, "Sir Benedict?" he asked and Ben nodded. "Will you come this way, the Earl is expecting you."

The group followed the man across the courtyard and into the great hall. They were guided out of the doorway to the side of the room, where Wilf and the two boys settled on a wooden bench with the other three shielding them from view.

"I'll inform the Earl you are here." The squire slipped away as soon as they were settled.

"I'm going to go help Ed with the horses," David said quietly, obviously uncomfortable with the number of people in the hall. Booker nodded as he slipped away.

"So, what's next?" Wilf said quietly.

"Hopefully, we hand the boys over to Derby, and then we can all go home again," Booker suggested.

"Something like that anyway," Ben said as he looked around the crowded hall, a slight frown creasing his brow.

"What is it?" Stefan asked

"There are more of Somerset's men here than we anticipated."

Stefan surveyed the occupants of the room, noting the prevalence of the Somerset badge on the cloaks of many of the men. Suddenly he gripped Ben's arm and whispered, "There, the man by the back wall, he's the man Booker met."

“Gentlemen, if you’d like to come with me, I will take you to the Earl,” The squire said as he returned to them.

They followed him back out of the great hall and across the courtyard to the chapel, which stood on the opposite side. They were led through the chapel itself and up a set of stairs into a hallway, which Stefan estimated ran the length of the outer wall. Outside the second door along the corridor stood two guardsmen, and it was this door that their guide knocked upon briskly before pushing the door open.

“The men you were expecting, my lord,” he announced as they filed into the room after him.

The room wasn’t particularly large, but it was light and airy, thanks to the arched window set in the far wall. A desk was set up to one side, and the walls were lined with a greater collection of books than Stefan had ever seen. When he heard Wilf gasp behind him, he couldn’t help smiling, knowing exactly what he was looking at.

The man sitting behind the desk, who the squire had addressed, rose as they entered, looking confused. Two other men were also in the room, seated on the settle. One Stefan recognised immediately as the King, the other he didn’t know.

“Papa!” Oliver shouted excitedly, racing from them into his father’s arms. Richard followed him over more slowly to stand at the King’s side. Stefan noticed with interest that the other man appeared to be in shock, slumped backwards in his seat, his face turning the colour of day old oatmeal.

“What is the meaning of this?” the man behind the desk asked.

“Not what you were expecting after all, Sir William?” the King asked.

“No, Sire. I don’t understand, I was awaiting the delivery of a manuscript from the Earl of Chester. Not...” His words trailed off as he looked helplessly at the assembled group.

“Not my sons?”

“No, Sire, definitely not.”

“Well, that’s odd,” Booker said, pushing his way to the front of the group. “If you’ll permit me to explain, Your Majesty?” he asked the King, who nodded his consent for him to continue with a small, tight smile. “You see, I was paid by the Earl of Derby’s man to recover these two boys for him. I was

led to believe that they were your sister's sons, and were being held against her will by an Irish lord. It was suggested I should recover them from their carriage as it passed up the Great North Road, and to deliver them to you. You paid me a dozen silver crowns in advance, with a dozen to be collected on delivery."

"I did no such thing!" Derby said hotly, his ink stained fingers gripped tightly to the edge of the desk. "Sire, I give you my word, I would never do such a thing."

"And yet, they have brought my sons here," the King said in a dangerously quiet tone. "I can see no other reason for this other than they are telling the truth."

"No! Sire, I would not, I did not."

"Shall I fetch the guard?" The man who had been sitting with the King rose to his feet and moved towards the door without waiting for a response.

"I think not Somerset," the King said coldly.

"If I may speak, Your Majesty?" Ben asked, moving to block the doorway as he spoke.

"Of course, Sir Benedict."

"I believe this matter may be sorted quite simply. I've been made aware that the man who commissioned Booker and his men is in the castle. Perhaps we can arrange for some sort of identity test. If Booker recognises him and points him out for us, we will be able to discover who paid him for this undertaking. I would suggest that given most of the men will be gathered in the great hall we begin there.

"It's a sound plan, if you're agreeable, Derby? Somerset?" The two earls nodded their agreement, though both looked somewhat shocked. "Boys, if you could stay here. There is a guard on the door if you need anything," the King addressed his sons.

"Yes, Papa," the boys said in unison, moving to one of the settles.

"Papa, perhaps Wilf could stay with us?" Richard asked. Wilf blushed deeply at being brought to the attention of the King and the two Earls.

"If Your Majesty wishes," he managed to stutter. Stefan couldn't help but notice the way that the Earl of Derby was looking at his friend.

One of the guards who had been on the door accompanied them back to the great hall, where the visitors to the castle and most of the Earl of Derby's men

had gathered for the evening. Upon entry, the buzz of chatter ceased as all rose to their feet, realising their King was among them. The King whispered something to the guard, who took up station alongside the two men already on the door of the great hall.

A space opened up down the centre of the room as the King led them forwards towards a small dais at the far end, where the high table would be set up for meals. Mounting the raised platform with the two Earls, the King turned to address the crowd.

“My lords, ladies, I shall only keep you for a short while. If you could please stay where you are whilst Sir Benedict and his companions walk the room; they are looking for something for me.”

Nearly all the occupants of the room watched in fascination as Booker, flanked by Stefan and Ben, made a slow tour of the room. The occasional embarrassed giggle rose from some of the younger female courtiers. They had reached the end of one side of the room and had just started to work their way up the other when Booker paused.

“You, there,” he said, pointing at a man with a Somerset badge who was half turned from him, behind an older couple who moved aside. “Yes, you. Turn this way, please.” The man moved with reluctance, keeping his head lowered as much as he could. Although Booker had spoken in English, it was clear immediately that the man understood him.

“Step out here, please,” Ben commanded in Norman French. As the man came towards them, his eyes kept flicking towards the dais. “Is this him?” Ben asked Booker when the man stood directly in front of him.

As Booker looked the man up and down, he didn't notice Ben look to Stefan, who gave a small nod confirming that this was the messenger.

“That's him,” Booker said with confidence.

“Very well, this way please.” Ben took the man's arm and walked him up towards the King. The Earl of Derby looked both relieved and slightly confused, but the Earl of Somerset's face was a picture of naked fear.

“I don't think we need to do this in public,” the King said coldly to Somerset.

“If you'll follow me, Sire.” Derby led the way from the dais and into a small antechamber. The others followed, with Ben still holding the messenger's arm

tightly. Once inside, Stefan shut the door behind them to shield them from the curious courtiers who waited in the great hall.

“Sire, I know nothing of this, of any plot to kidnap your sons. I assure you I would never do such a thing. There must be some mistake,” Somerset said quickly, but the King held up his hand to cut him off.

“Silence. I will have the truth of this matter,” the King declared. “This is one of your men, Somerset?”

“Yes, Sire, Gilbert de Clare, he’s one of my household knights,” the Earl confirmed “But Sire, I dispute that either he or I have anything to do with this.”

“Master Booker, are sure that this is the man that commissioned you?” the King asked, ignoring the Earl’s protestations of innocence.

“Yes, Sire,” Booker said with a definite nod. “We met in an inn in Doncaster five days past, only he wasn’t in that livery at the time. He wore Derby’s mark.”

“How can you be sure? You met the man who paid you just once. You say yourself that the man you met was Derby’s, which this man clearly is not,” Somerset interrupted.

“This is the man I met,” Booker repeated calmly.

“What proof do you have? Your word is worth nothing. You are an outlaw, a criminal for hire.”

“I would support his word,” Stefan said quietly. “What is more, I saw this man leave town after the meeting. He rode away under your badge, with four other of your men.”

“Your word is worth no more than his,” the Earl said, pointing between Stefan and Booker. “You’re one of his men, of course you’ll back him up. You probably weren’t even there.”

“Stefan’s word is good,” Ben’s voice was dangerously quiet. “As a knight of the realm I will champion him, in combat if necessary.”

“I am sure that will not be necessary,” the Earl blustered. “Anyway, I know nothing of this and, if my man has done such a thing, I would expect you to permit me to deal with this myself, Sire. I have the right.”

“No, I don’t think so,” the King said coolly. “May I remind you we are talking treason here? This is far too serious for me not to deal with it myself. I expect that once my gaolers have rung the whole truth out of him, he and any

other conspirators he identifies will hang for their crimes.” He turned to the man himself, who had turned white, his gaze flicking between Somerset and the King. “Of course,” the King continued, “I may be persuaded to leniency should he speak freely of whose instruction he was acting upon.”

“Sire, I assure you...” Somerset began.

“My Lord Earl, Sire,” Gilbert finally said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“Be silent, de Clare.” Somerset strode angrily towards his man, his fist raised as if to strike him.

“Enough.” The King’s tone was icy, stopping the Earl in his tracks. “I will have the truth of this. My Lord Somerset, you may consider yourself under arrest on a charge of treason. I will arrange for you to be conveyed to the Tower shortly.” The Earl turned white at these words, but the King ignored him and continued. “Derby, if you would be so good as to arrange for my guards to round up Somerset’s men. They can take them, with de Clare here, straight away to Nottingham, I will be returning there in a few days, once I’ve seen my boys safely off to York. Inform them they are to be kept in close confinement.”

“Of course, Sire.” Derby bowed and, casting a look of disgust at Somerset, he left the room to carry out the King’s orders.

“What of him?” Somerset spat, pointing at Booker. “He’s a common criminal, thief and outlaw.”

“So he is,” the King said coldly. “It appears that he’s also a man of honour, which is something that I don’t believe can be said for you. The crown owes him a debt of thanks for what he has done today, for the risks he has taken in coming to us to unveil this plot.”

“So that’s it, he walks away without penalty?”

“There has been penalty, there has been cost. One of our men died today,” Stefan said hotly before the King could reply. Ben laid a gentle hand on his arm, a reminder to keep himself in check.

“Talking of cost, I trust you have your purse on you, Somerset. I recall that you owe these men a dozen silver crowns. Wasn’t that the rest of the agreed price for delivery of my sons to Peveril?”

“You can’t think...” Somerset blustered.

“Oh, I do think. You talk of honour, yet have shown that you do not know the meaning of the word. It’s hard to tell which of you is the criminal here.” The King held out his hand expectantly.

As Somerset reached for the purse hanging from his belt, Booker said, “Sire, if it pleases you, I’d not accept further payment in exchange for your word of safe conduct for me and my men tomorrow when we leave.”

The King gave Booker’s request consideration before replying. “No,” he said bluntly. Booker gasped in dismay before the King continued. “You may have your safe conduct, but I insist that you receive payment for your services. Further, the crown will also pay an additional dozen silver crowns in appreciation.”

“Thank you, Sire.” Booker bowed deeply to the King.

After Derby returned, Somerset was escorted through the main hall to the castle’s gatehouse, where he was to be kept confined under armed guard until the King was ready to leave.

“Sire, I’ve arranged for rooms for you and your sons for the night, there is a servant outside waiting to escort you. I will send someone along with the boys as soon as I return to my library.”

“Very well, I will speak to you further in the morning.” As the King left the room, the others bowed deeply.

“Well, I never in my life thought I’d meet the King,” Booker said, after the door had shut. “This is going to be some tale we’ll have for Sarah and the rest, hey lad.” He nudged his elbow into Stefan’s side as he spoke.

“It certainly will,” Stefan said with a smile that didn’t touch his eyes. The words had reminded him sharply that this was not his place, not his world. The brief time he’d had with Ben would come to an end tomorrow as they went their separate ways, and who knew how many years it would be this time before they saw each other again.

“Sir Benedict. I’ve a room for you above the great hall.”

“Thank you,” Ben replied. “What of the others?”

“I’m afraid we’ve no further spare rooms. Most of the other guests will bed down in the great hall. We will be laying out sleeping pallets shortly, if your men would like to join them?”

“They aren’t my men, Sir William.”

“We’ll be fine in the stables, My Lord,” Booker replied. “I’ll go out to my men shortly. If you could send Wilf along to join us?”

“Of course,” Derby replied.

“Stefan can share my chambers. We’ve much still to catch up on,” Ben said suddenly, and Derby nodded. It wasn’t at all unusual for nobles to have to share a room, after all.

They lay on their sides, facing each other, beneath the sheets of the large bed that took up much of the room. The heavy drapes that surrounded the bed were drawn tightly leaving next to no light.

“Thank you,” Stefan said softly, placing one hand on Ben’s chest. “For coming to help us.”

“I came for you; I will always come for you, Stef,” Ben replied wrapping his own hand around Stefan’s and holding it close. “I can’t believe that this is all we get. That tomorrow you will ride off with Booker and the others in one direction, and I will ride off in the other.”

“I know, but that is the way it has to be. You are a knight; you have a great future ahead of you, particularly now you have the King’s favour. I am an outlaw; I am lucky to have got through this with my life.”

“You don’t have to be an outlaw; you could come back with me.”

“No, Ben, I couldn’t,” Stefan said gently. “My family doesn’t want me, I have no money and no title, and I won’t be reliant on you or anyone else.”

“I just wish we could have more time.” Ben’s tone was wistful.

“We have tonight.” Stefan pulled his hand away from Ben’s and wriggled closer.

Ben’s arm snaked around him, his palm lying flat over the small of his back. Stefan raised his arm and hooked it around Ben’s neck, pulling his head down to meet his. For a second they stared deeply into each other’s eyes before their lips came together. The kiss was hard and desperate. Stefan’s arm tightened, holding Ben in place as he nipped at his lips, his tongue forcing its way into Ben’s mouth as he gasped. Stefan backed away, planting small kisses along Ben’s jaw line and down his neck, spending time nuzzling in the hollow at the base of it.

Stefan's other hand reached down between them, finding Ben's cock and slowly stroking the developing erection. His own shaft was already plumping up in response. Ben's hand roamed down his back to his arse, pulling him even closer, so that his hand became trapped between them.

"Ben." Stefan seemed to breathe his name rather than speak it as he broke their embrace. "Turn over; I want to hold you when you come."

"Like this?" Ben rolled over onto his other side and Stefan pulled him back, spooning up against him and wrapping his arms around Ben's waist.

"Just like this," Stefan said, kissing Ben's shoulder. He covered Ben's body with his own like a blanket and, with one hand, he reached down over Ben's hip to his groin, taking the heavy weight of his erection into his hand. Rocking his own hips slightly, Stefan's cock nestled in the grove between the cheeks of Ben's arse. Ben's hand closed over his as he continued to pump him. Soon they built up a steady pace, Ben pushing his cock into their joined hands and then backing off, putting pressure on Stefan's shaft as he did. Stefan continued to kiss and suck at the back of his neck, until Ben turned his head, allowing Stefan to stretch up and capture his lips. Their tongues mimicked the movement of their hips, flicking from mouth to mouth, gradually getting faster as their arousal built. Finally, Ben gave a small cry, falling out of rhythm as he released his seed over their fists. Stefan pulled away from him slightly. Resting his forehead against Ben's back, he took his hand from Ben's spent cock and gripped tightly to his hip. He increased the speed of his thrusts until he reached completion, his cum spraying between them on his belly and Ben's arse.

For a while, their ragged breathing was the only sound in the curtained enclosure of the bed. When they'd both recovered, Stefan slipped from the bed to clean himself up, bringing back a wet cloth to wipe away all traces of their actions from Ben's body. Discarding the cloth, Stefan slipped back into bed as Ben turned to him. Entwining their arms around each other, with Stefan's head on Ben's shoulder, they drifted off to sleep.

Morning seemed to come far too quickly. Neither Ben nor Stefan spoke much over the small meal that had been sent to them to break their fast. Afterwards they made their way to the courtyard where David and Edwin had prepared the horses for their departure.

"You ready, lad?" Booker asked as they approached.

“Yes,” Stefan said shortly, securing the travel bag to his saddle.

“You need to take leave of the King and Derby before you leave,” Ben reminded them.

“We also need to find Wilf,” Booker grumbled. “He didn’t come to the stables last night and the guard wouldn’t let me past the great hall to go find him.”

“Come on then, the sooner we do this the sooner we can be on the road.” There was no happiness in Ben’s words.

They made their way back into the great hall where the King was seated at a long table on the dais, his sons on each side of him. At the far end, the Earl of Derby sat talking quietly to, of all people, Wilf. At their approach, the King rose to his feet.

“Your Majesty,” Ben said with a bow, the others copying him. “We come to ask permission to depart.”

“Very well, but I have some things for you before you go.” The King moved round the table and descended the three shallow steps to the floor before coming to stand in front of them. “Booker, I believe I promised you this.” Booker came forward and took the small purse the King held out to him.

“I am humbled by your generosity Sire,” Booker said as he took the gift and backed away with another bow.

“Sir Benedict, you have the appreciation of the royal household for your assistance in this matter. I would ask you to consider the suggestion contained in this letter.” Ben looked puzzled as he took the small envelope from the King, but bowed and moved away.

“Stefan of Gainsborough,” the King began. “Please approach.” Stefan made his way to where the King pointed in front of him and stopped. “My family is in your debt for the honour and courage you have shown. I thought long and hard about how I could suitably reward you for such loyalty to your King and in the end I came up with only one thing. Please kneel.”

Stefan sunk to one knee in front of the King who stepped forward. Behind him, he heard several people gasp.

“For services to the crown which we deem you to have performed with exceptional honour, I name thee a knight.” The King declared, striking Stefan forcefully against the left side of his neck with his fist. “Come, Sir Knight, in

the name of God,” the King declared solemnly as Stefan rose somewhat shakily to his feet.

“Thank you, Sire,” he managed to say.

“May I wish you all Godspeed on your journey,” the King said by way of dismissal as he returned to join his sons on the dais.

Stefan followed Ben out of the hall, his mind spinning with what had just happened. Just outside, in the summer sunshine, Ben stopped and ripped open the envelope he'd been handed. Inside was another envelope and a small note.

“Oh!” Ben exclaimed as he read it.

“What is it?” Stefan asked.

“A suggestion, and, if we wish to use it, a letter of recommendation from the King.”

“A suggestion?”

“Yes, the King points out an alternative life for two landless young knights.”

“Go on,” Stefan said cautiously.

“He's recommending us for entrance at Temple Bruer, to the Knights Templar. He's enclosed a note for the Master.” Ben looked directly into Stefan's eyes. “Come with me. We can be together.”

“I don't know Ben; it's a big step, leaving my friends, my family.”

“Please,” Ben said softly.

“Ready, lad?” Booker called over from where he was mounted on his horse.

“No, can you just give us a minute?” Stefan asked. He didn't wait for Booker to reply, taking Ben by the hand he drew him over to the curtain wall, where they had privacy.

“Why, Ben? Why do you want me to come with you?” Stefan asked.

“Why do you think?”

“I don't know. Honestly, I don't. I am a bastard, an outlaw. I have no money, no lands, and no title. That the King bestowed a knighthood on me was an empty gesture. I live in a cave with a band of criminals. I've begged, I've stolen, and I've killed.”

“Yes, but ...”

“Let me finish,” Stefan said gently. “You’re a respected knight and member of an important family. You’ve fought for the King. You may have no land now, but that won’t always be the case. You’ll marry, settle down, and raise a family. I don’t want to stop you from becoming what you are meant to be. I will only hold you back, tarnish your reputation.”

“You may be all those things, but you are also loyal, dependable, honest and a good man to have at your back. Yes, I am a knight, but so are you now. I am as landless as you, and I don’t want to marry and settle down. If I thought that Booker and his men would accept me, I would go with you in an instant.”

“But why?”

“Because you are my family. My home. For the last five years it has always felt like something was missing from my life. Finding you again, being with you, I feel whole again. It may be selfish, but I do not think I can give you up again.” Ben reached out and took Stefan’s hand. “Come with me?”

Numbed by Ben’s words, Stefan could only nod his agreement.

“Good,” Ben said with a radiant smile. “Let’s go break the news to Booker. Oh, and I suppose I shall have to pay him for that horse of yours. I’ve told you before, you can’t just go taking other people’s mounts, unless you want to hang as a horse thief.”

“Finally!” Booker exclaimed as they returned. “Some on Wilf, time to go,” he called across the courtyard.

Stefan turned to see Wilf was still standing in the doorway of the great hall talking earnestly to the Earl of Derby. He nodded and the Earl smiled, reaching out and gently touching his withered arm.

Wilf walked purposefully over to them and looked up at Booker, taking a deep breath before he spoke.

“I’m not coming.”

“What?”

“You heard me, I’m not coming. You’ve always said we had the free will to come and go as we please, to be part of the group or not as we want. Well, I’m sorry but I am not coming back with you. I’m staying here.”

“Staying here?” Booker echoed.

Stefan stole a glance back to the Earl, who was looking pensive as he watched Wilf. Making the connection between Wilf's disappearance the night before and how tired both men looked, Stefan began to laugh, "Busy night, Wilf?" he asked.

"He's got so many books," Wilf said, as if this explained everything.

"And that's why you're staying?"

"Well, that's one reason." Wilf blushed, his eyes flicking to the Earl again.

Turning back to Booker, Stefan said, "Wilf's not the only one. I'm sorry, but I'm not coming back either."

"You're not?" Booker didn't look too surprised. "I don't know. I take you in, feed you, clothe you, train you and what happens? The first opportunity, you're running off after a better offer. How's a poor old man to survive?"

"Here." Ben threw a heavy purse towards him, "this might help."

"It's a start, lad." Booker gave Ben a nod of approval.

"Thank you, Booker," Stefan said sincerely. "For everything."

"You know where to find us if you need us," Booker said gruffly. Stefan gave him a sad smile and nodded.

Booker, David and Edwin left first, Booker still grumbling all the way out of earshot about being abandoned by them as he rode away down the valley. Stefan and Ben followed shortly after, riding side by side, turning to the North East where they would head into Lincolnshire and seek entrance to the Knights Templar. They looked back just once, taking a last chance to wave goodbye to Wilf, where he stood in the gatehouse entrance, before they rode together into their future.

The End

Author's Note

This is a fictional story and as such, I make no claims whatsoever to historical accuracy—indeed the Earldom of Gloucester was one of the King's estates, held at the time through his first wife. The Earl of Derby was a favourite of the king though he didn't actually become bailiff of Peveril Castle until much later. The Earldom of Somerset was vacant at the time and would remain so until given to John Beaufort in 1397.

The Gainsborough title is wholly fictional as, at the time, Gainsborough itself was a small hamlet. Most of the other places identified—towns, villages, and priories—did exist, and some of the facts are real—Doncaster did suffer a devastating fire in 1204 and Litchfield Cathedral was in the process of being built. Elmton Bluff does not exist—but anyone who knows the area might note a similarity to the nearby Creswell Craggs.

There is virtually no record of same sex relationships in the period this story is set, and those that do have questionable provenance. However, there are some documents which indicate that homosexuality was viewed by the church in the same way as any other sin. With penances given out as they would be for say, heterosexual sex outside of marriage. It wasn't until the late thirteenth century that the church started taking a much harder stance and imposing severe sentences, such as castration and dismemberment. Sodomy did not become a criminal offence under statute in England until 1533.

For those interested, Wilf suffers from a condition called, these days, Erb's Palsy. It is usually caused at birth when too much external pressure is put on the baby's neck during delivery, damaging the brachial plexus nerves and causing deformities to the arm.

Author Bio

K works by day in the legal profession, at the insistence of the many critters that let her live in their house on the understanding that she provides them with food, warmth and entertainment. When they allow her any spare time, she reads (anything that is put in front of her), knits (mainly socks), bakes (usually cupcakes), and occasionally scribbles stories. She hopes one day to be allowed a large shotgun and a decent recipe for rabbit stew to deal with the damn plot bunny!

Contact & Media Info

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PRANCER AND GRUFF

By Jade Crystal

Photo Description

A cowboy stands alone in a grassy field, a saddle dangling from his grip by the saddle horn. He stands comfortably, feet apart and shoulders wide. He is looking down, his dark hat obscuring his face and throwing shadows over one shoulder. He is bare-chested, sporting an impressive upper body physique; he is wearing only belted jeans and boots. A river, some brush, and a wooden fence can be seen in the distance.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Being a cowboy is the only life I've ever known and I wouldn't change that for anything. Running the ranch keeps me too busy to be lonely but at night, when I'm lying in bed waiting for exhaustion to take me, I can admit I wish there was someone there beside me. Then you pranced into my life in response to a housekeeper wanted ad I posted online. You are nothing I expected and everything I need. My opposite in every way, your softness to my strength, your sass to my gruff, and yet we just fit. I'm stubborn and set in my ways, but I know I can be your happy ever after if you give me a chance. How do I convince you to be mine?

Sincerely,

Laura

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: cowboys, housekeepers, kiss, sweet/no sex, boss/employee, ranch, pretty men

Word Count: 25,637

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And many thanks also go to my beta readers for letting me bounce ideas off them and catching my mistakes: Tony, Mary, Pet, Jenni, Réalta, and Pamela. You guys rock.

PRANCER AND GRUFF

By Jade Crystal

Ding-dong. Ding-dong.

Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong.

“I’m comin’! Just hold yer horses!” Cliff Haywood yelled toward the front door, almost falling down the stairs as he tried to pull on a pair of jeans.

Ding-dong. Ding-dong.

“Just a minute, dammit!”

Who in hell is ringin’ my doorbell this time of night anyway? Half past ten is late for people who have to get up at the crack of dawn. I live too far outta the way to have unexpected visitors, he thought as he grabbed his Stetson off its peg on the wall. *Daddy always said a good cowboy is never without his hat.* A bit breathless, he skidded to a halt and yanked the door open.

Standing on his porch, with one finger paused in its mission to irritate the sanity right out of him with the incessant doorbell ringing, was the most beautiful man Cliff had ever seen. He looked both incredibly out of place and yet completely at home standing on the porch of a ranch house. A little on the short side, slender with a dancer’s body, dark hair that was short on the sides and longer in the front with short messy curls, chocolate brown eyes, and very kissable lips. The most charming inquisitive expression on his face. And a tee and skinny jeans that had to have been painted on. There was no other way Cliff could fathom that this man had gotten into those clothes. Every muscle, every line, and every curve was exquisitely visible, leaving little to the imagination.

Cliff stood in the doorway for several seconds, gawking at the divine vision before him, until the man shifted his weight on his feet and cleared his throat to break the reverie.

“Um, hi.”

Oh, right, I have to actually say something. Aloud, he asked, “You have any idea what time it is?”

“I’m so sorry, mister, I know it’s late! I never show up places this late uninvited! Well, I guess *never* isn’t really true, but I didn’t mean to disturb you—”

Cliff cut off the chatter, more interested in why the man was standing on his front porch. “Never mind. Can I help you?”

“I sure hope so. I don’t even know if I have the right ranch. There hasn’t been anyone to ask for miles and miles. I’m trying to find Cliff Haywood,” the beautiful man said, his words running together in his haste. He wasn’t from anywhere in the western part of the country; his clothing screamed big city, but that didn’t fit the drawl underlying his accent.

“Well, you found him. I’m Cliff Haywood. Is there somethin’ I can do for you?”

“Just the man I need,” he replied, then held up a creased piece of paper. “You put a want ad online for a housekeeper?”

“That’s right,” Cliff answered, looking the man up and down. He looked like he would be very skilled with his hands—to fulfill certain personal needs for single men—but Cliff doubted that housekeeping was one of those skills. “You’re a housekeeper?”

“Only the very best kind, Mr. Haywood—sassy and fabulous!” he declared with a grin, his face lighting up as he propped a hand on his hip and struck a pose. It sent all sorts of visuals through Cliff’s mind of what those hips could do, and his eyes grew a bit wider. When the man noticed that, his face fell, and he straightened and said, “I can tone it down if you’re not into that.”

“I’m interested in the quality of your work and your work ethic, not your personality,” Cliff responded gruffly.

That wasn’t entirely true; he found that he cared very much about this young man’s whole being for some reason he couldn’t put into words. But he needed someone to help him keep the large ranch house clean and habitable, not entertainment. He could find that on the internet whenever he wanted.

“Do you have any experience? References?” he asked.

The man produced a résumé and handed it to Cliff. It was clean and professional, if a bit more colorful than was generally acceptable. Just like this man, this Troy Balhaus, according to the sheet of paper in Cliff’s hands. He glanced over it quickly, noting the numerous entries in the employment history

section as well as the fact that those entries originated in the Southeast and led in a progressively northwestern direction. Some jobs Troy had only worked a few months, some longer, and a few over a year. As Cliff was about to ask, Troy offered him a small stack of documents.

“Those are letters of recommendation from some of my previous employers, Mr. Haywood. You’ll find that I come highly recommended.”

Cliff looked over the seven recommendations and compared them to the résumé. Each of the letters was printed on fine-quality paper with a company letterhead or personalized stationery, and each of them matched up with an employer for whom Troy had worked for a longer period of time. It was the two or three jobs that had lasted only a month or so that gave Cliff pause.

“I gotta ask, Mr. Balhaus, what’s the story with these jobs that didn’t last long?”

It was obvious from the look on his face that Troy hadn’t wanted him to focus on those, but he answered without a missing a beat, “Those just weren’t a good fit for me.”

“Weren’t a good fit how?”

“Those families had small children,” Troy replied with a dramatic sigh. “Not that I mind kids. I like them a lot, actually. I just don’t like cleaning up after them. Especially when there was no mention of it in the job description or interview.” He was speaking rapidly again, making it difficult for Cliff to understand him. “It was just like, ‘Oh, hey, we’ve got a kid who’s potty-training and he can’t pee in the toilet to save his little precious life, so we need you to clean up the pee on the floor and the wall and everywhere but in the toilet twelve times a day. And we need you to do it for peanuts. ’Kay, thanks, bye!’ Maybe with a little warning, you know? But just being thrown into it—”

“Okay, okay, I get it. It sucked,” Cliff interrupted, cutting him off. “Well, your résumé looks good, and these recommendations speak highly of you, like you said. You mind if I call some of these people in the mornin’ to ask about you?”

“If I said that I minded, would you just take my word for it?” Troy countered with a grin.

It wasn’t the answer Cliff was expecting. He raised an unimpressed eyebrow at his potential housekeeper.

"It was a joke!" the young man hurried to say, throwing his hands up in surrender.

The rancher noticed the nail polish on his fingers then; his fingers made a rainbow, a different color for each nail to match the bright colors on his tee. Nail polish wasn't something Cliff was usually into, but on Troy it looked good. It matched his bright, expressive personality, which was the polar opposite of Cliff's natural state of solitary gruffness. On any other day, Cliff would have immediately dismissed someone like Troy, yet today, for some reason he didn't understand, he found himself attracted to the man.

Maybe someone like this is exactly what I need in my life.

"Okay, I admit it was a terrible joke. Bad timing," Troy apologized, trying to find his way into the rancher's good graces. "Of course you can call them and ask about me. Except for the one couple who was not thrilled that they would have to clean up their kid's piss themselves, they should have good things to say about me."

"Things like how well you did the work, not about how you're a flaming gay man?"

For a few seconds, Troy couldn't seem to be able to force his mouth to work before he stuttered, "I-I'm not... I mean, I am but..." He took a deep breath and said in a steady voice, "My sexuality has nothing to do with my ability to clean your house, Mr. Haywood. In fact, as a gay man, I am, by reputation at least, far more qualified to do this job than any straight man."

"Calm down, Mr. Balhaus. I wasn't trying to offend you," Cliff responded. That was true; he hadn't meant to offend Troy. Most people didn't understand his gruffness. Then he added, as a truce of sorts, "And I'm gay too."

"Really?" Troy blinked in surprise, looking him up and down. "No way you're gay. I mean, that is a *fine* chest, Mr. Haywood, but those jeans... No self-respecting gay man I ever met would be caught dead in jeans like those."

He couldn't help but chuckle at that. "What do you expect a gay cowboy to wear? Assless chaps and a rainbow flag? We're all about the practical and functional out here." *He likes my chest*, he thought with a touch of excitement at the idea.

"There's a difference between practical and awful, and those are just awful. A self-respecting gay man would wear jeans that show off his ass no matter

what he's doing. You know, like mine," Troy shot back, shaking his head at the lack of fashion sense as he twisted to show off his firm ass.

Cliff could only shrug in confusion. Apparently, it was a terrible violation of some gay code, though he wouldn't know anything about that. What he did know was that Troy Balhaus had an ass that deserved to be shown off. *Thank God for skinny jeans, wonders that they are!*

Then Troy propped one hand on his hip as he said with flare, "It's like that fabulous gay man once said, 'I'd rather my flame burn bright than be some puny little pilot light.'"

"Well, Mr. Balhaus, I don't care how bright your flame burns, long as you can do the work I need you to do in a reasonable amount of time. I spend all my time keepin' this ranch runnin', and I don't have any extra time or energy to keep up the house too."

"I do great work," Troy said quickly. "I'm not the fastest thing on two legs, but I make sure to give each and every task my very best effort."

"That's what I want to hear," Cliff replied, ignoring the "thing on two legs" comment as much as he could. *Why did that sound sexual to me?* he wondered. Then he thought, *Because it's been too long, and everything starts to sound sexual when it's been too long. But good to know he can last a while.* A half-grin crept over his features for a moment before he said aloud, "Look, it's late for me—I have to get up early—so just come on in, I'll show you to your room, and we can work out the specifics in the mornin'."

"That's it? I'm hired, just like that?" the young man asked in surprise as he picked up the backpack resting by his feet on the porch.

"No, it ain't quite that simple," he answered, ushering him to the stairs. "Unless I find out somethin' that's cause for not hirin' you when I make those calls tomorrow, you'll be on a probationary period for two weeks. I'll tell you what I expect and see if the way you keep my house in those two weeks meets my expectations. If it does, you're hired and your room and board will be included in your pay, considerin' that the nearest town is two and a half hours away. If not, you'll be given two weeks' pay and let go immediately." He paused at the top of the stairs to look the man in the face. "Sound fair?"

"Sounds great, Mr. Haywood," Troy agreed, following the rancher down the hall.

“Good. This’ll be your room,” Cliff pointed to the last door on the hallway, then indicated another door closer to the stairs. “That’s the bathroom. It’s the only one on the second floor so we’ll be sharin’ it.”

“Not a problem,” he said. At Cliff’s questioning glance, he explained, “I mean, I have a lot of products that I use, but I can keep them in my room or in a cabinet somewhere or something. I promise I won’t leave them all over the bathroom.”

“I don’t care, long as you leave ’em neat and they aren’t in the way when I need to shave,” the rancher said with a shrug. He gestured toward the backpack and asked, “That all you brought?”

“No sir. I have more stuff in my car, but I have everything I need for the night in here. I can get the rest in the morning.”

Cliff nodded. “Make yourself at home. If you’re hungry, you’re welcome to anything you can find in the kitchen. Same goes for breakfast. I’ll be up and out of the house ’round dawn, so we’ll talk more about my expectations later if I don’t see you then. If you need anything, I’m the door just before the stairs. Any questions?”

Troy shook his head as he said, “Nothing that can’t wait until later. Thank you, Mr. Haywood.”

The rancher acknowledged the thanks with a grunt and mumbled, “G’nite” before heading back down the hall to his bedroom and shutting the door.

Troy Balhaus watched the rough-around-the-edges rancher go and decided that, awful jeans and not so fabulous home décor aside, the man had a very fine ass to go along with that magnificent chest and those glorious abs. He sensed a lonely man who worked every waking second just to keep from feeling that loneliness. And maybe his gruffness was a defense mechanism all on its own, preventing anyone from getting too close so he wouldn’t have to feel the pain of losing them later.

Troy smiled as he saw the strip of light disappear under the door. *I’ll just have to work extra hard to make this great big house a home and give him a reason to spend more of his time here... with me. Then maybe we can help each other out*, he thought as he closed his bedroom door behind him and flopped down on the big, comfortable bed—a bed that was more than big enough for two people.

Maybe this will be the place where I can finally settle down, he pondered as he pulled a few essentials out of his backpack. *Oh yeah, this feels good. Really good.*

It was still dark outside when Cliff dragged himself out of bed. Any other morning, he might have taken a moment to look out the window, see the sky beginning to turn pink and orange with the impending dawn, and appreciate the beauty of the land on which he made his living. It was nearly impossible to take such splendor for granted, except when he had gone to bed late and lacked sleep. His gritty eyes refused to stay open, and he stumbled over the jeans he had dropped on the floor the night before. Growling as if it was the fault of the jeans, he headed into the bathroom to take a shower, more to wake up than out of necessity. The fact that the bathroom was still warm and steamy from an earlier shower also escaped him as he let the hot water cascade over his body for a few glorious minutes. He felt a little less like a zombie after drying off and getting dressed.

That's a step in the right direction, at least. Now for some coffee so I can join the land of the living and avoid scaring the horses.

Rolling up his shirtsleeves as he made his way downstairs, his nose picked up some of the most delicious smells Cliff could remember since his mother had been in charge of the house. He rounded the corner to find Troy in the kitchen, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and busy making breakfast. Every burner on the stovetop was occupied with a pot or pan, and even the wood-burning stove that had served as little more than a heater for the last few years hosted a steaming tea kettle. Cliff paused in the doorway, a little stunned by the spectacle, when Troy glanced up from the skillet he was tending. He grinned at the rancher and started talking a mile a minute.

“Oh good, you're up! Hi! Good morning! Isn't it a great morning? It's so beautiful out there. I can see why you love it here so much. Are you ready for breakfast? I wasn't sure what you'd like so I made lots for you to choose from.” He gestured toward the various pots and pans on the stove. “Oatmeal, scrambled eggs, bacon, pancakes. Fresh biscuits in the oven—they're almost done. Toast and fresh fruit on the table. Or you could just have some cold cereal if you want, I guess, but I worked really hard making all this delicious food so I hope you'll try some of it—”

“Looks good,” Cliff said with a grunt, a bit overwhelmed by it all. There was enough food to feed a small army.

“—and I wasn't sure if you preferred coffee or tea so I brewed up some of both,” Troy said without missing a beat. “I don't personally drink coffee, but I know a lot of people do—a *lot* of people—it's like they can't survive without it, you know? Like they need an IV drip of pure black Colombian roast or something. Isn't that insane? If you can't be nice early in the morning without coffee, then just spare the rest of us and sleep later! That's what I think anyway. Anyway, I don't drink coffee, I drink tea—any kind of tea, just give me the tea and I'll drink the hell out of it. That's what I like, tea. Not coffee, stuff tastes so nasty to me and has too much caffeine. I don't think I need the caffeine, do I? No, definitely don't need the caff—”

Cliff put up a halting hand to quiet the incessant babbling. “I think you're doing just fine without it. Is this your usual irritating morning perkiness?”

“Well, I am, uh, perky in the mornings, usually. I'm a morning person, that's just part of who I am—” Troy closed his mouth as Cliff stopped him from going off on another rapid verbal voyage. “Sorry, Mr. Haywood. I guess I'm a little nervous.”

“A *little* nervous?” Cliff said with raised eyebrows.

“Okay, a lot nervous,” he admitted as he turned off the burners and began transferring the food to serving platters.

“You don't have anything to worry about,” the rancher remarked as he piled his plate high with a little bit of each of the foods on the table, even a small helping of oatmeal. “You have two weeks. Just do what I ask in those two weeks, and you've got yourself a job.”

“Thank you, Mr. Haywood,” Troy replied with sincerity, serving himself from the platters.

Cliff had never figured out how to respond to sincere gratitude, so he just gave a grunt around a mouthful of pancakes to acknowledge that he heard it. *God, he put a ton of food on his plate. I wonder if he can eat it all, slender as he is, or if his eyes are bigger than his stomach.* He glanced up and mentioned, “For future reference, I'm one of those people who can't be civil without coffee first thing in the morning.”

To his surprise, Troy laughed. “I should've figured that you would be a coffee man just because I opened my big mouth and said that,” he said, still

smiling as he got up to retrieve the coffee pot and place it on a trivet on the table. "Or shall I just save us both some time and get you an IV drip?"

The rancher glanced up at the grin on that beautiful face and bit back his automatic response. *The sass on that man! That beautiful man with that beautiful smile. I want that smile to stay right where it is. I will not be so grumpy today, I will not be so grumpy today,* he repeated mentally. It remained to be seen whether or not he would succeed, though. Instead of biting the man's head off for the remark, he simply stated, "I take my coffee with a splash of milk and two sugars."

"I'll remember that—splash of milk and two sugars, splash of milk and two sugars, splash of milk and two sugars—and I'll have it ready and waiting for you as soon as you come downstairs from now on," Troy said with another beaming smile. "Do you have a favorite mug? I could make sure to always put it in your favorite mug."

He was speaking so quickly that his words were running together again, and Cliff without coffee had a difficult time understanding him. He was used to a slower pace, the natural way of things on the ranch, and all this fast talking made his head spin. He sliced his stack of pancakes and speared the pieces, then pointed with his fork toward the mug in the dish drain as he chewed, not wanting to add to the chaos by speaking.

"Hey, cool! It has Loki on it!" Troy exclaimed as he grabbed the mug and poured the coffee before sitting back down at the table.

"Yeah, gay cowboys like superheroes too."

"Superheroes?" he questioned, confused for a moment. Then, as if the light bulb lit up above his head, Troy picked up the pop culture reference. "You must mean like Loki from those movies about all those other superheroes. I don't watch much television or films so it took me a minute," he explained.

"That's one thing we have in common then," Cliff said. "I don't even own a TV."

"Seems like such a waste of time to me. Besides, I've been told I make plenty of my own noise," Troy replied with a grin.

"Whoever told you that was an honest individual."

"Brutally, but I didn't mind. I can't get mad when somebody tells me the truth," he pointed out, making a miniature Mt. Vesuvius out of his stack of

pancakes, syrup, and pieces of bacon. He scooped up a forkful of maple goodness, then said, "Well, those movies didn't portray Loki accurately. I mean, I get that it was about entertainment and all, but still. The actor is hot, though. Anyway, in mythology, Loki was a trickster through and through. Would do whatever it took to get his way. He even transformed into a female horse once to distract the stallion Svaðilfari from helping the Hrimthurs from building the wall of Asgard because the Aesir didn't want to have to pay him."

"I don't want to hear about that," Cliff said, unimpressed, as he devoured his scrambled eggs.

The look on Troy's face made it clear his train of thought had been derailed by the terse remark, and it took him a moment to recover and pick up the conversation. "Oh, okay. You don't like mythology?"

"Never paid it much mind. It's too early in the mornin' for this."

"Then drink your coffee faster. I might have to mark your mug so I know when it's safe to converse without living in fear of you eating me for breakfast," the young man laughed. When he got a glare in return, he cleared his throat and tried again. "That's a relief, though. I thought you were mad about Loki becoming a female horse. Mythology is fun. Thor once bashed a guy's head in while disguised as the Goddess Freya. Lots of mythological figures cross-dressed or changed genders/sexes to get what they wanted. Zeus, for example—"

He stopped short and snapped his mouth shut as Cliff shot him a more intense glare. His gaze dropped to his plate in disappointment, and he picked up his knife and fork to attack his food as he slouched down in his chair.

"Not a breakfast table topic. Got it."

Why in hell does it bother me so much to see that dejection in his eyes or hear the disappointment in his voice? Why do I care? I shouldn't care, but I do. I can't help it. Cliff couldn't stand it, so he offered, "Food's good."

I'm such a softie. Now he's probably going to start talkin' fast again.

Troy visibly brightened and sat up straighter in his chair. "Glad you like it. If you tell me what your favorites are, I'd be happy to make what you want instead of guessing."

"Can't pay you any extra to cook for me," Cliff said. "That wasn't in the job description."

“That’s okay. I love to cook, and it’s just as easy to cook for two people as it is to cook for one person. I’m not a sandwich-every-day kind of guy, so I’ll probably cook most of the time.” He paused, then amended, “I mean, as long as you don’t mind. It is your house and your food.”

Who in their right mind would turn down that offer? Sounds like a good deal to me, Cliff thought as he shrugged and nodded. “Just make a list, and I’ll get what we need when I go to town. And make sure everythin’ is on the list, okay? I only go to town once every couple of weeks.”

“I guess you can’t just run to the store to pick up something way out here, huh.”

“Not really. If we don’t have it, we don’t have it ’til it’s time to go to town again. I don’t make special trips except for emergencies. Can’t afford the extra gas or time away from the ranch.”

“Got it.” Troy thought about what he had already found in the kitchen and pantry while he was looking for ingredients to make breakfast and what he needed from town. Swallowing another mouthful of Mt. Pancakes-and-Bacon, he said, “You’re running low on some things. When is your next trip?”

“Monday. Not as busy then,” Cliff replied briskly and shoveled another spoonful of oatmeal in his mouth. It was just as warm and delicious as when his mother used to make it so many years ago. *Good memories. I like this man.*

“That’s three days from now,” he said, then smiled. “I’m used to being thrifty. I can make it work until Monday.”

He looked like he could pull off thrifty, but Cliff kept his mouth shut on that, unable to think of a nice enough way to say so. He got the impression that Troy could go shopping in a dollar store and get everything he needed to keep the house running smoothly for two weeks. And he could probably get a fabulous new outfit for five bucks at Goodwill while he was at it. Today’s ensemble consisted of the skinny jeans from yesterday along with a white tee that looked like someone had thrown paint all over it, like abstract art.

It makes him look like a work of art, Cliff thought before he caught himself, a little shocked at where his mind was going. *Whoa there, cowboy. Glad I didn’t say that out loud. Wonder what he’d think if I did say it, though...*

Cliff glanced up at his new housekeeper now and then as he went back to rambling and running his words together. *Hope he can break that habit. The pace of the ranch, of this whole part of the country, is laidback and easygoing.*

It's what the animals need... what I need. He's just too intense, but he'll learn. I hope.

Then again, maybe it'll be good for me to be around him, just like he is. He definitely adds excitement and a little chaos to my life, and those aren't necessarily bad things. There's plenty I could learn from him. Like how to smile and actually mean it. Maybe I'm just stuck in a bad rut and he's exactly what I need to find my way out of it.

Please, God, let him do satisfactory work for the next two weeks. I want to keep him around. That smile really does light up the whole room and not in the way that makes me want to claw my eyes out in the mornin'.

Once his plate had been wiped clean, Cliff leaned back in his chair and remarked, "I ate too much. It was delicious."

Troy smiled, genuinely pleased, as he gathered up the dishes and took them to the sink. "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, you know."

"That right?" the rancher mumbled, sipping his second cup of coffee.

"It is, it is, indeed it is," he replied in a singsong voice.

"Sounds like somethin' a mornin' person would say."

Troy laughed at that, a beautiful, musical-sounding laugh. "Coffee does not a breakfast make, Mr. Haywood. You work hard, and you need a nutritious meal to start your day."

"So you made me bacon?" Cliff asked, something that might be described as a half-smile turning up one corner of his mouth.

"And eggs and oatmeal and fruit, don't forget. And you ate some of all of it."

Cliff got up and placed his coffee cup in the sink. "That I did. I'm headin' out now, but I'll be back for lunch 'round noon."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Haywood!" Troy called as the rancher paused at the back door to step into his boots and grab his hat. "That's it?"

"Uh, yeah. Did ya need somethin'?"

"Well, I have some questions." He ticked them off on his fingers. "What do you want me to make for lunch? Where can I find you if I need you? How do you want me to answer the phone if anyone calls? What if someone stops by? And most importantly, what do you want me to do around the house today?"

“Alright, alright, slow down,” Cliff said, trying to remember all the questions so he could answer them. He didn’t want Troy to worry all day. “First, people usually make sure I’ll be reachable before they come by. They know I run this ranch by myself and I’m usually out all day. I’ll have to take you ’round the land one day so you’ll know where to look for me if you need me. Second, if someone calls, answer Wild Prairie Ranch, take a message, and tell ’em I’ll call back. And last, I don’t need a big meal sittin’ heavy in my stomach in the middle of the day. I need somethin’ that’ll keep me goin’ but not weigh me down. Just a sandwich is fine.”

It was the most he had said all morning, and he could tell Troy was cataloging each answer in his mental files. He waited until the man said, “Okay, I got all that, but you didn’t answer my question about the housework.”

“Well, that’d take more time than I can give it right now,” Cliff admitted. “So ’til we can talk more about it—say, after dinner—just do the basic housekeepin’ stuff like sweepin’, moppin’, cleanin’ the bathrooms. That sort of thing.”

“I can handle that. Just those things should keep me busy all day,” Troy replied, throwing a conspicuous glance around the kitchen area.

“I know. Sorry things aren’t very tidy. I haven’t had time to keep up with everythin’.”

“No worries, Mr. Haywood,” he said with a wink. “That’s why you need me, right?”

“Right,” Cliff agreed. For a split second, he thought, *I hope he doesn’t clean me out and disappear.* Then he inwardly laughed at himself. *Funny how I didn’t think ’bout the fact that he could’ve murdered me in my sleep, but I worry about him stealin’ from me. I don’t even have anythin’ valuable enough to take. Besides, he don’t seem the type.* He tipped his hat and headed out the door, calling back over his shoulder, “See you at lunch.”

He heard Troy yell some sort of farewell, and he put a hand up to wave without looking back. *If I look back now, I’ll never get to work,* he thought with a half-smile. The beautiful man had captured his attention but good. The half-smile morphed into a full-blown grin as he saw the dogs gathered at the barn door and the horses lined up at the fence, all waiting for their breakfast. *Captured my attention so good I’m late feedin’ the animals. Hope they don’t decide to stop talkin’ to me.*

“Hey, boys and girls, breakfast is comin’ right up,” he said, ducking into the barn to grab a bale of hay. On his way out, he nearly tripped over a barn cat who clearly thought he should be able to see her through the dense hay. “Sorry, kitty,” he offered with a chuckle as she hissed at him and climbed to the safety of the rafters.

“Come and get it!” he called as he approached the pasture fence.

The small herd of five mares and three geldings responded immediately as he spread out the hay. He touched each horse’s neck in turn and greeted them all by name. Taking just a moment to appreciate and reinforce the bond with every horse was something he had learned from his daddy and granddaddy. *They’re livin’ creatures, after all, not machines,* he had heard countless times.

After filling the water troughs, he went back to the barn and put some feed in a bucket. It was a nutritious special treat for the horse that he would be working with for the day. Singling out one of the horses, Cliff led him to a paddock close to the barn where the tack was already spread out on one of the fence rails. He hooked the handle of the bucket over a fence post and rubbed the big blue roan gelding’s nose. “Here ya go, Dante. Finish up yer breakfast while I feed the other animals and then it’s time to go to work.”

Dante snorted in response, and Cliff patted his strong neck with a chuckle. “Easy, big fella. I got things to do before we can head out. Everybody else has to eat too, not just you.”

He went about his chores with calm, quiet composure despite getting a late start. If his energy levels were high, the energy levels of every animal on the ranch would rise, and things could get out of hand in a hurry. So Cliff banished from his mind the fact that he was already behind schedule; the work would get done. If he tried to rush things and triggered a riot in the yard, it would serve no purpose except to waste more time and cause stress to him and all the animals.

“Daddy always said, nobody ever made friends with a horse by yelling at ’im. Ain’t that right, Bandit?” he said, glancing down at his best cattle dog as he doled out portions into each of the dogs’ food bowls. Bandit yapped in agreement. He dove into his bowl snout-first as soon as his master set it on the ground, chomping away as if he was starving.

Cliff chuckled, scratching behind a floppy brown ear. “Hungry, weren’t ya, boy? Sorry, I was a li’l bit distracted this mornin’, new housekeeper and all.”

Very pretty new housekeeper, he thought as he spent a quiet moment with each of the cattle dogs, using their names and scratching their favorite spots.

They were working dogs, and it was important that he didn't treat them as pets. But that didn't mean he shouldn't care for them and bond with them the same way he did with the horses.

Even as he spent a few minutes with his dogs, he couldn't get Troy out of his head—the outfit that was every bit as formfitting as the one from the previous night, the fact that he had taken time to apply a touch of eyeliner before making breakfast, the irritating yet endearing way he ran his words together when he was nervous... Cliff smiled, remembering Troy's quip about the IV coffee drip. *Been a long time since anyone made me smile like this. Don't screw this up, Haywood. This man is good for you.*

Good for me, yes, but just look at him. He don't belong here. He sticks out like... well, like a damn rainbow after a storm. The folks in town'll eat him alive, and when they see me with him, they'll chew me up and spit me out too—

Whoa there, Haywood! What the hell's got into you? Since when did you start carin' what the folks in town think, or anyone else for that matter? You like him. That's all that matters. Nothin' and nobody else.

And when they see you with him, you damn well better be proud as hell he has the balls to be himself. That's the least you can do for him.

Cliff didn't realize that he had stopped in his tracks, staring into space while he argued with himself in his own head, until Bandit let out a sharp yap that made him jump. "It's alright, pup," he soothed, inwardly chuckling at his reaction. "I'm okay, just figurin' out some stuff."

Better get back to workin' or I'll never get to go back in the house... where Troy is. Is it lunchtime yet? Shit, this is going to be a long day...

When all the animals had been fed and all the regular chores had been checked off his mental list, Cliff strolled out of the stable and headed for the paddock where Dante waited, snorting and snuffling and ready to go. The rancher's heart felt lighter than it had in ages, and there was a liveliness in his step that wasn't quite a spring but was perhaps its distant cousin.

On his way to the paddock, he noticed Troy's car in the yard near the house. It was an old Buick on its last legs, from the look of it. The sight of it jogged his memory, reminding him that he had been meaning to check on the heavy equipment used for harvesting the hay. He didn't want to be stuck with broken-down tractors on the first day of cutting. With a quick apology to Dante, he turned on his heel and went to tinker with his large toys.

“Have a good morning!” Troy yelled back from the back porch, giving an enthusiastic wave.

He watched the rancher disappear into the barn and return a few minutes later with an armload of... stuff. He laughed out loud then, realizing that he didn't know the right word for it. He could see a saddle and a blanket and maybe a halter. *Halter... is that even right? Maybe it's a bridle, who knows? I'll just have to ask him later.* For a moment, Troy faltered, wondering, *I hope he doesn't mind me asking so many questions. Oh well, I'll never know if I don't ask. Knowledge is power!*

Troy turned to go back inside the house to get started on the dishes when he noticed the dust and grass all over the porch. *Might as well sweep it off while I'm thinking about it.* He stepped back inside and looked around until he found a small door that looked like a closet. *Bingo*, he thought, then couldn't help finishing the tune, *was his name-o!* With a chuckle, he grabbed a broom and proceeded to sweep off the porch, humming and singing as he went. After he finished, he walked around the house and swept off the front porch. *Might as well do both while I'm at it.* Once both porches had been swept clean, he indulged himself a bit and twirled the broom like a dance partner.

“Thank you for the lovely dance, Mr. Broom, but now it's time to get back to work,” he said as he dipped in a low bow to the broom. Then he laughed out loud at the silliness as he pranced inside to start the dishes.

There was a large window located over the kitchen sink, and Troy was able to keep his mind occupied looking out over the seemingly endless lands belonging to Wild Prairie Ranch while his hands were busy washing the breakfast dishes. Had the window not been placed exactly there, he would have had a difficult time standing still long enough to get the job done.

Contrary to what he first thought, there was plenty to see outside. Chickens doing their thing strutting around the yard, some goats munching away on the other side of a fence, several horses eating their breakfast in a nearby paddock, a couple dogs following the rancher around as he did his chores, and even a barn cat came into view now and then through the open barn door. It was all fascinating to a transplanted city boy.

After he had dried and put away all the dishes, Troy realized that the way the kitchen was laid out made no sense and was not functional. The pots and pans were in a cabinet on the opposite side of the kitchen from the stove, and he'd had to walk around the room two or three times to collect all the dishes,

glasses, and flatware to set the table for breakfast. It would be so much easier and more pleasant to cook if he rearranged the whole kitchen and made everything more functional...

Whoa, nelly! he thought as he stopped himself after emptying one cabinet. *You crazy queen, this is not your house. You can't just go flip-flopping rooms around all willy-nilly. You need to ask Mr. Haywood first. And since when did you start flip-flopping anyway?*

Hehe, I said willy.

“God—or Goddess, as the case may be—it’s a good thing nobody can hear what goes on inside my head,” he said out loud, laughing again. “At least I entertain myself.”

He put everything back in the cabinet, then thought about what he should do next. He found himself thinking out loud, as was usual, because saying his thoughts out loud helped him organize them. It also helped fill the silence.

“Every surface in here needs a good scrubbing, and the floor could definitely use a thorough mopping,” he mused, looking around the kitchen. He made his way into the hallway as he went through his options, walking up on the balls of his feet as if he was wearing a fabulous pair of high heels instead of worn sneakers. “These hardwood floors are gorgeous, but they need some work. Sanding, staining, sealing—I’ll have to talk to Mr. Haywood about that, though. That would be a big project. For now, they need sweeping and mopping. But it’s always wonderful to have clean bathrooms—I bet he would love to be able to soak in a hot bath in a sparkling clean tub after sweating outside like a slave all day. How divine that would be!”

An inspection of the house turned up a full bathroom and a washroom downstairs in addition to the bathroom upstairs, and they all needed to be cleaned from top to bottom. Troy had visions of scrubbing grout on his knees with a toothbrush in his not-so-distant future. “Not the way I like to spend time on my knees,” he grumbled. “Has the man never heard of cleaner? He simply *cannot* be gay.”

There were plenty of other things that needed to be done as well. There was dust everywhere, the drapes needed to be cleaned or at the very least vacuumed, the windows washed, the rugs shaken out and beaten, the baseboards scrubbed, the cobwebs swiped out of the corners of the ceiling, the ashes cleaned out of the fireplace, a few fixtures around the house polished, some light bulbs

changed. Troy had no idea when the bed linens or bath towels had been changed last, and he was sure there was laundry somewhere that needed to be washed—

“Ahhh! Mental overload!” he screamed dramatically. “Where do I even begin? There’s so much to do! I can’t get everything done, especially if he adds more to the list, and if I can’t get it all done, he’s going to let me go!”

He ran upstairs, flopped on his bed, and pulled his pillow over his head. It was only then that he realized he had forgotten to make his bed after getting up early. “Make your bed and stop being so dramatic, you silly queen. Prioritizing and tackling one thing at a time will get the job done.”

Making his bed and tidying the room allowed him to check one thing off his long list, and the sense of accomplishment spurred him on to the next thing on his list. He decided that he should clean the toilets, sinks, and counters in all the bathrooms first. *There’s not many things worse than peeing into a nasty toilet*, he thought with a shudder. After that, he would tackle the kitchen so it would be clean when he prepared meals. *I can work out what to do next after I finish those things. One thing at a time.*

Hours later, Cliff came back inside and was greeted by the harsh smell of cleaners. *Gross*, he thought, wrinkling his nose. *On one hand, it means he’s been cleaning. Fantastic. On the other hand... now my house smells like bleach and Pine-Sol. Note to self: pick up cleaner that smells better when I go to town.*

“Troy!” he yelled from the back door as he hung up his hat and stepped out of his boots.

“In here!” came the immediate response from the kitchen.

He rounded the corner and saw that everything formerly located on the kitchen counters had been neatly displaced onto the table. Then he saw pristine countertops, a spotless stainless steel sink, a sparkling chrome faucet, and a gleaming cooking range. The oven had been set to self-clean. He also noticed that every cabinet had been scrubbed clean, doors and sides, which was made evident by the fact that Troy was sitting cross-legged in front of the last cabinet scrubbing it with a sponge.

“Hi!” he said with a bright smile as soon as Cliff came into view. Then he sprang up off the floor, stunning Cliff with how quickly he moved when it was

obvious he had been sitting that way a long time. "Is it noon already? It can't be, I haven't made lunch yet! Give me just a few minutes and I'll have a sandwich ready lickety-split!"

The rancher raised an eyebrow at "lickety-split" but didn't comment on it. Instead, he reassured his housekeeper, "It's late mornin', not noon yet, don't worry. I just came in to tell ya that I won't be back for lunch after all."

"Oh. Is everything alright?" Troy asked, pausing in the middle of frantically grabbing things out of the fridge to make sandwiches.

"Been trying to wrangle stubborn machinery all mornin'," he explained, washing his hands and taking care not to get dirt and dust on the clean surfaces. "Glad I didn't wait 'til it was time to cut the hay before I checked. Finally got the tractor to start, but now I'm behind for the day."

"What do you have left to do?"

Cliff let out an amused laugh at that. "What do I have left? I barely got started."

The look on Troy's face made him regret laughing. *Idiot. How's a city boy like this one s'posed to know what I do outside from sunup to sundown?*

He cleared his throat and reached past his housekeeper to grab a bottle of water out of the fridge as he said, "This is a cattle ranch. But I can't just turn 'em loose in a pasture and leave 'em alone forever. I gotta check on the herd every day to make sure none of 'em are sick or injured and to make sure there's no signs of predators preyin' on the herd. If somethin' like a cougar or a pack of wolves gets a taste for calves, it could decimate the herd, and losin' even a few head of cattle would cause a financial burden for any rancher in this economy. I gotta check on the calves and make sure they're healthy so they'll sell well enough at auction to at least break even. And I gotta ride the land as often as I can to make sure it's safe for the animals and check all the fences for breaches."

"I had no idea there was so much to do," Troy admitted. "Whenever I see pictures of ranchers, they're always walking around without shirts and carrying saddles or doing, um, other things—"

"Like layin' around in the hay blowin' each other?"

Those gorgeous chocolate brown eyes grew wider. "What?"

“Cowboy fantasies. They’re all over the internet. Most of ’em are models—their muscles come from liftin’ weights in a gym instead of hard manual labor. And no real cowboy would ever have sex buck ass naked in the hay. You’d be covered head to ass in scratches.” Cliff stopped and eyed him closely, trying to gauge his reaction. “Oh, c’mon now. Tell me you ain’t a prude.”

“I’m not a prude!” Troy shot back. Then a sly grin settled on his face. “Cowboy fantasies, huh. You know about that from personal experience, do ya, cowboy?”

“Your ass only gets covered with angry red scratches once before you learn to take the extra five seconds to put down a saddle blanket,” he answered with a derisive snort.

“And that concludes our first session of Lessons from the Ranch 101. Class dismissed,” Troy joked with an adorable giggle.

“On that note, I need to be heading out. I gotta lot of ground to cover today. Should be back for dinner, though,” Cliff said, grabbing an apple on his way to the door.

“You have a picnic lunch already packed up in your saddlebags, right, Mr. Haywood?” he asked, standing with his hands on his hips. When he was met with a blank expression, he went on, “Because I know you don’t plan on walking out of here with just an apple when I can make you a delicious, stick-to-your-ribs sandwich in a flash.”

A couple minutes later, the rancher walked out the back door carrying his apple and a sandwich thick enough that he would have to stretch his jaw to get a decent bite. Troy watched him mount his horse and ride off into the wild blue yonder—or the rolling plains, as it were. He went back inside with a smug smile on his face. *No hot boss of mine is gonna go hungry, not while I have anything to say about it.*

Hey, I have a totally hot boss!

Troy looked at all the ingredients spread across the countertop that was no longer spotless. It would need to be wiped down again before he could move on to cleaning the fridge and eventually the floor. With a dramatic sigh, he said out loud, “That’s the problem with housework—it’s never really finished. There is always something else to do.” Then he shrugged. “But that’s a good thing, I guess. It keeps me employed.”

Then his stomach rumbled, and those sandwich ingredients began to look a bit more appealing. He had been working nonstop since before dawn; he hadn't had time to realize that he was hungry. "Might as well eat something before I put everything away so I won't have to take it back out again. That's efficient, right?" His stomach rumbled again, and he lowered his voice and said Cookie Monster-style, "Belly say 'feed me'! That good 'nough for me."

One large PBBLT later, he rubbed his stomach and asked, "How's that, belly? It's been a while since we had real bacon, lettuce, and tomato for our peanut butter, bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches. Yummy deliciousness, that's what it is. Okay, back to work then. With whom shall we flirt—I mean, work next, hmm? Mr. Mop?"

He glanced around at all the work that needed to be done before he could start mopping and shook his head. "No, my apologies, Mr. Mop. It would be absolutely scandalous to work with you out of turn. I couldn't possibly. Mr. Broom, then? Nope, not him either. Gasp! Ms. Dishcloth, have you put on your best dress just for little ol' me? I am flattered, just flattered!"

The beautiful housekeeper danced and twirled and pranced and sang his way through cleaning the entire kitchen first with Ms. Dishcloth until the counters gleamed, then with Mr. Broom until there was not a speck of dirt to be found, and finally with Mr. Mop until the stone floor was cleaner than he suspected it had been in quite a long time. Troy looked around the pristine kitchen, proud as a peacock at how fantastic it looked, and realized that he couldn't wait to cook again. But since it was early afternoon and nowhere near time to start dinner, that would have to wait.

"Oh well, it's not like I'm hurting for things to do," he said to no one in particular.

Bowing gracefully to his dance partners, he declared in a sophisticated tone, "Gentlemen, and my fair lady, it has been a true pleasure, but sadly, I must go on to new things. This is but one room of many that so desperately need my attention. You, my dear," he said, gently wringing out and hanging Ms. Dishcloth where she could dry, "must be absolutely exhausted, so just rest here a while. You two gentlemen," he went on, gesturing grandly to the mop and broom, "have performed valiantly, but alas, your work is not yet finished. Mr. Mop, Mr. Broom, I fear I shall have further need of your accompaniment. Onward and upward to the second floor we go!"

In the upstairs bathroom, Troy met a toothbrush with whom he ended up spending a great deal of time, just as he had feared. The toothbrush, who preferred that he not use gender pronouns and to whom he referred only as Lovely, worked like a slave until that grout was as white as it could possibly be. And even though his knees screamed at him after kneeling so long on the hard tiles, Troy twirled that toothbrush around with as much grace as if he was a giant and Lovely was a little person.

“That’s exactly how we look in my mind, Lovely,” he said aloud to his faithful scrubbing friend. He refused to look in the mirror, lest the spell be broken. “And ‘Lovely’ is the perfect name for you, my little friend,” he added, admiring the once bright, now faded colors on the toothbrush’s handle. “I always thought they were marketing your kind to us Rainbow Warriors. Turns out I was right all along, huh?” He giggled out loud, and the pair moved to the downstairs bathrooms to get more heavy-duty cleaning done.

Once all three bathrooms sparkled and shone just like the spotless kitchen, Troy returned all of his new friends to their places so they could rest, then he flopped down on the couch to have a rest himself. He kicked off his sneakers, propped his feet up on the arm of the couch, and wiggled his toes in the air.

“Feel that cool breeze! Be free, little piggies, be free!” he yelled, then descended into fits of giggles. “You must be delirious, you crazy queen. Talkin’ ’bout piggies. Bless your heart.” He shook his head in that way the old biddies from back home in the Deep South used to do when he let his gay hang out around his family’s friends, but he couldn’t hold the mock seriousness for long. “There aren’t even any pigs on this ranch... that I know of. Hmm, I should ask. More questions for the boss. Speaking of that positively delicious man...”

His voice trailed off as he craned his neck to see the grandfather clock on the other side of the room. The hands counted down the seconds until the clock chimed five times. Troy let his head fall back down on the couch as he lazily remarked, “It’s five o’clock.”

Suddenly sitting straight up on the couch, he repeated, “It’s five o’clock! And the boss will be back for dinner! Wait—I have no idea when dinner is,” he realized. “Oh well. Any time’s a good time for cooking, I say. Especially when I’m hungry. Don’t you think so, lonely ranch house?”

He didn’t wait for a response. None of his inanimate companions ever answered him, and that was just as well. *I’m sure there’s a DSM-worthy*

diagnosis in there somewhere, but who cares? I amuse myself. He jumped up and pranced into the kitchen. *Prancing is so much fun. Who would ever want to walk normally—whatever “normal” is—when you can dance and frolic and cavort and prance?*

Plundering through the fridge and pantry, he made a mental list of what ingredients he had available to work with, and from that list, he managed to come up with enough dinners to last until the trip to town on Monday. And there would be leftovers he could use for lunch. Proud of himself, he pulled out an assortment of odds and ends along with the ground lamb he found in the freezer and threw together what promised to be a delicious shepherd's pie.

“Just like Grandma used to make,” Troy said to the old wooden spoon that had taken on a sort of grandmotherly persona in his mind. He put the heavy ceramic baking dish in the oven and set a timer, amending his previous statement. “Well, sort of like Grandma used to make. Hers was a bit more precise. This one... is really just leftovers and odds and ends and such, but with the ground lamb it should be pretty tasty. And it will stick to the boss's ribs, don'tcha think, dearie?”

There was no sign of the rancher or the horse he had ridden anywhere in the yard, the pastures, or on the horizon yet. Troy found himself a bit disappointed as he gazed out of the kitchen window for a sign of the boss coming home. *Still nothing*, he sighed.

“This is ridiculous. Disappointed that you can't see him yet—what are you thinking, you silly queen? He's your boss, not your next ride. This whole ‘waiting for the master's return’ nonsense is just... ridiculous. Utterly. There's plenty to do until he gets back. This house is certainly not up to our standards of clean and acceptable.” He cracked an imaginary whip in the air. “*Tssssssh!* So get a move on, little doggie!”

Laughing at himself, he twirled into the laundry room and put the towels he had collected from all the bathrooms in the wash. As he closed the lid and started the wash cycle, he belatedly hoped that those towels weren't the only ones in the house. *Should've checked first. Oh well.* Troy checked the dryer and found a load of wrinkled work clothes crammed inside.

“Good God Almighty,” he exclaimed, using one of his grandmother's favorite phrases, “how on earth did he ever get all those clothes to dry crammed in there like that?” He started pulling them out of the dryer, feeling for damp spots and sniffing for mildew, when he caught himself with his nose buried in

the crotch of a pair of worn jeans and laughed. "Sniffing the boss's clothes. Yeah, that's not weird or anything."

By the time he ran upstairs to the linen closet he'd found by chance earlier in the day and placed fresh towels in all the bathrooms, folded the load of laundry, then ironed the things he felt needed to be ironed so his boss wouldn't look completely uncared for and transferred the towels to the dryer, the shepherd's pie was done and sitting in the warm oven with the lid on and Troy was having a difficult time resisting the urge to indulge in a taste. *Or two or three. I'm hungry!*

As if on cue, Cliff walked in the back door, hung his hat on its peg, and stepped out of his boots the same way he did every time he came inside. Mere seconds passed before the delicious fragrance of a home-cooked meal wafted into his nostrils, overpowering the harsh odor of cleaners, and his beeline to the bathroom to take a long, hot shower took an immediate detour into the kitchen to see what his housekeeper had conjured up for dinner.

He was greeted by a noticeably tired but still bright and perky Troy jumping up from a chair to greet him in what he was coming to consider typical Troy fashion. "Hi, Mr. Haywood! Did you have a good day? How are the cattle? Everything good?" Then he stopped himself and pointed to the washroom near the back door. "Go wash up, Mr. Haywood. Dinner's ready, and you are not sitting down at the table like that."

Blinking a bit at the unmistakable tone of command given without a thought in that sweet voice, Cliff replied, "How could I say anythin' but *yes sir* to someone who makes food that smells like that?"

"Oh, don't you start with that *yes sir* business, Mr. Haywood," he laughed. "Troy is just fine, and right now, Troy is very hungry. Go wash up!"

"Just hold yer horses, I'm agoin' right now."

That beautiful, musical laugh. I need that in my life. Never realized what's been missin' 'til he knocked on my door. Or rather, rang the doorbell a million times. Cliff chuckled at the memory still fresh in his mind as he washed his face and hands. It was a wonderful feeling to have someone to come home to at the end of a long, hard day, even if that person was just his housekeeper. *Glad I didn't yell through the door for him to go away. What a treasure I'd've missed out on.*

The two men sat down together when he returned to the table presentable, each of them taking a careful bite of the steaming hot meat, vegetables, and

potatoes. It melted in their mouths, and Cliff had to bite his lip to hold back a sensual moan. He held it back out of respect for Troy; he didn't want his housekeeper to misunderstand the meaning, though in his mind the pie did warrant such a response. *The mashed potatoes are so fluffy and the meat is so flavorful. What kind of meat is it anyway? The whole thing is just so moist and delicious. I even like the veggies. I never like veggies. I usually just tolerate 'em as long as they don't attack me, but this... this is makin' me rethink that.*

Troy wasn't quite so discriminating. "Oh my God," he moaned out loud, savoring the flavor. "That is good! Isn't it good, Mr. Haywood?"

Cliff mumbled an affirmation then shoveled another huge spoonful into his mouth.

"I agree, it's just divine! Thank you for the recipe, Grandma. May you rest in peace," he said as he glanced skyward with reverence. The glance lasted only a second or two, and then his focus shifted back to his boss. "It's a keeper, don't ya think?"

The rancher didn't stop eating long enough to voice a reply this time; he merely nodded, scooping up another spoonful before he finished swallowing. *Rinse and repeat, Troy thought. Is he that hungry, or does he not want to talk to me that badly? I know I'm more irritating than a swarm of mosquitoes sometimes. I make a lot of noise, and he's kinda laidback, but he didn't even look up or anything that time. What if he's mad that I didn't get more done today? But I got a lot done! I cleaned the kitchen and all three bathrooms top to bottom—he could eat off those floors now! Maybe I should ask—Nope, he decided resolutely. Not gonna annoy him with more questions. If he wants peace and quiet, then peace and quiet he shall have.*

His resolve began to falter after only a few minutes. Troy had never been especially good at waiting, or patience, or taking hints. Cliff sat across the table, hunched over his plate as if prepared to defend against someone trying to snatch a forkful. His head stayed low, his eyes remained focused on his dinner, and he made not a sound other than chewing and swallowing. Finally, Troy could no longer stand it and the words blurted out of his mouth before he could stop them.

"Is there something wrong, Mr. Haywood? Did I say or do anything to upset you?"

"What?" Cliff asked, looking up from his plate in bewilderment.

“You’ve barely said two words since you started eating, and you won’t even look at me,” Troy replied as he set his fork down. “It was me, wasn’t it? I did something you didn’t like.”

The rancher stared at him for a few seconds, genuinely confused. *Thought we were just havin’ a nice, quiet meal...* “No, no, you didn’t do anythin’. Well, I reckon I don’t really know if you did or didn’t—haven’t been here all day, remember?—but that’s not why I haven’t said anythin’.”

“Oh. Well, why then?”

“Cause dinner is delicious,” Cliff answered honestly. “Don’t need conversation to enjoy every last drop on my plate.”

Troy watched him soak up the last of the liquid with a piece of toast before shoving the whole soggy mess in his mouth. “You were concentrating so hard on eating that you couldn’t talk to me? That’s all, really?” *Insecure much? Good lord, you ridiculous queen.*

“That’s all. Really,” he repeated, serving himself a second helping. “Why? You need to talk to me about somethin’?”

“No, I-I just—” Troy stopped himself before his mouth could shoot off a mile a minute and let out a breath. “Still nervous, I guess.”

“What’d I tell you about that? Nothin’ to worry ’bout, right? I meant it.” At the smaller man’s nod, Cliff switched gears and asked, “What kind of meat is this?”

“Lamb. I found it in the freezer,” Troy answered, perking up a bit at the budding conversation. “I was surprised to find it in there, but I just knew shepherd’s pie would be the perfect thing to make with it.”

“Not somethin’ I’d ever buy on purpose. One of the neighbors brought it by a while back and asked if I wanted it. His kids refused to eat it, and he didn’t want to waste it. I threw it in the freezer and forgot about it.”

“I used all of it. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I told you, feel free to use whatever you can find,” Cliff said with a shrug. “Don’t think I’ve eaten this good since my mama could still cook for me.”

Troy had a brief flash of panic thinking that there might have been someone else in the house to see him talking to and interacting with inanimate objects all day long. Then he remembered he had been in, or at least seen, every room in

the ranch house by now, and he was sure that nobody else was around. Unless they were hiding in a closet or something.

“Did she get sick or move away?” he asked out of genuine curiosity.

“Move away? No, nothin’ like that. Folks don’t just leave their family ranch. Some of the ones ’round these parts are third or fourth generation.”

“Oh, I thought maybe the life of a rancher got to be too hard for her and she moved into a retirement village or something.”

“A retirement village?” Cliff echoed in bewilderment. He had no concept of such a thing. “Don’t know what that is, but I’m pretty sure we don’t have ’em in Montana.”

This place certainly isn’t Florida or California, Troy thought as he finished his pie and wiped his plate clean. Then he said aloud, “That would probably be a safe bet. Do you mind if I ask what happened to your parents?”

“Go right ahead.”

That made Troy giggle to himself. *This man is so very literal, I love it.* “Okay, what happened to them?”

Cliff let out a heavy sigh and leaned back in his chair. His eyes fell closed in what looked to Troy like pain as he admitted, “They were killed.”

“I’m so, so, so sorry.” Troy could have kicked himself. *How the hell did a nice conversation end up with dead parents and obviously awful memories? Hello, my name is Troy, and I have the unfortunate inability to socialize in any sort of acceptable way with Montanites—Montanites... Montanans... Montanians? Ranchers? Whatever—C’mon, squirrel brain, we have to focus here!*

“What’re ya sorry for? It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know, but I can’t help it. Saying I’m sorry is my default response when I hear news like that.” The rancher didn’t offer anything else on the topic, so Troy let his imagination tumble out as he asked, “How did they die? Bandits? Cattle thieves? Wolves?”

“Nothin’ as excitin’ as all that,” Cliff replied with a short chuckle before turning somber. “They were killed by a drunk driver on their way to town early one mornin’ years ago.”

“People who drive drunk or even buzzed live on a whole different plane of stupid than anybody else,” he stated with disgust, less interested in dinner than he was before. “Wanna talk about it?”

Cliff seemed to consider the offer for a moment or two, glancing up at Troy as he leaned back down over his plate, as if on guard. He stabbed a pea precisely with the tine of his fork then seemed to deflate as he exhaled.

“It was just the three of us for years and years, ever since I was a kid. Daddy taught me everythin’ I know ’bout bein’ a rancher and bein’ a man. Mama took care of the house mostly, but she also helped Daddy and me out on the ranch when we needed it. We made a good team. One day, he didn’t feel well so I told him to stay in bed and I would handle everythin’ myself ’til he felt better. It was the first sign that somethin’ was wrong with him.

“You have to understand, my daddy never got sick. Man was strong as an ox and had an immune system like a fort. Livin’ out here, we aren’t exposed to as many germs as townfolk, and we’re used to what occurs naturally here. But he’d been to town recently, and I guess maybe Mama hoped that he caught somethin’ there. Anyway, he wasn’t gettin’ any better, and she finally took him to see his doctor. Did a whole mess of tests and found out he had cancer. The doc said he had a good chance of beatin’ it so he was doing chemo and radiation, everythin’ he could to beat the cancer and get back to livin’ and workin’ like he always had.”

Cliff smiled. Those memories were good ones. “That was all he wanted, just to get back to runnin’ the ranch. Back to his horses and his dogs and the cattle. I remember how upset he was that he couldn’t go on the cattle drive that year, and he was so picky about the guys I hired to help me get the cattle to auction. Broke my heart to see him sittin’ on the porch when I rode away. Anyway, Mama and Daddy left before dawn one mornin’ so they could get to his chemo appointment first thing, but they never made it. Drunken bastard had just left the bar and hit ’em head-on. Old truck, airbags didn’t work. I was told they were killed instantly.”

“God, that’s a terrible story. I’m so sorry,” Troy said again. He couldn’t think of anything else to say. He didn’t think there was anything else to say. The man had lost his family in a tragedy, and nothing he could say would fix that. “I hope the guy who killed them was convicted.”

“Don’t change anythin’. My parents are still dead, but yeah, he’s servin’ his sentence,” Cliff replied, nodding. “I just want him to learn his lesson and never

drink and drive again. Don't want another family to have to go through this. Other than that, I couldn't care less where he is or what he's doin'. Ya know the worst part?"

"What's that?"

"The guy who killed 'em, the drunk? I had just broken things off with him before this happened because he was aimin' for some big city somewhere and I was aimin' to stay here on the ranch."

Troy's eyes were huge. He felt like they were bugging out of his head. "Oh my God, your boyfriend killed your parents?"

"It wasn't like that. Would've never called him my *boyfriend*. Whatever we had was pretty casual, I guess," Cliff mused. From the look on his face, that part hadn't been so bad, Troy noted with more than a hint of jealousy but didn't say anything. The rancher went on, "But yeah, the guy I was sometimes seein' killed my parents. That was six years ago. Haven't seen anybody since. Too much to do 'round here."

Yes, he's single! Troy exclaimed in his head. Then he mentally kicked himself. *Wipe that inappropriate grin off your face, you stupid queen! He's telling you about losing his family and his ex-whatever. You aren't supposed to be happy about this.* He forced a more somber expression on his face and managed to keep it from cracking as he thought again, *But he's single!*

"So you have to do everything by yourself now that you and your dad used to do together?" he asked, trying to cover his inner struggle.

Cliff nodded. "It ain't so bad. Only time it's much of an issue is when I have to move the cattle or when it's time to cut the hay. I have the dogs to help me, though, and a good cattle dog is worth at least three men, probably more."

"I never knew dogs were so useful."

"They're essential. Couldn't do this without 'em," he said. He pushed his plate away and stretched mightily. "I lost my best cattle dog about a month after I lost my mama and daddy. I think that old girl died of grief. Had to shell out a ton of money to get a new dog and have him trained, but it was the best money I ever spent. Bandit's my best dog now. Makes workin' with the cattle so much easier for me. They know he's the boss."

"He's the boss? Not you?" Troy asked with a smirk.

“Never’s a truer truth been spoken,” the rancher replied with a grin, and they shared a laugh. “Alright, I spilled my guts. Now it’s your turn. What’s your story, pretty boy?”

It took a second or two for Cliff to realize the words that had slipped out of his mouth. *God, I just called him a pretty boy... to his face. I didn't mean to say that out loud! I hope he don't think me a hateful bastard.*

Troy nearly choked on the bread he was chewing. *Did he seriously just call me “pretty boy”? Does he really think I'm pretty? Don't you dare be mocking me, cowboy. My stilettos are sharp as hell.* After drinking a sip of water and regaining his voice, he remarked flatly, “You just called me pretty boy.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Cliff responded, trying to gauge the other man’s reaction. “I’m sorry, I—”

“You’re sorry for what? You don’t actually think I’m pretty?” Troy asked, trying his damndest to inject humor into his voice instead of hurt.

“Oh, no, it’s not that at all. I swear I’m not making fun of you. I do think you’re pretty,” Cliff said, still stumbling over his words. He stopped himself, cleared his throat, and said in a quiet voice, “I like pretty.”

“And I like muscles, so if you could wear a little less shirt now and then, that would be fantastic,” he shot back without missing a beat.

“Okay,” the rancher replied, slowly stretching those two syllables into three or four. *He likes my muscles. He wants me to wear less shirt so he can stare at my muscles! God, why does that make me so happy?* “I can do that. Not outside—sun and wind would scorch me—but inside, sure, I can wear a little less shirt.”

“PrettyBoy and MuscleMan... or MuscleMan and PrettyBoy—we’d make a great superhero team, don’tcha think? I wanna be the trusty sidekick.” Troy waggled his eyebrows at his boss in a suggestive, silly manner. “I’ll be your Boy Wonder, Batman.”

“You do know there are all kinds of stories out there ’bout Batman and Robin,” he remarked, thinking. “What’s it called? Slash?”

“Yeah, but what do you know about that kind of stuff, huh, cowboy?”

Cliff shrugged and said in a matter-of-fact way, “A man could get bored in this big ol’ house all by his lonesome at night sometimes. I do have a computer. And the internet.”

“No way—you have a computer?” Troy repeated, surprised. “You don’t even have a TV, but you have a computer.”

“How else am I s’posed to keep track of several hundred head of cattle and all their vaccinations and such?”

“Your incredible memory superpowers?” he quipped.

“I could remember a lot of things if I had to, but that ain’t one of ’em,” Cliff said, shaking his head. “My daddy had this big ol’ stock book he used to keep up with all that. Each animal had its own line where we wrote in the data. After Daddy died, I decided to jump into the twenty-first century and get a decent new computer. The book’s still upstairs somewhere. Nostalgia, I guess. But keepin’ up with spreadsheets is a helluva lot easier than luggin’ that heavy book around.”

“So you use your computer for livestock stuff, slash fics, and porn,” Troy summarized, ticking them off on his fingers one by one. “Sounds about right.”

“And to keep all my financials straight.” The other man’s eyebrows rocketed skyward at that remark, and he added with a sort of half-grin, “That’s the only thing that’s straight about me, though, I swear.”

Troy let out another one of those beautiful, musical laughs. Cliff audibly cleared his throat, shifted in his seat, and said, “Well, that’s ’nough about me. You ain’t answered my question yet. What’s your story?”

“That’s complicated.”

“Then it’s lucky we have the whole rest of the night. Fire away.”

For a moment, Troy just sat stiffly and looked at him. Cliff wondered what he was thinking. *Maybe he’s tryin’ to figure out which skeletons to leave in the closet and which ones to drag out*, he thought, amused. *Or maybe he’s tryin’ to decide if he can trust me. Pretty boy like him prob’ly had a hard time growin’ up in the South.*

He was glad he had kept his mouth shut when Troy relaxed his shoulders and went back to his dinner, seemingly at ease, as he began to talk. “You know how you pegged me for a flaming gay man when I showed up on your porch?”

“Yeah, my filter usually works a li’l better than that. Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I *am* a flaming gay man. You figured it out in two seconds,” he replied with a grin. Then his expression turned somber as he regarded the

remains of the shepherd's pie. "It was obvious to my family too. I never came out to any of them, but I never had to. They just knew."

"Guessin' they didn't take it too well," Cliff ventured.

"Understatement of the century," Troy said with a derisive snort. "I was one of six boys, second youngest, and every last one of my brothers was super masculine. Football, baseball, track—jocks, all of them. The only sport I was interested in was swimming, and according to my brothers, that wasn't a 'real sport'," he explained, making quotation marks in the air for emphasis, "so I still didn't fit in. Didn't matter that I placed well in all of my meets."

"That must be where you got that great body from," Cliff said without thinking. Then he felt his face flush with heat as he realized what he had said. *Dammit, where'd that filter go? This is why I hate chitchattin'.*

"Competitive swimming is a fabulous workout. It kept me in shape, and I worked damn hard." Troy beamed at the compliment. "Anyway, I couldn't hide the fact that I was different, so I didn't even try. My older brothers bullied me worse than anybody else ever did. I actually heard my dad tell them once to make a man out of me. Then my mom told some of her lady friends that I was her daughter." He took a deep breath and looked at his hands in his lap. "That one really hurt. Not that there's anything wrong with being a girl—'cause girls are awesome—but that's not what I am."

"Nobody should have to live like that, and I'm very sorry you did."

"Don't be sorry, Mr. Haywood. You didn't do it," the housekeeper countered, throwing Cliff's words from moments ago back at him with a smile.

He smiled back, but it faded quickly. "Did you have any friends?"

"Oh, sure. At school, I always got along pretty well with the girls. Most of them, anyway. I mean, those girls were the only ones who treated me decent. The cheerleaders loved me, and I loved doing their dance routines with them. Not officially part of the squad—'cause in my family, guys couldn't be cheerleaders, I guess that's not really the jock thing to do—but it was fun. I had my grandma too. I think she was the only person in my family who ever really loved me."

"That can't be true. Family loves family."

"Maybe that's how it worked in your family. I guess in mine we did things a little differently."

That gave Cliff some pause. *I always thought the way I grew up was different. Felt like I was standin' on the outside lookin' in at something amazin' that I could never have. All the other kids I knew were townies*, he considered, with his childhood friends in mind. He was the only ranch kid he had known at the time. It wasn't until his preteen years that he realized there were ranch families all over and no few kids grew up the same way he had.

I'd rather be alone and secure in myself and my sexuality than in the middle of a crowd of people questionin' everything about me. And to have no support system at home? That must've been terrible. My mama and daddy were opinionated, sure, but they loved and accepted me as is, no strings attached. Every kid in the world deserves that.

He stayed silent, resolving to let Troy speak uninterrupted, and his housekeeper continued, "I loved my grandma, and she loved me right back. She never cared that I was a little different, not quite like the other boys. And when I told her that I'm gay, she just said, 'I know, baby. Don't make no difference to me.' Then she smiled at me, and that was that."

"That was it? No drama at all?"

"None." A smile spread across his face. "I told her once about this boy at school I liked—total babe but oh so regrettably straight—and instead of calling me a fag or telling me I was a sinner and going to hell like other people did, she said that he would look better with less clothes on."

That coaxed a genuine laugh out of the gruff rancher. "She sounds wonderful."

"She was my best friend," Troy said with a sad smile. Cliff hated to see the joy of life fade out of those chocolate brown eyes, replaced by sorrow. "I went to live with her when my family disowned me. A coach caught me kissing another guy in the locker room after a swim meet. I guess it looked a lot hotter than it actually was—we *were* both wet and half-undressed—but I swear it was just a sweet little kiss, that's all. My parents looked at me like I was the spawn of the devil himself. My older brothers roughed me up pretty good while my parents were in the school office, and nobody said a word to them. They broke one of my ribs but not one damn word was said to any of them about it. Fuckers."

How could anyone do that? He's the most beautiful man I've ever seen, and he has the most amazin' laugh, and those soulful eyes, and that sharp wit... and I've never seen a pair of jeans look better on a body in my life! Cliff thought

but kept it to himself. Troy wasn't fishing for compliments; he was reciprocating by sharing his history, and Cliff respected him a lot for that. But the experience he was hearing about made him angry. *Hope I never meet his brothers. Not a single one of 'em would walk away unscathed.*

Before he lost control and spoke what was on his mind, Cliff asked, "What about your younger brother? You said your older brothers roughed you up, but you didn't say anything about him."

"He didn't totally disown me or walk away from me like everyone else did. At first," he added. "At first, we emailed, sometimes called or texted. The only reason I got a cell phone was so I could keep in touch with him. He would come to Grandma's house just to hang out sometimes. I was so grateful that I got to spend a little more time with my younger brother. He was a good kid, but he'd been brainwashed like all my other brothers."

"Don't sound like it lasted very long. What happened?"

"The fucking religious, conservative family got to him, that's what happened to him," he almost spat. He was fuming. This was a touchy subject, Cliff could tell. Troy elaborated, "I mean, he never agreed with my 'lifestyle choice'—no matter how many times I told him it wasn't a choice, he still said that—but he thought our parents were wrong for kicking me out. 'We're still family,' he said, and I loved him for it. Then he started growing distant, coming to Grandma's house less. He went from being the guy who wanted to help me paint my nails to the guy who changed the subject or stopped talking to me anytime I mentioned anything even remotely gay."

Anger drew the skin tight on his face, and Cliff could feel the negative energy pouring off him. In the next second, it was gone, vanished, and weariness caused his shoulders to slump. "One day we're texting and I innocently mention something that's important to me, and he says, 'Dude, that's so gay.' And I knew that he meant it in a derogatory way, like stupid. So I call him on it, and he accuses me of trying to force the 'gay agenda' down his throat."

Cliff couldn't help himself that time and a derisive snort escaped his lips. "The 'gay agenda'? Since when did wantin' to be treated just like everybody else become some sort of agenda?"

"I know, right?!" he exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air. "I mean, if I had some sort of gay agenda, I would've made over my entire high school. Those people need an intervention something fierce!"

A deep, rumbling chuckle rolled through the kitchen as Cliff replied, "Those people would've never been better dressed." He saw the spark light in Troy's chocolate eyes again and prayed it stayed there even as he asked, "So you don't talk to your little brother anymore either?"

It was Troy's turn to snort. "Nope. Nothing for a few years now. I finally gave up on him and stopped sending him messages that I knew in my gut he would never answer. Probably just deleted them as soon as he got them. Finally cut ties with the last of my family." He met the rancher's eyes then and a brave smile lit up his face. "It's okay, though. I'm okay. In fact, I'm better off now. No looking back."

"They had their chance to have you in their lives, and they blew it," Cliff replied and nodded. "It's your life to live, not theirs. You don't need 'em if that's how it's gonna be."

"That's what I keep telling myself. It's hard, though, being transient and not having any place to call home."

That caught Cliff's attention. He thought back to the résumé Troy had given him, the many jobs he had worked, and the hundreds of miles his employment history spanned. *I have no idea what that kind of life is like. I've always had a home. He hasn't had one in a long time. It's about time to change that, I think.*

"Well, you don't have to be transient anymore, Troy. Just do what needs doin' 'round here, and this can be your home too."

"Working someplace doesn't make it home," Troy countered, shaking his head. "Been there, done that, already made that mistake more times than I want to remember."

"I know, but it can be home—if you want it to be."

"What does that mean?" he asked, wary of what his boss might be thinking.

"Just means that I'm lonely and it would be mighty nice to have someone to come home to at the end of long days in the saddle."

"You mean like roommates?"

"Yeah, sure, like roommates," Cliff agreed. *No, not like roommates! I want more than that!* he screamed in the safety of his mind. But it didn't seem like the right thing to say out loud so he kept it to himself and waited for Troy's answer.

Oh my God, yes, yes, yes! A thousand times, yes! A million times, yes! YES!!! For a fleeting moment, Troy imagined screaming those words out loud, jumping into his cowboy's arms, and covering every square centimeter of beautifully tanned bare skin with hot and hungry kisses... except that the man had said roommates, he realized, crushed. Roommates. As in, not lovers.

Of course he did, you stupid fucking queen! You only met the man yesterday and already you're begging him to take you to bed? Pull yourself together, Troy! This is the best thing we've had going for a long time—so much better than we ever hoped for in a place like this—and you are not going to screw it up for us! Get your head out of your ass and in the game!

“That’s moving a little too fast, don’tcha think, Mr. Haywood?” he casually mentioned, putting both hands in his lap where his boss wouldn’t see the nervous twitching. “I mean, you only promised me two weeks. Who knows what might happen by then? You might not want me for a roommate anymore.”

“Don’t think that’s likely to happen,” Cliff replied, trying to scrutinize his housekeeper without appearing to look too closely. He noticed the tension in the man’s shoulders and neck. *Dammit, now he’s all uncomfortable. I shoulda just left well ’nough alone.* “I already decided I’m not gonna bother calling around for your references ’cause I want you to stay. But if you want to stick to the original plan for these first two weeks, that’s fine with me.”

“I think that would be good,” Troy declared in a light tone, rising from the table and gathering dishes as he headed to the sink. He continued to speak over his shoulder, “If you’re happy with my work and we haven’t killed each other by the time two weeks is up, then we might have a better chance at getting along as roommates.” *And hopefully a lot more.*

“Glad that’s settled,” Cliff remarked but knew it was far from the truth. What he was glad for was that Troy wasn’t looking at him to catch him in the lie. He glanced around at all the carnage from dinner and offered, “Want me to help you with the dishes before I go upstairs to shower?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Haywood! Never! You worked hard all day out in the sun, and you deserve to have a nice, hot shower and some time to yourself to relax and rest before you have to go and do it all over again tomorrow. Go on now, upstairs with you!”

Going upstairs to shower was the last thing on Cliff’s mind as Troy chased him out of the kitchen brandishing a dishtowel as a whip. The playfulness of it

loosened up a bit of his gruffness; he felt himself genuinely laughing, and he was rewarded with the musical laughter of a beautiful man. He was loose enough to give his dick and balls some long-needed attention in the shower. And for the first time in six years, he fell asleep feeling not nearly as lonely and perhaps even a bit hopeful.

The next morning, Cliff was surprised to smell coffee brewing when he finished his morning routine and headed downstairs bare-chested, his long-sleeved work shirt slung over one shoulder. *Ya wanna see more of my muscles, pretty boy? You got it*, he thought with a roguish half-grin. *But what're ya doin' up so early when I heard ya up so late workin' in the kitchen?*

The banging and clanging of cabinet doors and various household items on granite countertops had stopped around midnight. *Which is very late when a body has to rise before dawn. I sure as shit thought he'd still be in bed sleepin' at this hour.* The corners of Cliff's mouth turned down a bit as he contemplated, *I hope he isn't wearin' himself out tryin' to impress me. I already know I want him to stay. Didn't I make that clear last night?*

The fragrant dark roast called to him like a Siren to a sailor, inviting him to join her in the depths and breathe no more. Fortunately, coffee had the benefit of making him feel more—rather than less—alive, unlike the Siren. Cliff rounded the corner and started on the shortest path from the doorway to the life-giving nectar of the gods.

He nearly crashed into his housekeeper as Troy turned to greet him and grace him with a beautiful smile that made his stomach do somersaults. “Hi! Good morning, Mr. Haywood! Did you sleep well? What are your plans for the day?” he asked in a rush.

Cliff barely managed to contain the growl before it escaped his throat. *He's blocking the coffeepot. He's beautiful, but he's blocking the damn coffeepot!* “Need. Coffee. Now.”

“Gotcha covered, boss,” Troy replied with a grin as he held out the Loki mug filled to the brim with steaming coffee. “Freshly brewed, splash of milk and two sugars, in your favorite cup. Have at it.”

A grunt was all Cliff could push past his lips before he dropped into a chair and indulged himself. It was perfect. *The guy's good, I'll give 'im that.* After he drained the mug and set it down on the table with a *thunk*, Troy appeared at his

side and refilled it. A bowl of apple cinnamon oatmeal was placed in front of him, along with toast and some of the leftover fruit. He glanced up to meet Troy's gaze as the housekeeper joined him at the table with his own breakfast.

"Is it safe to attempt conversation with you yet, or are you still Mr. Don't-Talk-to-Me-Before-My-First-Cup-of-Coffee-Or-I-Will-Cut-You?"

Cliff felt the corner of his mouth quirk upwards in spite of his efforts to stop it. "No zombie ranchers here. Back to the land o' the livin'. How'd you know this was my favorite breakfast?"

"I didn't. I mean, I didn't know it was your *favorite* breakfast."

"My mama used to make me apple cinnamon oatmeal every mornin'," he said, shoveling a spoonful in his mouth. *It tastes just like hers. The man is good!* "It's perfect. How did you—?"

"I, uh, found her recipe box in the cabinet when I was moving stuff around last night," Troy admitted with a guilty look. "The recipe for the oatmeal was in the front so I figured she used it a lot." Then he smirked and remarked, "Then there was the phrase 'Breakfast of Champions' written in the top corner. I figured she wasn't talking about the horses."

"The horses only wish they ate this good," Cliff replied around another mouthful.

"I take it you like it? I had to guess some of the measurements. They don't make measuring spoons for a pinch or a dash." He got nothing more than a grunt in response so he continued, "I meant to ask you about it yesterday and forgot, sorry, but I switched things around in the kitchen cabinets so they would make more sense. You don't mind, do you?"

Cliff looked around. Nothing seemed out of place. "What do you mean?"

"Like, putting all the pots and pans near the stove instead of across the room. Or like, putting all the plates and bowls and stuff in cabinets that are next to each other, instead of having plates over here and bowls over there and glasses back over this-a-way."

"Makes sense to me," he said with a shrug.

"You're not mad I moved things around in here?"

"Why would I be?" Cliff asked, demolishing a piece of buttered toast. "You're the one who needs to be comfortable cooking in here."

“But it was your mama’s kitchen,” Troy said in a small voice. “I should have asked, but I wanted to do it while I was thinking about it and while the kitchen was clean and before I had to cook again but you were already in bed and I didn’t want to wake you up just to ask you a stupid question—”

“There’s no such thing as a stupid question,” Cliff stated firmly. The next instant, he wondered, *Was that the best thing to say to a man who can talk a mile a minute? Hope he doesn’t start askin’ a shit ton o’ questions now.* Then he gave a mental shrug. *So what if he does? Might be nice to see things through his eyes. Everything’s all new to him out here. I needed somethin’ to shake up my life, right? And Troy Balhaus is definitely somethin’.* “My mama’s been gone for a while now. It’d make her smile knowin’ that there’s somebody busy in her kitchen again. Lord knows I’m not good at much more than boiled water or toast in here.”

“You really think so?” Troy asked a little too earnestly.

“Yep. Now pass me that bowl of oatmeal. I’m good for a second helping.”

He passed the serving bowl, then said with a blatant stare at firm pecs and abs, “Thanks for leaving your shirt off, by the way. I’m really enjoying the view.”

Cliff dug into his second helping of oatmeal with a rare grin on his face. After he swallowed his last bite and leaned back in his chair, he remembered that he wanted to mention something. He cleared his throat to get Troy’s attention and stated, “I noticed that you were still workin’ and cleanin’ after I went to bed last night.”

Troy swallowed the last bite of his first helping of oatmeal and replied, “I didn’t disturb you, did I? I was trying to be quiet.”

“No, you weren’t botherin’ me. Just wanted to say that evenin’s and weekends are free time. You don’t have to keep workin’. You can do something else.”

“Oh, I know,” he said, then corrected himself, “I mean, that’s what I figured.”

“So why—?” Cliff started to ask, but his housekeeper seemed to anticipate his question and answered before he could finish asking.

“I like it, keeping house. It’s why I’m a housekeeper. My grandma taught me a lot about life from keeping house. A job well done makes me feel good, and a clean house is something for me and my boss to be proud of.”

The rancher raised his eyebrows at that. *Am I gettin' buttered up for somethin'?*

"And I don't expect to get paid extra," Troy added with a wink.

"So you enjoy it?" Cliff asked, puzzled. "For me, it was always somethin' that I didn't have time for but still needed doin'. Another chore. Not somethin' I enjoy like workin' outside with the animals around the ranch."

"I guess I feel the same way about the outside work as you do about the inside work," he chuckled. "To each his own, right?"

A grunt was all his boss had time to utter before Troy asked, "You know what my fantasy is?" He didn't wait for an answer, quickly saying, "To fall in love with a big, strong man who will take care of me, and I'll keep his house clean and beautiful and make his life as magical as a daydream, and he'll be so proud to be mine and call me his."

He suddenly stopped, realizing that Cliff was staring at him from where he sat in his chair, bare-chested and looking like a very strong man. Troy felt the heat rise to his cheeks instantly, embarrassed, as he got up and started clearing the table. "I'll, uh, just start on the dishes then."

Cliff sat for a few moments, stunned, while the other man gathered up the dishes and started arranging them in stacks in the sink. *Did he just read my mind?* he thought, as he watched that lean body moving underneath a different pair of tight jeans and yet another colorful tee. *I never imagined the part about fallin' in love with a man who cleans houses for a livin'—not that there's anythin' wrong with that, it's an honest day's work—but how many nights've I fallen asleep wishin' there was someone in bed beside me? How long have I been this lonely?* He shook his head, not wanting to even try to guess. It didn't take much thinking for him to realize that he wanted to be the big, strong man in Troy's fantasy.

Can't very well just come out and say it, though.

In an effort to start up the conversation again, he said, "You did a great job yesterday. I don't recall if I mentioned that before I went upstairs last night, but it's true. This kitchen hasn't been this clean since before Daddy got sick, and I could eat off those bathroom floors."

Troy grinned to himself. *That was exactly what I thought yesterday!* Then he said over his shoulder, "I was a little worried that I didn't get enough done."

Cliff's eyebrows shot up. *I thought he got a lot done.* Aloud, he said, "I'd rather you take your time and get the house really clean than rush through and do a half-assed job of it."

"Good. I think I'm going to work on the upstairs today. Downstairs tomorrow. Clean top to bottom, Grandma always said."

"Sounds like a plan," Cliff grunted, pushing away from the table as he realized that the conversation was drawing to a close.

"Just to make sure," Troy called as he headed for his boots next to the back door. "You do want me to clean your bedroom too, right? I mean, I don't want to take a flying leap over the boundaries or anything."

"Yeah. I picked up the things off the floor last night. I think it's mostly tidy now, but just toss anythin' that's left out in the closet. I'll deal with it later."

"Sure thing, Mr. Haywood. Have a great day!" Troy said and stood on the porch waving as the rancher headed to the barn to start the morning chores.

He looked around and noticed that the porch was again covered in dust and grass. "Didn't I just sweep this yesterday? I bet the front porch is dirty again too. Oh well, might as well have a twirl with Mr. Broom while the dishes are soaking."

Two swept porches and a sink full of dirty dishes washed later, Troy cradled Mr. Broom and Mr. Mop in one arm and a bucketful of cleaning supplies he had met the previous day in the other as he all but skipped up the stairs. He had to make a second trip for the vacuum, an ancient and very heavy thing he dubbed Sir Sucks-A-Lot. There was no skipping as he lugged that thing up the stairs. Once at the top, he took a moment to catch his breath as he looked around.

"It looks like we've got our work cut out for us, doesn't it, Sir Sucks-A-Lot?" The vacuum didn't answer him. None of his friends ever did. "Let's get to it then."

He started by stripping all the bed linens in each of the three rooms. The sheets on his bed and the ones on the bed in the empty room seemed clean enough—*probably because they hadn't been slept on in a while*, Troy thought—but the sheets on his boss's bed were in dire need of a washing in scalding hot water.

"I wonder how long ago Mr. Haywood even thought about putting these in for a wash," he muttered with a slight cringe as he put an armload in the

washing machine. "This will definitely be a weekly thing from now on. Gotta get the man used to sleeping on clean sheets again." It didn't occur to him as he skipped back upstairs that the thought was one with the vision of a future for the both of them in the ranch house.

Back in his boss's bedroom, Troy climbed on top of a desk chair to pull down the rods that held up the heavy draperies. *Damn it all to hell, these things weigh a ton!* He would have cursed out loud, but he couldn't spare the breath as he tried to keep his footing on the small seat of the chair. When he was able to tilt the rod, the draperies slid off one end and dropped into a pile of fabric on the floor with puff of dust that made him sneeze. He replaced the rod, dusted his hands on his pants legs, and coughed, waving the dust away from his face.

"Dreadful news, Sir Sucks-A-Lot. I do believe these lovely old ladies are beyond your chivalrous help. It's outside for a beating and then a spin in the wash once the sheets and quilts are done. What say you, Sir Sucks-A-Lot?" he asked, bending closer to the vacuum and pretending to listen. "You say it is impolite to speak of beating a lady? Perhaps you are correct. Perhaps it would be more satisfying if she was to receive a spanking instead, hmmm?"

He giggled as he rounded up all the draperies on the second floor, grateful that the rest were lighter than the first set by a significant margin, and took them outside to the back porch. One by one, he stretched them out over the porch railing and gave them each several good *whacks* with Mr. Broom before collecting them in the laundry room.

"My heavens, Mr. Broom, you are getting quite the fabulous workout today!" he exclaimed as he paused to catch his breath in between beatings. "Spanking all these lovely ladies—you are a naughty fellow, aren't you!"

Looking around the porch, Troy realized that he would have to sweep again as he noticed all the dust from the drapes on the floorboards. He shrugged, saying with a smile and a wink at Mr. Broom, "I would never pass up the chance to dance with a great partner. But let's get all the carpets beaten first." He caught himself and grinned wider. "Not beaten. I meant spanked, of course."

The pair repeated the process with the rugs and hall runner that Troy collected from upstairs. Those were left hanging over the railing like banners in a ballroom overlooking the pair as they twirled around the porch, banishing dust from their path. When the porch was spotless, Troy bowed to his partner and said, "Always a pleasure dancing with you, Mr. Broom."

A lovely feather duster named Marguerite with a skirt that reminded him of a cancan dancer helped make quick work of the dusting in all the rooms. Troy regretted having to put her down so soon. “Don’t cry, Marguerite darling, we’ll see each other again real soon. Like tomorrow, downstairs,” he promised as he placed her back with the rest of the cleaning supplies, then ran downstairs to put the sheets in the dryer and start another load of washing.

“Now, loves, what to do next, hmm? So much to do, I’m not sure where to start... vacuum the mattresses and upholstery, polish the wood surfaces, wash the baseboards, sweep and mop the floors...” he trailed, trying to decide what should logically come next in his grandma’s top-to-bottom cleaning program. “Not the baseboards or the floor, for sure. Those will be last. Sir Sucks-A-Lot, it looks to be your turn at long last!”

Trying out the ancient Sir Sucks-A-Lot on the flat mattress seemed like a better idea than rushing into hoses and attachments so soon. “Gotta give an old geezer time to adjust, ya know,” Troy quipped to Mr. Broom and Mr. Mop lounging in the corner. He fired up the old vacuum... only to have it sputter and die. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it, honest! C’mon, my knight in not-so-shiny armor, you can’t do this to me. I *need* you to work,” he pleaded as he tried again and again to start it. He fiddled around with it, changed the vacuum bag, and switched to a different outlet, and finally Sir Sucks-A-Lot roared to life.

Troy let out a whoop of excitement and said with a smirk, “Thank God! That’ll do, ya cranky old bastard.”

After vacuuming the mattress, struggling to flip it over by himself, vacuuming the opposite side, and moving on to the upholstery, furniture, and cobwebs in the corners, Troy was ready to start on the floor. The padding on the bottom of the floor attachment promised to glide across the floor without scratching the hardwood, and Sir Sucks-A-Lot made quick work of the bedroom floor. The last place that needed vacuuming was underneath the bed.

“Can’t have any dust bunnies escaping now, Sir Sucks-A-Lot. I don’t want them to attack Mr. Haywood in his sleep. Or any other time, really,” Troy mumbled as he knelt down to peek under the bed. It was all clear except for one box. He stretched to grab it and pull it out from under the bed with the innocent intention of being able to vacuum unimpeded. But the lid popped off and slid to the floor as he yanked, providing him with a clear view of its contents.

To his abject horror, it was a big box full of sex toys—butt plugs, anal beads, vibrators, dildos of various shapes, sizes, and colors—hiding under his boss’s bed.

My boss has a big box of dongs under his bed!

Troy shrieked inside his head, unable to give voice to those particular words. It was a hot fantasy, the boss/employee trope, but not when either of those people was someone he knew. Plus, it just seemed dirty to see all of his boss's toys laid out in the open like that. Then he looked closer and saw that there was more than just dongs in the box. *Not sure if that makes it better or worse...* Still, he couldn't seem to make up his mind as he continued to stare at the box, and thoughts began to spill out from his lips faster than he could regulate them.

"Oh my God, what a perv! What a freaking awesome perv!"

"No, no, no, no, NO! He can't be a bottom! Two bottoms in a relationship don't work!"

"Hey, there's a Fleshjack... maybe he will at least consider being versatile..."

"Maybe he'll want to use some of them on me—that could be fun. But what if he used them on Mr. Drunken Bastard that killed his parents? Gross!"

He violently slammed the lid back on the box, sealing it shut. "Gotta get out of there! That's Mr. Haywood's business and nobody else's—especially not mine. But some of it looked like so much fun! Like you, ya li'l beauty," he purred to one of the realistically shaped dildos, popping the lid again and reaching inside the box toward it. He stopped short of making contact, though, and wailed a bit dramatically, "What have I done? I have to tell him I saw all of this stuff. *I have to.* He'll know and then he'll think I'm lying or not being honest with him about accidentally finding it."

The vacuum cleaner sat beside him, all but forgotten, as he snapped the lid shut again. "You're chivalrous and loyal and all that, right? What should I do, Sir Sucks-A-Lot? Pretend like I never found this and let life carry on as usual and hope Mr. Haywood doesn't find out, or be honest and tell him that I found his giant box of dongs but that it was a complete and innocent accident and then beg his forgiveness?"

Troy sat in silence for a few moments, feeling like the walls were closing in on him the longer he sat there in indecision. *This is the best job I've had since Grandma died and I left Mississippi. He isn't paying me as much as some of those other jobs, but money isn't everything. Hell, money isn't even all that important to me as long as I have a place to sleep and food to eat. This job is perfect in so many other ways—Mr. Haywood is perfect! As a boss, I mean.*

Who do you think you're kidding, huh? The man is perfection and you know it, you stubborn queen. Just admit it.

“Okay, fine. *Fine*. I admit it. I'm an honest guy, to a fault, but I'm terrified that I'm going to somehow screw this up and Mr. Haywood—who is absolute perfection—is going to send me packing in a heartbeat. And there goes that fantasy that might actually have had a chance of coming true.” He glared at the vacuum. “There! Are you happy now?”

There was no reaction, of course, but Troy could just imagine Sir Sucks-A-Lot raising his imaginary eyebrows, encouraging him to continue. *Go on*. With a sigh, he plowed ahead. “I think he likes me. He likes me, right? He said he likes pretty and he left his shirt off at breakfast this morning like I asked. Wasn't that view amazing? Oh, you didn't see it, but trust me, he is oh so very lickable. Oh, how I would just love to lick him up and down...” He paused, realizing he had taken off on a tangent and shook his head to clear his thoughts. “Wait, where was I going with this? Oh yeah, I just want so bad to have a chance to see where all this might lead, ya know? I don't want to screw up and get tossed out before we even find out if there could be something between us. I mean, that's a valid concern, right? We are talking about me here—Mr. Pretty-But-Screws-Everything-Up-and-Can't-Settle-in-One-Place-Long-Enough-to-Develop-A-Significant-Relationship.”

Dead silence, and yet Troy felt like Sir Sucks-A-Lot was smirking at him as hard as his ancient imaginary features would allow. *Ye are making a mountain out of a molehill, ye are*, he imagined the old vacuum chiding him.

“God, you don't even have to say it. I'm such a drama queen, *I know!*” he said with emphasis as he shoved the box back under the bed. Then he yanked it right back out in frustration. “Dammit, I got so flustered by my own drama that I forgot we haven't vacuumed under there yet. Ye aren't slacking, now, are ye, good Sir Knight? That would be unbecoming of one of the Knights of the Petite Cleaning Closet.”

With a giggle, he went back to work as the pair vanquished every dust bunny under the rancher's bed. When he switched off the machine, he praised, “That'll do and a job well done, good Sir Knight. Now I won't have to worry about any of those bloodthirsty buggers going for the boss's throat in the middle of the night while he sleeps.”

The clock on the nightstand caught his eye. Noon was fast approaching. *Better head downstairs and take care of some of that laundry before it's time to*

start making lunch. “Alright, Sir Sucks-A-Lot, time for you to take a break,” he said as he dragged the heavy appliance back out into the hallway. “Not to worry, though. You’ll get plenty of action after lunch is over.”

He skipped down the stairs, taking the advice of Snow White and her forest animal helpers and whistling while he worked. A few minutes later, he skipped back up the stairs carrying freshly laundered and folded bed linens. He decided to take the extra few minutes to make up his boss’s bed before stopping for lunch so that he could look around the room and feel a sense of accomplishment. A proud smile lit up his face as he headed down to the kitchen.

It turned upside down into a disappointed frown as soon as he caught sight of the scrawled note on the counter.

Gotta fix a breach in the north pasture fence and still have to check on the herd. Should be back in time for dinner. Don’t worry—I made myself a sandwich.—Cliff

“Shit. Not only do I have to wait the whole rest of the day to tell him I found his Big Box o’ Dongs, I don’t get to look at him or spend any time with him until dinner either,” Troy grumbled under his breath. He began to gather the ingredients to make himself another PBBLT. “Never thought I’d say this, but I really hate those big ol’ dongs right about now.”

Before heading back upstairs, he pulled a package of frozen chicken out of the freezer and set it in a bowl on the counter to thaw. There was no microwave in the Haywood house, which meant that he couldn’t defrost it like he would have at any of his previous employers’ homes. He was channeling the late Mrs. Haywood again for the evening meal, having selected another worn and, hopefully, well-loved recipe from her box after plundering through the pantry for ingredients. *It seems like a good idea to break the awkward dong news while the boss is eating a comfort meal. I hope he likes it.*

Hours later, the entire second floor of the ranch house gleamed and sparkled, and Troy wanted nothing so much as to plop down on the couch, put his feet up, and take a nap. But if he didn’t start dinner soon, there wouldn’t be anything hot to feed his hungry boss when he got home.

In an effort to distract himself from his aching feet, Troy imagined that he was making dinner while wearing perfectly applied makeup, a bit of jewelry, and his favorite pair of shiny bubblegum pink high heels. Feeling pretty always

made him happy, and it was a lot more fun to make dinner when he was in a good mood. He danced in place while sautéing the chicken and mashing the white beans, and he twirled and spun and laughed while the concoction simmered away on the stove.

Secretly, he imagined his boss dancing around the kitchen with him, wearing that grin he had only caught a glimpse of but had already fallen for. But in reality, Troy hoped that the rancher never found out about the duffle bag stuffed with pretty things that he had brought in from his car the night before. He doubted he could handle the rejection. And he just knew he would be rejected, like all the other times. Just because Mr. Haywood liked pretty men didn't mean that he would be fond of his housekeeper prancing around in lipstick and high heels.

Troy heard the sound of running water in the small washroom by the back door just as he turned the burner to the lowest setting and covered the pan. *The boss is back. Oh God, he's back! You've been wanting to see him all day, so why are you suddenly so nervous?* He pulled out the dishes and occupied himself with setting the table, trying to mask his anxiety and the clatter of plates and glasses clanking together. *It isn't just the whole box of dongs thing I need to talk to him about. This is a good thing I've got going here and Mr. Haywood's a good man—and damn fine too—and I just really, really, really don't want to screw this up. Even if that doesn't happen with the dongs, I'm so afraid I'll manage to do it some other way.*

It hit him like a punch to the gut, and he stopped in his tracks, realizing that he had a far greater chance of shooting himself in the foot if he kept that kind of attitude. *Just be yourself, you silly queen! If he really is as good a guy as you think he is, then he won't drop you like a bad habit the first time you fuck up. And if he does... well, we didn't need him anyway.*

Admitting that was the easy part. The hard part was accepting and believing it.

"Smells good in here," Cliff said when he strode into the kitchen a moment later. He headed straight for the stove, lifting the pot lid and inhaling the aroma. "Southwestern Chicken and White Bean Soup—another one of my mama's well-used recipes."

"I figured I could get to know what you like to eat if I work my way through her recipe box. That and I had to find something I could make with the little bit of food left in the pantry," Troy admitted with an awkward grin.

"I know supplies are runnin' low, but I go to town day after tomorrow. We can just have sandwiches and leftovers 'til then."

"Don't you worry about a thing, Mr. Haywood. I have a plan all worked out," he replied as he ladled a generous helping of soup into each of their bowls, added a dollop of sour cream, and sprinkled a bit of grated cheese on top.

The pair sat down and savored their first spoonful before either of them spoke. After watching his boss devour several mouthfuls, Troy couldn't help asking, "How is it?"

"Better than my mama's used to be."

"No way, it can't be."

The rancher shrugged. "It is. Seasonin' tastes a bit different. I like your version better."

"Well, color me surprised. Guess this one's a keeper too."

Troy allowed his boss a few moments of peace and quiet before he took a loud, crunchy bite of his toast. "You know, Mr. Haywood, this bread is kinda old—"

"Yeah, I know. Only get to town every couple weeks, remember?"

"I remember. My memory isn't that bad yet," he quipped, eliciting an amused smirk, before he went on, "I was going to warn you—I mean, ask you! I was gonna ask you if it was alright if I add some things to the shopping list. It'll be a long list this time, but once I restock the fridge and pantry, you shouldn't have to get so much on every trip."

"Sure. Whatcha need?"

"Flour, sugar, yeast—you know, baking things. If I bake, we'll always have fresh bread. Sandwiches are better with fresh bread," he explained with a wink. "I can also make muffins, cookies, scones, brownies, cakes, pies. You tell me what you like and what you're in the mood for, and I can make it in no time."

"Could you make me a chocolate lava cake or a lemon meringue pie?"

"Yep. All I need are the ingredients."

"Write it down and I'll get whatever you need," Cliff said, licking his lips. "I could hurt myself eatin' a lemon meringue pie, or a chocolate cream pie, or blueberry cobbler..."

“Okay, you can stop any day now!” Troy exclaimed with a wide grin. “That is pure torture! I can’t make any of those right now!”

“Ya know,” the rancher pondered, scratching his chin, “I think there’s some chocolate cream pie in the freezer.”

Troy made a face. “How long has it been in there?”

“Not that long.” Cliff let his eyes roll as he shoved away from the table and headed to the freezer. “The lady who lives on the ranch ’cross the highway brought it, said she thought I would enjoy it. I did, way too much. That was maybe a week and a half ago.”

He brought back a tin with half the chocolate cream pie missing. Troy blinked at it a couple times, then looked back up at his boss. “She brought you a whole pie?” At Cliff’s nod, he said, “Tell me she stayed for a while to help you eat it. Tell me you did not eat half a pie in one sitting.”

One corner of Cliff’s mouth curled up in a smirk. “I ate half a pie in one sittin’. I could’ve eaten more, but I stopped myself.”

“I bet you could have eaten the whole damn thing if you’d really wanted to, couldn’t you?” Troy asked as he ran a knife under hot water to make it easier to cut through the frozen pie.

The rancher gave Troy one of those rare grins that he adored. “You’re gettin’ to know me pretty good.”

He cut a generous slice for each of them, and they ate for a few minutes in comfortable silence. *Have to say, it’s... interesting to have this dessert following a Southwestern-style dish, but it’s good. And Mr. Haywood doesn’t seem to mind at all,* he thought, glancing up to watch him eat. The man took his pie every bit as seriously as he took his meals, and Troy realized that he may have underestimated the appetite of a man who worked outside with his hands all day.

I am so stalling so I don’t have to tell him about the box of dongs. Dragging it out is only going to make it worse, not better. So out with it, you scaredy queen!

“Mr. Haywood, I have something I need to tell you.”

Cliff paused, forkful of pie raised halfway to his mouth, and asked, “What is it? Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, it’s just... I found this box while I was vacuuming under your bed...” he trailed off, hoping that his boss would figure it out and spare him having to elaborate further.

But Cliff didn’t understand and prompted him to continue. “And?”

“And I wasn’t snooping, I swear I wasn’t, but the top came off when I moved it out of the way and—oh God, Mr. Haywood, I’m so sorry!” he apologized, his nerves making his words spill out and run together.

“Sorry for what?”

“I saw them.” Cliff looked at him, blank-faced, so he took a deep breath and went on, “The toys in the box, I saw all of them! I didn’t mean to but I saw everything in your big box of dongs!” His cheeks flaming red, Troy dropped his gaze to his hands fidgeting in his lap. He couldn’t look his boss in the eyes. It was just too embarrassing.

“Oh, that.” Cliff let out a loud roar of laughter, realizing what had happened.

Is he making fun of me? Troy wondered. *What if he set me up on purpose?* “Please don’t laugh at me. I didn’t think it was very funny.”

“I wasn’t laughin’ at you, Troy. I was laughin’ at me. I completely forgot that box was under there.”

“So you’re not mad?”

“Course not. You didn’t do anythin’ wrong,” Cliff said with a chuckle. “Thanks for vacuumin’ under there. God knows the last time that happened.”

“That’s my job,” Troy replied with a hesitant smile. “Mind if I ask how you forgot there was a big box of dongs under your bed?”

“They’re not mine.”

He raised his eyebrows, confused. “Well, Mr. Haywood, they say that possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

Cliff laughed again, and Troy had to admit that however awkward the confession had been, it was worth hearing the rancher really laugh. Cliff explained, “I guess they are mine, technically, but I don’t use ’em. Total top. I got no use for dildos unless I’m usin’ ’em on somebody else, and I haven’t had anybody else in years.”

“So, um, why do you have a whole big box of them?”

“Remember me tellin’ you about the guy I used to see sometimes?” He waited until Troy nodded, then explained, “Well, he’d give me a new one for every gift-givin’ occasion there was. Even gave me a big orange one for Halloween one year.”

“He didn’t know you were a top?” Troy asked with a grin.

“He did. He thought it was funny, even when I told him I didn’t want ’em. It was kind of a thing between us, I guess. Just somethin’ we did. It stopped being even mildly amusin’ when he showed up the mornin’ of the last Christmas I spent with my parents and gave me yet another giant dildo. I opened that thing in front of my mama.”

Troy cringed, feeling his pain. “Ouch. She knew you were gay, though, right?”

Cliff nodded, then said, “Just ’cause she knew I was attracted to other men didn’t mean she wanted to think about how her son would have sex. Or use a sex toy. She told him he wasn’t welcome to come back. I broke it off with him shortly after that, when he tried to convince me to run away with him to some big city somewhere.” He sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Whatever fun we’d had was over and I wasn’t leavin’, so I figured it was better to be honest with him.”

“Honesty is always better,” Troy agreed. *I sure am glad I told him that I found that box instead of trying to hide it. Awkward... oh my God, yes! But still so much better than having to live every day wondering if he knows I found it.*

“I’ve always wondered if me breakin’ things off with him is what drove him to start drinkin’ so hard,” Cliff mumbled in a tone so low that Troy almost missed it. But he heard it, and it broke his heart.

“You mean you’ve always wondered if you breaking up with him led to him killing your parents, making the whole thing ultimately your fault?” he asked, as blunt as a billy club. Cliff blinked at him a few times, stunned into silence. “It’s normal to feel guilty about things that aren’t your fault, Mr. Haywood, and that was not your fault. Maybe it’s time to let it go. Six years is plenty long enough to have held onto it, don’t you think?”

“Maybe you’re right,” the rancher mused. Then, all of a sudden, he asked, “Hey, you didn’t touch anythin’ in that box, did you?”

“No. Why?”

“‘Cause the toys he gave me were never wrapped in any kind of packagin’, and I have no idea if he ever used ’em on himself or anybody else,” he replied with a grin.

Even though that adorable grin had made several appearances since they sat down to eat dinner, Troy couldn’t stop his natural reaction. “Oh my God, Mr. Haywood! That’s so nasty!”

He let out another guffaw that Troy both loved and hated simultaneously. When he caught his breath, he remarked, “By the way, Mr. Haywood is what people called my daddy and granddaddy when they were alive. Just call me Cliff. I think we’re on a first name basis now. I mean, you did find my dongs.”

“Okay, then, Cliff,” Troy replied then repeated the name a few times, trying it out. It was exhilarating calling the man by his first name but it was also strange. “It’s kind of weird, calling you that, since you’re my boss and all. I’ve never addressed an employer by their first name. But it fits. I like it.”

“I like it too.”

The way he said it and the look he gave Troy made the younger man feel a bit lightheaded. *He likes me! Nobody looks at an employee that way unless they want a harassment charge. Wait—why the hell did my mind go there?* He gave himself a mental shake. *He is so interested in me as more than just his housekeeper. I know that look!*

Whoa, slow down, killer, he thought, derailing his train of thought. Days. You’ve been here days. Not even a full week yet. Getting a little ahead of ourselves, aren’t we? He seems like a genuinely nice man, so maybe he’s just being nice to you and isn’t actually interested in you at all. Ever thought of that, huh? You don’t know him well enough to tell the difference. You’re such a hopeless queen.

The one thing he knew for certain was that he needed more time, and privacy, to sort through the turmoil in his mind, so he did what he did best: change the subject. “So, Cliff, you just gonna leave ’em under your bed for all eternity?”

“Nah, I’ll throw the whole box in the back of the truck and get rid of it when I go to town.”

“Good. I don’t think I could sleep at night knowing those things are just hanging out under there. So creepy,” he said, giving a pronounced shudder then winking at his boss.

Troy smiled while cleaning the main floor, thinking about the previous evening. In all of the places he had worked before Wild Prairie Ranch, such a conversation as the one he and Cliff had would have ended in awkward, uncomfortable silence, later followed by avoidance and/or cold professionalism. Instead, he and Cliff had shared easy conversation and comfortable companionship. Cliff insisted on helping clean up after dinner, drying and putting the dishes away as Troy washed them, and then they spent no short amount of time convincing Troy's refurbished laptop and the wireless router to get along so that Troy could have internet access during his free time.

And Cliff had imposed no restrictions on how or when he could surf the internet. He trusted Troy's work ethic that much.

It was refreshing and exhilarating and motivating and terrifying all at once. Troy was still afraid he was going to screw up, but he chose to listen to the voice in his head that kept shouting, *You don't have to be perfect, you silly queen! You just have to be you!* instead of the one that tried to paralyze him with fear.

You're getting comfortable here, in the ranch house and with Cliff, in whatever capacity that is. And that's scary too because that's usually when things creep up on you and surprise you, right? When you're in your comfort zone and things seem to be going well...

"Nope, little asshole in my head," he said out loud as he geared up to beat the dust out of the rugs from the living room. "Not this time. This is different. Cliff is different. Doesn't seem to be interested in taking things any further like I wish he would, but that's okay. Maybe someday. But until then, he's a good man, he treats me well, and we have a good thing going. Not letting negativity screw it up for me."

I'm happy, he thought, surprised. For the first time in, like, ever, I'm happy and content with where I am and what I'm doing.

Thoughts of Cliff and his grins and smirks and chuckles and belly laughs and the way only one side of his mouth seemed to smile sometimes filled Troy's head as he cleaned. He whirled and twirled and danced while he dusted and polished. He sang out loud, even though he couldn't carry a tune to save his life, because there was no one around to tell him to shut up. He pretended that he was all made up, twirling on the tips of his killer black high-heeled ankle boots across the hardwood floor.

He stopped in his tracks, polishing cloth hanging from his fingertips and wondered, *Why not get all made up? Cliff won't be back until late. He said he would be out all day repairing one of the shelters in some pasture somewhere and doing lots of last minute things so he can go to town tomorrow. He'll never know.*

Part of him felt like that would be deceiving Cliff, which would be wrong. But another part of him desperately ached to feel pretty again. *I'm safe here. No one will know, and it's been such a long time...* The old familiar battle raged in his mind and his heart, the what-ifs versus the why-nots. *What if Cliff finds out?*

He's not here. How will he know?

But what if he does find out and fires me? What if he doesn't want to have anything to do with a man who wears pretty things and kicks me out? What then?

C'mon, you ridiculous queen! You have to be able to live with yourself no matter what Cliff or anybody else says or does. You've never been able to stay in the closet in your life. Why start now? Why not get all made up and feel pretty?

No matter what anyone else thinks, I'm the only one responsible for my own life and my own happiness. That realization always won in the end. That, and the duffle bag full of pretty things waiting for him upstairs.

Running up the stairs two at a time, Troy raced to his room, dragged the bag out from under his bed, and started rifling through it. He knew exactly what he wanted, and he might have made a less than manly sound when he found it, though he would never admit to it. He ducked into the bathroom, vowing to take only a few moments to get ready. *Can't take too long and risk not getting my work done.* He stripped down to his underwear then wriggled into the tightest jeans he owned. Next came the fingerless black gloves adorned with rhinestones, a couple bracelets on each wrist, a gorgeous antique necklace he'd discovered in a thrift shop, and his shiny bubblegum pink heels. Some product to style his curls, a bit of eye makeup to make his eyes pop, a touch of rouge to emphasize his cheekbones, lipstick the same shade as his shoes, and Troy stood in front of the bathroom mirror grinning and feeling like he hadn't felt in a very long time—pretty and powerful.

“Watch out, world, Troy Balhaus is back and better than ever!” he proclaimed to an imaginary crowd of his admirers. He turned to look at his ass

and noticed how long his legs looked in the tight jeans. Grinning wider, he added, "Takes one helluva man to rock heels like these!"

With dinner already in the oven and most of the dirty work done, Troy felt like he could really let go and have fun while sweeping and mopping the floor. He grabbed his iPod and little portable speakers and strutted down the stairs, feeling fierce. He set it to play loud enough to hear wherever he was on the main floor and retrieved his favorite dancing partner from the closet as David Bowie's "Let's Dance" blasted from the little speakers.

"Care to dance the blues with me, Mr. Broom?" he asked with a giggle. He paused, as if listening to the response, then shrugged. "I know, the revered god of the dance commanded me to put on my red shoes, but these heels are the best I can do right now. Maybe someday."

He was so captivated by sweeping and dancing and humming along to the music that he didn't hear the back door shut. Cliff had ridden back to the barn to retrieve tools and supplies since the repair job ended up being larger than he had anticipated, and he had heard noise he didn't recognize coming from the house. Realizing it was music by the time he started up the porch steps, he decided to stop in and speak to Troy anyway. It was still nice to know that there was someone waiting for him to come home.

The housekeeper wasn't in the hallway or the kitchen, so Cliff headed to the living room and stopped dead in his tracks in the doorway, shocked. The man dancing around his living room was not the same man he had left early that morning. He had left the Troy he knew and had returned to... this gorgeous, smoking hot man with smoky eyes, pink lipstick, jewelry, and high heels dancing with a broom around the room.

Cliff was tongue-tied and rooted to the spot. He couldn't seem to make his mouth work, but his mind was at no loss for words. *Is that even the same Troy? It looks like him, but damn, that is so hot! I thought the pants he had on the night he got here were tight! And that ass... that ass makes me want to do naughty things.* He shook his head to try to clear his mind. *He's so beautiful. That confidence looks good on him. Wonder what it would be like to kiss those lips...*

His thoughts trailed off as Troy swung the broom wide, turning to face Cliff. Then he froze in place as well, a look of horror spreading across his face as he realized what was happening. Cliff drew in a breath to assure him that everything was fine, but Troy interrupted him, the words tumbling out too fast for Cliff to get a word in edgewise.

“Oh God, Mr. Haywood, I’m so sorry! I didn’t think you’d be back so soon, I thought I had the rest of the afternoon by myself! This isn’t what it looks like—well, actually it’s exactly what it looks like but, but—God, I am so, so sorry! It won’t happen again, I promise!”

He stopped speaking as abruptly as he had started then fled from the room. Cliff heard the bedroom door slam before he was able to wrap his head around what had happened. Then he began to sort through the mess. *So we’re back to Mr. Haywood again. Well, why not? He thinks I’m gonna reject him for dressin’ up like that. Wonder how many times that’s happened before,* he thought, already angry at the idea of anyone mistreating Troy for something as harmless as wearing pretty things. *Well, it ain’t happenin’ this time, or ever again if I got any say in it. But how do I get him to see that?*

Cliff noticed a pile of dirt and dust and saw that only half the living room floor had been swept. He picked up the discarded broom and absentmindedly swept the rest of the floor while pondering that question. The oven timer started beeping as he emptied the dustpan. Having no idea if whatever Troy was making for dinner was done or what the timer was for, he took the heavy pan out of the oven and took a whiff of the aroma. *Smells good, whatever it is.*

He’s probably upstairs worryin’ himself sick about what I’m gonna say and do about this, Cliff realized. *I don’t hafta know the perfect thing to say. I just hafta get up there and let him know that it’s okay.*

A few minutes later, Cliff knocked on the closed door and asked, “Can I come in?”

“It’s your house. You can go wherever you want,” came the shaky response.

He frowned. That wasn’t what he expected. “Well, do ya mind if I come into *your* room?” he tried again.

“Okay.”

He eased the door open and slipped inside. The sight that greeted him broke his heart. Troy sat on his bed with his back to the wall, his arms wrapped his knees, and his face buried. The jewelry was missing, and Cliff caught a glimpse of the shiny pink shoes shoved under the bed. He could tell Troy had been crying; his shoulders shuddered as if he was trying to gain composure. It struck a protective nerve in Cliff’s core. *I will never be the reason he cries like this again. And nothing else will either, not if I have anything to say ’bout it.*

“Troy—” he began but was immediately cut off.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Haywood, so *very* sorry. I'll stop! I promise I won't do it again. Please don't fire me, I don't have anywhere else to go!" he exclaimed, sounding close to tears again.

"Whoa, slow down, Troy, it's alright. I'm not gonna fire you. Why would you think that?"

"Because that's what every other employer did as soon as they found out."

"Well, I ain't every other employer now, am I?" Cliff asked gently, leaning against the doorjamb.

"No sir, you're sexy as hell—" Troy looked up and gasped, another horrified look flitting across his face. "I didn't mean that! Yes, I did—I mean, yes, you are—oh my God, I'm so sorry!"

"Calm down, I'm not mad. Why would I be? There is nothing wrong here."

"Nothing except the fact that I'm a man dancing around in high heels, makeup, and jewelry, you mean."

"Yeah, like I said, nothing wrong here."

Troy looked at him with suspicious eyes. "You don't mind?"

"Course not. You didn't do anything wrong. This is a ranch, there's no dress code here. You can wear whatever you want," Cliff said with a smile. Then he winked and added, "Besides, I really liked the view."

"You-you what?" Troy asked, his eyes wide in surprise, slowly relaxing into a cross-legged position on the bed.

"I said I really liked the view."

No way. No fucking way. He's fucking around with me, right? He can't be serious. Big, tough cowboys don't go for wimpy, girly guys like me, Troy thought. "I, uh, I don't even know what to say to that, Mr. Haywood."

"It's Cliff, remember? Nothing's changed."

"Okay, Cliff, but I'm having a hard time believing that nothing has changed."

"Why? 'Cause I accidentally caught you dancin' with a broom in my livin' room?"

"With makeup and jewelry and high heels—pink high heels, no less."

“You’re the one makin’ a big deal out of this. I’m tryin’ to tell you it don’t matter to me,” Cliff said with a chuckle.

Troy’s face fell and his shoulders slumped. “That’s, uh, great, I guess.”

“That’s not really true. It does matter to me,” Cliff admitted. Troy’s gaze shot up to meet his, and Cliff saw fear there. He took a deep breath. *Out with it, big man! Put both of us out of our misery!* “When I said I liked the view, I meant it. I already told you that I like pretty.”

“And you think I’m pretty?”

“No, I think you’re beautiful, with or without the makeup and stuff,” Cliff answered truthfully. It was such a relief, not holding that in anymore. “And don’t you dare ask me if I mean that.”

Troy laughed that beautiful, musical laugh that he loved. “I won’t. And since I already blurted out that I think you’re sexy as hell...”

“Everything fits just perfect then,” Cliff said, taking his hand and pulling him gently to his feet.

“I guess it does.” Troy stepped closer, then looked up at the rancher and stepped back again with one eyebrow quirked up. “I didn’t realize I’m so much shorter than you.”

Cliff gave him one of those lopsided smiles and crouched down to reach under the edge of the bed. “Here’s one way to make you a few inches taller,” he said as he stood up and offered the pink heels.

Troy slipped them on and stood at his full height, now only a couple inches shorter than the rancher. He looked up and met the gray-eyed gaze with a shy smile. “That’s better.”

Brushing his thumb along the edge of a smoky eye, smoothing out smudges the tears had left behind, Cliff agreed, “Yeah, it is.” Then the same thumb brushed across a pink lip. “Ya know, I’ve wondered what it would be like to kiss these lips since you got here.”

“Well, then, why don’t you try it and see, cowboy?”

Cliff hesitated only long enough to look into his eyes and make sure that he meant it. Then he leaned in close, gently pressing his lips against the plump ones he had seen in his dreams the past two nights.

The kiss was soft, patient, and giving, not anything like the hard and demanding kisses Troy had known before. He found himself short of breath and

holding on for dear life, afraid that if he let go, he would melt into a gooey puddle on the floor. And there wasn't even any tongue involved. Troy had no idea that a kiss could be so sweet, so hot, and so breathtaking all at the same time. When Cliff finally pulled away, they were both breathing hard.

After catching his breath, Cliff licked his lips and grinned. "A man could get used to that," he said, leaning in for another kiss.

Troy laughed his musical laugh. "Only one more, cowboy. Can't have you spoiling your dinner."

The End

Author Bio

Jade Crystal is easily distracted by the shiny things in the world. She often rambles and at times makes little sense to anyone but herself. She is most focused when writing the contemporary, paranormal, urban fantasy, and sci-fi romances of all her sexy men—in other words, her characters. It's their story, after all. Jade merely records it. Sometimes her imagination runs away with the stories they tell. Other times, they are infuriatingly quiet. But don't let them fool you... she loves every single second she spends with them. Her favorite thing to do besides writing their stories: leaving the real world behind and getting lost in books on rainy nights with a cup of hot tea and a handful of chocolates.

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PUCKISH

By Wart Hill

Photo Description

A man is sitting at a table in a café, working, a book open in front of him. He has tea and food as well. Another man is walking in.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It's safe to say that if I had picked any other café that day to stop into, my life now would be completely different.

Different, saner, less dangerous BY FAR, and... less... less thrilling, less exhilarating, less intoxicating, less... alive... less... whatever it is that he is. The bastard.

He says it was random. That he just lucked out that the one café, the one table, the one seat that was chosen was mine.

I don't know if I believe him though. Of the few things that I've learned in the short amount of time we've been forced together (NOT my idea), it's that there's nothing random about him.

In my new turned-around world, he has become the most steadfast presence. The one thing that, no matter what, I don't want to lose.

Maybe if we survive through this... Maybe I'll tell him.

Yours,

ttg, a humble reader

P.S. What I like: I love adventure romance—action, spies/detectives/magic/pirates/fantasy/urban fantasy/Romancing the Stone, and/or whatever and all of the above. So I would love it if you took this letter and went to town in whatever fun, creative, exciting, romantic way that you wanted. Would love some kind of happy ending (HFN, HEA, whatever.) Sexy times are fine, although not necessary, and up to you.

What I hate: Am not a fan of dark grim unhappy stories, and really dislike non-con and torture.

Thank you!!! :D

Story Info

Genre: urban fantasy

Tags: action/suspense/adventure, magic users, fae, fairytale/folklore, sweet/no sex

Content Warnings: character death

Word Count: 11,360

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Author's Note

Along with the quote at the beginning, the titles for chapters 1, 3, and 5 come from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, the title of chapter 2 is from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the title of chapter 4 is from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. All of these works are in the public domain.

Thank you to the moderators of the M/M Romance Group for hosting this event and doing such a great job organizing it, and thank you to the volunteers who made it possible.

Thank you ttg for your great prompt, I hope I did it justice.

A thousand thank yous to Maxime Deas-Mhumhain for the gorgeous cover he made! You, sir, are so ridiculously talented. Thank you.

Thank you to my beta readers : Gaelyn, without you, this would probably still be a mess. Love you, you noodnik! And Claire, thank you for pushing me and asking me questions I didn't ever think to answer, so I wouldn't leave my readers hanging.

PUCKISH
By Wart Hill

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was going to get out again.

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Chapter One

Down the Rabbit Hole

This is how it started:

I was minding my own business, indulging my sweet tooth in a quaint little café downtown—where I only was because I had pulled jury duty. I had sat on an uncomfortable bench for *hours* before they declared they had found all the members they needed and the rest of us could all go home. I felt I deserved a treat after that, and I'm certain I wasn't the only one, so at the first nice establishment I saw, I ducked inside and decided to have something to cheer me up.

A cherry-cheese Danish and a hot pot of Earl Grey later and I was a very happy man.

Like I said, I was minding my own business, grading papers (because there is no rest for the TA). It was shaping up to become a pleasant afternoon despite the atrocity that was the morning.

I should have known better.

When *he* walked in, I allowed myself a look. He was tall and clearly muscular under his well-cut suit. I might have let my gaze linger a little too long, but I felt I deserved to enjoy a bit of eye candy today—particularly since I had just finished red-penning a grammatically atrocious essay. So I took a moment to admire the view, and that was when everything took a dramatic tilt sideways.

First, he met my gaze *and held it*. When I let my eyes drift apologetically down, back to my work, I could feel his still on me. Then I watched the floor as his steps turned towards me, and I was certain he would find a chair and take up residence at my table, rudely interrupting my solitude all because I had allowed myself a moment to admire his assets.

I blew out a breath of relief when, instead, he passed my table and walked up to the decorative phonograph set up by the window. His back was to me now, and I allowed myself a quick, appreciative glance at my favorite asset—I have found, frequently, that being a gay man *and* an ass man is frustrating when bombarded by stick-thin white men with disappointingly flat gluteus maximi.

This man had no such shortcomings. His ass was as shapely and alluring as the rest of his well-toned body, and I had to avert my gaze quickly before the tightening in my trousers became embarrassing.

I kept my eyes glued to the next paper as he examined the phonograph—or whatever it was he was doing, as I was pointedly *not looking*. Moments later, a haunting, lyrical piece began to play, filling the small café with captivating, impossible music. I turned my head. Certain I wasn't the only one looking to see what was happening, I let my gaze linger on my fellow patrons, but none of them seemed to notice or care, going on with their meals as though nothing was different. Finally, my gaze settled on the man. He was standing at the phonograph, watching for a moment as it played. It simply wasn't possible. Even I could see from here that, restored though it was, the thing was no longer functional—the crank was gone, the needle bent. Yet the record turned and music played.

The man turned around, hands in his pockets, and caught my eye. He grinned, the boyish expression softening his chiseled features, then he winked at me and, much to my relief—not that the blood draining quickly from my face and taking up residence elsewhere was about to let me think so—he walked past my table and up to the counter where, in a loud, jovial voice, he ordered a cappuccino.

And that, I thought, was that.

Instead, tall, broad, and sexy did, in fact, find an easily moved wooden chair and pull it up across from me, settling himself down at my table, hands wrapped loosely around his mug. I felt his eyes on me, watching me, and it was an effort not to look up at him. I knew what I would see if I did: that goofy grin, those wide, brown eyes, that barely tamed hair. And the shoulders. Don't even get me started on his shoulders. I was no longer working, but I kept my eyes fixed on the paper I was grading, pen poised and ready to write. Of course, if I wrote what was actually going through my head, I would likely get summoned to the Dean to discuss appropriate behavior.

Thankfully I had enough presence of mind to keep the pen off the paper, though it didn't help my ruse any.

“That cannot possibly be more interesting than I am,” the man said after a moment, interrupting my solitude even more. I tried to ignore him, to ignore the laugh in his voice, the strange, lilting accent that tugged just a bit at his consonants. Almost not there, but there enough that I could hear it. Pursuing a

graduate degree in linguistics, I was the type who was hard pressed to ignore language. And this was an accent I had never heard before.

I looked up.

He was grinning, his teeth vibrantly white against the tan of his skin. His eyes were much more striking up close than they had been from a distance, and I found myself staring. He winked at me and leaned forward. Instinctively, I crossed my arms over the papers I was grading, but that only made him laugh—a good-hearted chuckle that sent a warm rush through me.

“I certainly don’t find them interesting,” he said, shaking his head. Then, after a moment, he added, “You might want to hold on.”

I stared at him. “Hold on to what?” I asked. I hadn’t meant to, but it was such an incongruous comment that the words were out before I could decide if I was going to go back to ignoring him or not. He unwrapped his hands from his coffee cup—long, thin fingers and broad palms catching my attention quickly—and gestured at the edges of the table, then returned to his starting position.

“Just a thought. I’d ask you to move, but then I’d have to explain and you wouldn’t believe me anyway and we’d be right back where we started.” He shrugged and took a sip of coffee. “It’s easier if I just accept I’ll have a tag-along and adjust accordingly.”

I blinked, my gaze fixed on his, trying to decide if he was mad or I was. What was it Albert Einstein said? Something about *am I or the others crazy*... I was leaning towards this man being the crazy one and was thinking I would just pack up my things and either find another table or get the hell out of that café and never come back. Then the music on the phonograph changed to something more upbeat, but still as strange and haunting, and I remembered that that music was *impossible*.

“Why?” I asked.

He raised an eyebrow. Clearly this wasn’t the reaction he’d expected. “Why what?”

“Why should I hold on?”

“Oh.” He shook his head and blew out a breath. “Oh, that was supposed to scare you away.” He tapped his fingers on the ceramic mug in his hands, his nails ticking softly against the hard surface as he studied me with those shining,

piercing eyes. He sighed and shrugged, resigning himself to my staying, and leaned forward again. He closed my file folder, neatly collating the papers, took my pen and capped it before tucking it into my shirt pocket. Then, in a voice so quiet I almost didn't hear, he said, "You haven't learned to miss."

I was about to ask the next, and I thought fairly obvious, question when it happened. The floor beneath us disappeared, replaced by a gaping black hole. An impossible instant passed—there was a lot of impossibility happening today—where we hung in the air and, in that moment, I managed to get a firm grip on the edge of the table just before it, our chairs, and us with them, plummeted downwards.

I clenched my teeth as we delved into the darkness beneath us, my grip on the table tightening until the edges dug painfully into my palms. Though there was no visible source of light, I could still see the table and the man across from me. He was reclining in his chair, sipping at his coffee as if this were the most normal thing in the world.

"I always loved that," he said, nodding sagely like he was saying something profound.

"Loved what?" I managed to ask without unclenching my teeth—it wasn't very comfortable, but I felt it was safer. If there was a sudden stop at the bottom that didn't kill us, I didn't want to lose my tongue instead.

"That book, by that guy." He waved his hands vaguely in the air. All I could do was stare at him—what the hell was he talking about? He caught my look and sighed, leaning forward again. He set his cup down on the table, and though I fully expected it to tumble off the table immediately, it stayed where it was as if we weren't falling who knew how far. He looked at me and said, "That book where in order to fly, you have to miss."

"Miss what?" I asked. It was on reflex. I really didn't want to engage this man anymore than I already had. I had fully intended to give him the silent treatment because there was no way this *wasn't* his fault, but the words slipped out because, really, if it was his fault, he was the one with the answers. That and if I kept talking, I wouldn't focus on what was happening, which was a plus.

He shrugged and leaned back, picking his coffee up again. "It doesn't matter, that's not how flying works."

"And you would know." I rolled my eyes—about the only part of my body I felt comfortable moving at this juncture. We were *still* falling and it was still

black all around us and if there was a bottle labeled “Drink Me” at the bottom I was definitely going to throw it at this guy’s head.

“Of course I know,” he said. “I can fly.”

I nodded my head slowly, adding another check mark to the “evidence of insanity” tally.

He smiled. He could tell I didn’t believe him. He set the coffee cup down on the table again and shrugged out of his suit coat, draping it over the back of his chair. He arched his back, his eyes fell closed, and a moment later a pair of luminescent white wings unfolded behind him. There was no tearing sound of the wings pushing through the fabric of his shirt, they simply appeared, white and glowing.

All I could do was gape.

He opened his eyes and winked at me. “Look around you,” he said. “Think about what’s happening.” He gestured at his wings. “Is this really so unbelievable?”

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice quiet, barely a whisper. I was back to Einstein again, wondering—was I losing it? I had to be, if I thought this was actually happening. I must have still been in the café, probably raving. Unless someone had called an ambulance already. Or I’d passed out. But there was no way any of this was real.

Yet the table dug painfully into my palms. And my jaw hurt from gritting my teeth.

It didn’t feel like a hallucination. Not that I knew what a hallucination felt like. Perhaps they felt real. I suppose they must, if the person experiencing it thought it was. But was it supposed to be *this* vivid?

The man was studying me now, concern creasing his brow. “Are you all right?” he asked.

I blinked, staring at him for a moment. “I’m falling down a nonexistent hole that appeared suddenly beneath my table.” I shook my head. “Of *course* I’m not all right!”

“Ah, yes, that.” He set his coffee down again and clasped his hands in front of him, the wings disappearing as quickly as they’d appeared. “The hole exists, otherwise you wouldn’t be able to fall down it.” He said it matter-of-factly, like

it was the most obvious thing in the world, never mind the fact that nearly everything that had happened since he walked into the café was impossible.

I shook my head. "This cannot be happening."

He shrugged. "I tried to scare you off. You refused to leave."

"I had a *nice* table! By the window, good light, comfy chair!" The words felt foolish—it wasn't like my prime seating mattered now, not since I'd been plunged into madness. Down the rabbit hole. Was this guy the Hatter? "Who. Are. You?" I asked again, punctuating each word, needing an answer.

He blew out a breath. "May as well. You've come this far." He spread out his arms as though to let me take a good look at him then, surprisingly, he managed a small bow despite his seated position. When he straightened up, he was grinning. "I am Charys of the Underneath."

I blinked. "Underneath what?"

His brow furrowed into a glare. "Are you mocking the Underneath?"

"How can I mock it? I don't even know what it is."

"Well, don't," he said, shaking his head. "Don't mock the Underneath because without the Underneath there is nothing Above."

I drew in a deep breath. My patience was running very, very low. "That doesn't answer my question. What exactly *is* the Underneath?"

"You'll see," he said. Then, after a moment. "I need your name, though."

"Why?" I was wary. In case this guy was a raving lunatic and we were experiencing some sort of shared hallucination, I didn't want him to have too much information about me lest he hunt me down once my faculties were restored.

I really needed to read up on psychology.

"So you can pass," he said. "The Ferryman won't let you on the boat unless you're protected, and I can only protect you if I know your name." He shrugged. "It's how magic works. Have to be specific or things go," he tilted his head to the side, "cockeyed."

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. "What exactly happens if I don't have permission?"

Charys turned his head and gazed out at the darkness. "You lose yourself," he said. His voice was low and quiet. Sad. He turned to look at me again, his

brown eyes bright with unshed tears. “The River takes what it wishes, and often more than we are willing to give.” He shook his head. “That is why the Ferryman will not take you without protection. One unguarded soul, and we could all be lost.”

I was still convinced he was mad and dragging me into his insanity, but he sounded so sad and serious that I felt compelled to go along with it. Enabling, I think it's called. Still. It couldn't hurt. Worst case he was having me on, best case he was telling the truth and if he was I didn't want to lose myself... whatever that meant.

“My name is Minoru,” I said. I waited, hoping he didn't need more. He remained silent, watching me. I blew out a sigh. “Levinson,” I added. “My name is Minoru Levinson.” I waited for the inevitable disbelief. The amusement. Something. Instead, Charys only nodded and turned to watch the passing darkness again.

I suppose when your name is Charys, a Japanese Jew isn't terribly shocking.

“We're almost there,” he said. I looked at the darkness around us, wondering how he could possibly tell. It was all just black. There was no sign of movement, no hint that we had gone anywhere in the time that had passed—however long that had been, I wasn't wearing my watch. A decision made to ease the painfulness of jury duty. It hadn't worked, and now I regretted leaving it at home.

I was about to ask Charys how he knew where we were when there was a light *thunk* and we touched down on solid ground. I blew out a sigh of relief and loosened my grip on the table as I felt the floor connect with the soles of my shoes. “Thank God that's over,” I breathed.

Charys looked at me and shook his head, that sad look back in his eyes. “It's only just beginning.”

He stood, but I stayed seated. All around us it was still dark, as though only ourselves, our chairs, and our table existed in all of this world. Loath though I was to admit it, I was afraid of moving. I was afraid that entering the darkness would mean *I* would leave existence behind. And though there was no way back, I did not want to go forward, either.

“Minoru?” Charys asked, stopping a few steps away, right where the line of darkness seemed to begin. “You can't stay here,” he said, looking at me, worry creasing his brow.

I looked away, flicking my eyes first to the darkness, then to the table. "Where are we?" I asked.

"Underneath," Charys replied.

I shook my head. Forced myself to meet his gaze, trying to ignore the vast unknown that stretched out behind him. "I'm going to need more than that," I said, frustration and fear choking my voice. "What the hell is going on?"

"I have a meeting." Charys stepped towards me and I let out a sigh of relief. He cocked his head, studying me. "I was summoned. This gateway was the closest to where I needed to be." He shook his head and looked away. "You weren't supposed to be here."

"What does it mean?" I asked. "That I am. Here."

Charys looked at the darkness again, and I started to suspect he saw something I didn't. "You are under my protection for now," he said. "Once we pass the River, it is no longer up to me."

I swallowed hard, my tongue heavy in my mouth as I struggled to ask my next question. "Who is it up to?" I asked. I didn't think I really wanted to know, but since he hadn't offered to take me back to normality, I figured I couldn't get back the way I'd come. And if I was going to go forward, I wanted to know everything I could.

Charys looked back at the darkness again, and I felt annoyance roiling in my gut. I clenched my hands and my teeth and stood. The sound of my chair scraping against the ground brought Charys's attention back to me, and I took an unsteady step forward—I didn't want to get any closer to the darkness, but I needed him to pay attention to me.

"I get it," I said, when I was sure he wasn't going to look away again. "I do, really. You're late for a very important date." I stopped. Shook my head, dismissing the Lewis Carroll as quickly as it had reared up. I wasn't Alice and this definitely wasn't Wonderland. And Charys was clearly not a rabbit. I drew in a deep breath and tried again. "I get it, I wasn't supposed to be here, but I'm here now and the least you can do is tell me what the hell is going on!"

"This is the Underneath, I am a Fae, and I have a job to do," Charys listed off quickly. "And," he added, "I *am* late and I'm going to be later if we linger. It's in your best interest to hurry up."

He turned then and stepped into the darkness, but as he moved, what I could see moved with him and instead of standing frozen to the spot absorbing what

he'd said like I wanted to, I forced myself forward quickly, staying in his wake as we walked along what was turning into a long hallway surrounded by nothingness. "Why can't I see anything?" I asked after a few minutes. The silence was getting to me—heavy and present, it felt *powerful*, like it was lying in wait for me to drop my guard.

"You aren't Fae," Charys said simply. I waited for him to continue, but he seemed to think that was all the information I needed. I was just about to ask what that had to do with anything when he came to an abrupt halt and turned to face me. Behind him, there was a river flowing swiftly, and beyond that... more darkness.

"You are about to enter a sacred place," he said. "Mortals must tread carefully in the Underneath, especially beyond the river."

"Why won't you tell me anything?" I asked in a quiet voice, hating myself for how scared I sounded. How scared I was.

Charys shook his head. "I value my life, Minoru," he said, not meeting my gaze. "There is no greater offense than sharing our secrets with mortals."

I frowned at him, realizing what he'd meant before. About my not being able to see. "Everything's hidden from me," I said. He nodded, smiling, clearly glad I'd figured it out. I felt a little proud of myself, even though it probably would have been obvious to anyone. Or maybe it wouldn't. I didn't know anybody who had met a Fae—hell, I didn't know anybody who even believed they existed.

I took a deep breath, allowing myself to accept everything that was laid out before me, despite my mind still clinging to the hope of insanity. I wasn't sure which was better, but for right now, I had to operate on the assumption that I had not gone mad—the world had. "What comes next?"

"The Ferryman takes us across," Charys turned back around and stepped forward, out onto the water. Except in the next second there was a boat—a gondola—beneath his feet. At the back stood a tall, thin figure, cloaked in black. His face was hidden. I went to take a step back, but Charys held a hand out to me and I took it and let him help me onto the boat instead.

There was no way to go but forward.

I stayed close to Charys as the Ferryman punted us across the water, unnerved by his dark, silent presence. He seemed to me to be all of my misgivings and fears brought to life and placed before me, and though it sent a

prickle of uncertainty down my spine to turn my back to him, I could not bring myself to look, either. And so I spent the short trip across the steady river gazing out at the further stretches of the unknown that awaited me, Charys a comfort beside me, strange though it was.

“What happens now?” I asked as we came upon the bank. Charys stepped out onto the crunching gravel and I followed, braving a glance at the Ferryman, who stood still and silent at the back of the boat. As Charys and I walked forward, onto a paved path I had not seen before, darkness swallowed the figure up and I felt in that moment that it was chasing after me, racing to catch me before I saw... whatever it was I could not see.

It was only as we turned a sharp corner and entered into what appeared to be a town—though I could not tell, not being able to see more than two buildings at a time, with the darkness ahead and behind, and I had no sense of any people being there—that I realized Charys had not answered my question. This fact scared me, as I worried that he did not want me to know because it was something bad. Perhaps the next destination for me would be the last—a death in this dark underworld, ensuring my silence.

I had to get an answer.

“I wish you could see it.” Charys’ voice broke through my thoughts. He was gazing all around us, seeing the world as I could not. “I haven’t been here in years. All my work is topside.” He shrugged and lowered his gaze, meeting mine. “I’m sorry about...” he gestured to the side. “It really is beautiful, but the Elders cling to the old ways. They think your kind will disrupt our world if they know about it, and we’ve lived the way we have for centuries.” He shrugged again and shook his head. “I really am sorry.”

“Yeah, well, next time sit at another table,” I grumbled, though I hurried my pace to stay beside him, and the look he shot me—his eyes dark, eyebrows raised—made walking a little difficult. It was a nice distraction, how attracted I was to him, but I knew I should focus on the matter at hand.

I blew out a breath and came to a halt, laying a hand on his arm so he turned back to face me, brows drawn together. “What happens next?” I asked, because here, now, in this unknown, ignorance was not bliss.

“I shouldn’t,” he muttered, looking down, scuffing his toe against the cobbled street beneath our feet. He looked back up, his brown eyes wide, his face pale. “I *really* shouldn’t.”

“Charys, please,” I said, my fingers tightening on his arm. I held his gaze, struggling to keep my own steady. “Please.”

After a moment and a quick glance around as though looking for eavesdroppers, he finally answered. “You will meet Obey and Roahn,” he said. “They are King and Consort to Queen Tani. They handle all meetings of the council, save matters that require the Queen’s personal attendance.” He shook his head. “They’re only telling me my job. I’ve no idea what they’ll do to you.”

My mind was reeling, thinking back to those advanced English courses I’d been encouraged to take in high school. “Oberon?” I whispered. “Titania?” I looked up to find Charys gazing at me quizzically, clearly wondering if his revelation had had an adverse effect on me. I shook my head quickly, hoping to assuage his fears. “Sorry, it’s just...” I trailed off, not quite wanting to voice the question, afraid of what the answer would be. Finally, I took in a deep breath and just went for it—I was here already, things couldn’t possibly get weirder. “Was Shakespeare ever here?” I asked. “William Shakespeare?”

To my astonishment, Charys laughed. It was a deep, hearty laugh, and the sound brought a smile to my face. It lightened the atmosphere considerably, and I felt things were not as bad as I had feared during the long fall from the café.

“Of course he was here,” Charys answered when he’d caught his breath, grasping my shoulder and holding back more laughter, as though what I had said was some great joke. “How else do you think he learned to write such plays?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He was a Changeling, Minoru,” Charys explained. “We took him from his crib and raised him here, then returned him when the time was right.”

I was wrong; it could get weirder.

“Right,” Charys said, sobering in an instant. He let go of my shoulder and started forward again. I followed close at his heels, not wanting to lose the light. Not wanting to lose him.

We seemed to walk forever, but for all I knew, no time passed. For all I knew, there was no time here. Perhaps we’d slipped into Tir Na Nóg and when we returned, I would instantly age to death, having been gone centuries. I shuddered at the thought, not paying attention, nearly running into Charys’s back where he’d stopped at the foot of a short set of steps. They led up to a

looming white marble building that looked down on us like the Parthenon must once have done. Clearly we had arrived.

It was all I could do to keep my mouth shut, to not ask again *what happens now?*

This time I really didn't want to know.

I expected Charys to start up the steps at any moment, but he stayed still and silent at the base, waiting. After a few minutes of heavy silence, the doors to the building swung open and a booming voice rang out. "Enter, Puckish one," it said. "And bring the Mortal, if you must."

With a nod, Charys headed up the steps. I did not immediately follow, put off by the way the voice had been so dismissive of me. Charys paused at the doorway, realizing I was not with him, and turned back. "Minoru?" he asked. I shook my head, not sure how to voice my misgivings. After a moment, he came back, bouncing down the stairs with light steps. He held out his hand and flashed me a mischievous grin. "Come along, Mortal," he said with a wink. "Let's give the court a shock."

After another moment, I took his hand.

Chapter Two

What Goodly Creatures

The sight that greeted us inside took me so off-guard I stumbled, and had Charys not had a tight grip on my hand, I likely would have fallen. As it was, he pulled me up close to him, pressing his lips against my ear, and whispered, “Steady, Minoru, it hasn’t even started yet.”

I nodded, my gaze fixed on the vast room that lay before us. It was an open space, no tables, the only seats two thrones set upon a central dais. The one on the right was empty. A huge, looming seat, the wood carved with intricate patterns. Beside it on the left was a smaller throne, occupied by a lanky man with pale brown skin and a stern, unsmiling face. Behind him stood another man who was his twin in every regard.

And I could feel their gazes on me, and it was this that nearly sent me stumbling backward. They were not happy I was here. I could *feel* their displeasure, hot and prickling on my skin. It was almost impossible for me to walk forward, as though something in their wills was trying to hold me back. If I had not kept hold of Charys, I felt sure I would have been forced back out the door and into the street. And I would have been alone in a darkness, unwelcome in this world.

I clutched tighter to Charys as he led the way, stopping a few feet away from the dais. He gave a quick bow, pulling me down with him, then he straightened and grinned at the two men.

“Obey, Roahn,” he said, giving them a quick nod. “This is an unpleasant surprise.” He winked at me, as though drawing me into this little performance—I wished he wouldn’t—then turned his attention back to his... rulers, I guess. “What harbingers of destruction made you call on me?”

“Now is not the time to be a fool,” the seated man said—Obey, I thought. King. He leaned forward and looked down on us, his hair falling over his bright eyes and thin nose in a dark curtain. “Why do you bring this creature into our court?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought you had an important mission for me,” Charys said, sounding bored. I wanted to elbow him, bring what was likely my imminent demise back to his attention, but as I watched the cold, silent

creatures who were Obey and Roahn, I realized it was likely that Charys didn't care. He'd put up a good front on the way here, being kind to me, answering my questions. I'd thought... but, no. Maybe he had only done it to earn my trust so he could pass me off to someone else once he got this far. The thought made me shake, my stomach twisting. I tried to pull away, but Charys's grip tightened and he gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

"His Royal Highness asked you a question, Charys," Roahn growled, his voice deep and rumbling. "You will answer."

Charys shrugged. "If you insist," he said. "But I was led to believe this matter was *pressing*." He cocked an eyebrow, tilting his head to the side and studying Obey and Roahn. I drew in a breath slowly, holding it until my chest began to hurt as I waited for what came next. I was longing for the darkness outside, for the unknown. Here, faced with Obey and Roahn looking down on me, a small speck in a huge room, the fear threatened to overwhelm me. I missed my books, my DVDs. I even missed grading papers.

The thought reminded me of the table, sitting at the bottom of an impossibly long shaft that shouldn't even exist, covered in my work, and I spluttered out a laugh that turned quickly loud, gasping, and desperate as it continued.

"Why does it laugh?" Obey asked.

Charys was squeezing my arm as though the pain might bring me back to my senses, but I just laughed harder at Obey's question. It wasn't that any of this was all that funny—except maybe the fate of my students' papers—but at this point I was laughing more out of fear than anything else, and Obey's deep, commanding voice only made it worse.

"Minoru," Charys whispered, his voice anxious and harsh. "Minoru, what is it?"

"The papers," I said, gasping for breath. "The ones I was grading." Another round of laughter doubled me over, and I clutched at Charys. I was fully conscious of my hysteria, but I couldn't do anything to stop it. "Sorry, I couldn't finish grading your papers, they're in Tir Na Nóg."

The silence that fell over us was like a dousing of ice water, bringing my laughter to a stop. Fear took over in full, no longer hiding in mania. I looked up. Charys was staring at me, his eyes wide, his face pale. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Obey and Roahn's attention had shifted fully to me. I was no longer an annoying curiosity. I had done something wrong.

“Sorry,” I said, not sure what exactly I was apologizing for. “Sorry.” Charys gripped my arm tightly, his fingers digging in as he tried to pull me behind him without letting go.

“How does it know?” Roahn asked. His deep voice rumbled, shaking the room. “How does it know? Our world is hidden from mortals.”

“What have you told it, Charys?” Obey asked.

Charys shook his head. “Nothing,” he insisted. “Do you think I am so foolish? This is my world as well.”

It took me a moment to realize what they were talking about, and I cursed myself for being so stupid. “Sorry,” I said again. “I mean. I was right?” I looked between the rulers and Charys, not wanting them to answer my question. “I was just spouting bullshit,” I said. “My mom teaches mythology at the university, so, I kind of... know stuff?” I finished with a shrug, hoping that would put them at ease, though I rather doubted it.

“This is unacceptable.” Roahn said after a moment. He stepped forward, coming around the throne and walking slowly down the steps towards Charys and me, one hand on the hilt of a sword that hung at his hip. As he approached, he drew it slowly, and the action startled me. Sobered me. I took a step back, my fingers digging into Charys’s hand. “It must be silenced.”

“Oh, please!” Charys said, rolling his head back and looking up at the ceiling as though asking some god for patience. “You really think he’s going to go back up to the world of mortals and tell anybody any of this? Do you know what happens to mortals who do that?”

Roahn continued forward, his steps purposeful, his gaze fixed on me, hard and dark.

“Please,” I whispered, my voice coming out hoarse as it caught in my throat.

A moment stretched before us, and I waited for the sting of the blade. It never came. As though in slow motion, Roahn raised his sword and Charys stepped between us, catching the blow on his forearm. “Leave it, Roahn,” he growled. “Just give me my task and we’ll get out of your hair.”

“It must not be allowed to leave,” Roahn said. He lowered his sword and waited, as though he expected Charys to move. But Charys did not oblige him, and I squeezed his hand in thanks.

“He will be labeled mad. Thrown into an institution. Studied. Laughed out of academic circles.” Charys shook his head. “You have been too long away, Roahn,” he said. “Times have changed since last you walked in the mortal realm.”

Roahn looked like he was going to just stab Charys and be done with it, but Obey stood, the movement drawing Roahn's attention despite making no noise. The three of us stood, staring up at the King. In a moment, I realized why he was standing, but only because he quickly dropped to his knees.

From behind the dais, through a door I had not seen before, came the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She was tall and imposing, her bare arms well muscled, her figure full. Her skin was a pale brown, and her black hair shone in the strange light of the room. She fixed her eyes on the scene before her, then shook her head. Roahn sheathed his sword and slowly returned to his post behind Obey's throne. Obey, meanwhile, resumed his seat.

The woman—Tani, I assumed—strode down the steps and up to Charys, studying him with her hazel eyes.

“Did you not warn the mortal?” she asked.

“I did it all as it is done,” Charys answered, giving a low bow. His motion pulled me with him, which was good, since I felt frozen and as I was forced to bow, I realized it would likely have been a slight if I had stayed standing while everyone else honored the Queen.

My fate was already precarious, I did not want to slight anyone.

Once we'd straightened, I found the Queen's gaze fixed on me. She strode forward, stepping close to us, looking down on me. Her eyes were dark, her gaze steady and unblinking. I tried not to shy away from the intensity, clutching harder and harder at Charys's arm.

“Why did it come?” she asked.

It took a few moments of silence before I realized she was speaking to me, not Charys. I tried to focus; my mind had felt disordered since she had entered the room. “I, um. I was just. Working,” I explained. “And I liked my table. And Charys sat down and wouldn't leave and the next thing I knew...” I trailed off with a shrug, hearing how ridiculous it all sounded. Charys was right, if I ever tried to tell anyone what had happened, where I'd gone, they wouldn't even try to believe me. I had known, of course. But hearing the words for the first time, said out loud, in my own voice. I realized how insane all this was.

Forget someone else locking me up, I had half a mind to check into the psychiatric ward myself... as soon as I got back.

From Tir Na Nóg.

I bit back a groan, gnawing at my lip as I waited for Tani to say something. *Anything*. Just as long as she stopped staring at me.

She turned her gaze to Charys, and I forced myself to relax.

“May I have it?” She tilted her head towards me as she spoke, as though we’d forgotten what she was talking about in the past few seconds. Her eyes flicked to me for a moment, traveling my body, predatory. I did my best not to shudder and tried to discreetly shuffle behind Charys.

Charys shook his head. “He was not brought here in the proper way and must be returned.” He gave her a quick bow, then continued, “I’m sorry, majesty. I can bring him back, if you wish it, after my task is done.”

That gaze returned to me in full, and it was all I could do not to shrink back or let go of Charys’s arm and allow the force of Obey and Roahn’s anger to drive me out.

After a long moment, Tani nodded. “I may wish it,” she said. “I will inform you before your work is through.”

She turned and walked back up to the dais, taking her seat in the lavish throne. “Charys, Puckish son,” she said. “We have need of you.”

“I am ever at your service, my goodly Queen,” Charys answered, bowing low.

“Bricne has proved a problem. He must be returned to Tir Na Nóg for good, or eliminated.”

“Dare I ask what he has done?” Charys inquired, inclining his head slightly in acknowledgement of his task.

Tani shrugged. “He has gone mad,” she said. Then, with a wry smile, added, “Well, *madder*.”

She looked to her king and her consort, and Obey took up the explanation, his deep voice rumbling with his anger. “Bricne has killed a Changeling. One of ours, in its post. Bricne killed without mercy or remorse, and he refuses to give reason.”

Charys had stiffened beside me, his face was pale. "I understand, Majesty," he said, bowing to his rulers. "I will bring the traitor to you."

Tani flicked her fingers at us, looking bored. "Take the mortal away, Puck," she said. "I weary of its presence. It reeks of humanity." I felt a hot flash of anger, shocked that she could go so quickly from wanting me as her plaything to hating me, but I quickly quashed it and focused on my relief that I wasn't going to be forced to stay here, a toy for the fairy queen.

Charys gave another low bow, then turned and led me back out into the cobbled street. I still could not see beyond our immediate vicinity, and I hated it even more now that I knew where we were. I longed to see Tir Na Nóg in all its glory, to lay eyes on something few mortals had ever seen—and even fewer had come back from. I wondered how Shakespeare had felt, glimpsing a reality few of us dream of beyond childhood.

But there was no majestic city for my eyes to feast upon, and out on the street, Charys stopped, pulling me close to him. "Close your eyes," he whispered, his breath warm against my cheek. I obeyed, wondering what was next. A moment later, Charys let me go and stepped away, and I felt a cold emptiness at the loss of contact.

I opened my eyes. We were in the living room of my apartment. Charys was striding quickly and purposefully towards the door. In a few moments, all of this would be behind me, a bad dream that I could forget.

"Charys," I called out. He halted, hand on the doorknob. "Charys, what the hell is going on?" The question came out harsh, demanding, as if I had a right to an answer. It was not my world; I should just let it go.

Instead, I walked slowly, cautiously up behind him and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Please," I said. "Tell me what's happening."

Charys shook his head as he answered. "It isn't your concern." And with that, he pulled open the door and disappeared through it. Literally. He stepped through the door and though it hung open in front of me, he was nowhere to be seen. The hallway was empty. The Fae was gone. And only then, once he had disappeared, did I think of all the things I should have asked—starting with why the hell we'd gone through all that if he could just close his eyes and blink himself to Tir Na Nóg.

I blew out a sigh and shut the door, relishing the normality of the sound of it slamming.

From behind me, there came a high pitched giggle. Slowly, I turned around.

Standing in the center of the room was a tall, thin man. He had a pale face with dark hair and gleaming blue eyes—*too* blue. They almost glowed in the dim light the table lamp shed from beside the couch, shining up on his face. He crossed his arms over his chest and studied me with an overexaggerated frown of disappointment.

“You’re still mortal,” he said, pouting. “There’s no fun in *that*.”

I stood in silence for a few moments, fear hot in my gut. I clenched my fists to keep them from shaking, but it didn’t help. All of the terror Charys’s presence had numbed in the throne room combined with the foreboding this man’s presence instilled in me, all of the fear of the unknown darkness of Tir Na Nóg rose up in me again. It was all I could do not to curl up in a ball and sob like a child afraid of what lurks in the darkness.

Because now the darkness had a face, and that only made the fear *worse*.

“Bricne,” I finally managed, my voice barely a whisper.

The man grinned and clapped his hands, bowing low before me. “At your service,” he said as he straightened up. He giggled again.

Chapter Three

We're All Mad Here

It made sense to walk away, Charys thought as he made his way along the darkening street, wishing the streetlights would go out so he could look up at the stars. He wasn't opposed to technological progress—humans had no magic, they had to do *something*—but he spent so much time in their world that he had gotten used to stargazing. As the cities grew and electric lights became more prevalent, they overpowered the night sky, and Charys missed the stars.

They reminded him of the old times, before Tir Na Nóg and the mortal realm had become separate. When humans and Fae passed between worlds easily and frequently. Times when humans were still children in the grand scheme of the universe.

Because children believed.

But having no stars to look at meant Charys was left to think as he strode down the street, and as he went, he thought only of Minoru. He *should* have been thinking of Bricne and his task and the atrocities Bricne had committed against the Fae, but instead he was wondering if it was right to leave without answering Minoru's questions. He had dragged Minoru into this—he could have easily gotten him away from the table, but something about the stubborn glint in his eye when Charys had sat down had endeared Minoru to him, and he had wanted to know more.

So he had let him come to Tir Na Nóg.

It was foolish, Charys knew. A rash and reckless action, but he couldn't bring himself to regret it.

Charys blew out a sigh and tried to refocus his thoughts. Minoru was home safe, his adventure with the Fae over and done, it was time for Charys to leave him behind and do his job.

He was just getting his mind focused, thinking on a plan that would draw Bricne out, when he heard the giggle. High pitched and echoing, it rang through the empty street and resounded in Charys's head, and he froze between streetlights, the darkness weighing heavily down on him as that sound sent a chill down into his bones.

Tani had been worried about him finding Bricne; it had never occurred to anyone to worry about Bricne being the one to find *him*.

To find *them*.

“Minoru,” Charys whispered, realization clenching in his gut. He turned and he ran. Streetlights went off as he passed them, plunging him into darkness, but there was no relief in this. No stargazing now. He was frantic, worried.

Afraid.

By the time Charys made it back to Minoru's apartment building, the streetlights were out and Minoru's apartment was dark save for a flickering light that could have been a candle, but knowing what he was up against, Charys had a feeling it was far more sinister than that. Why did it have to be *Bricne*? Charys wondered. And why did *he* have to be so foolish as to drag a mortal into this?

He tried not to focus on his guilt. Now was not the time, and he struggled to keep his mind on the fight ahead as he slipped into the building, the lock proving no more a challenge to him than it must have for Bricne, and raced up the stairs to the third floor. The corridor was dark, a deep, pitch black. No light from outside—bright though the moon was tonight—came in through the window at the end of the hall.

Charys hurried to Minoru's door and slammed into it, twisting at the knob, but it would not open. It wasn't locked, not by any mortal means. Bricne was keeping him out. “Damn it!” Charys shouted, pounding on the door. “Let me in, Bricne!”

“Why?” came a high-pitched, whiny voice. The door grew hot, and Charys pushed away from it, clenching his fists at his side.

“Leave him alone!” Charys tried, knowing it would do no good. Then a thought struck him. He hadn't given it much musing, not really caring about it beyond the disturbing nature of Bricne's actions, but maybe it would buy him time. Maybe he could use it to save Minoru. Slowly, tentatively, he reached out and laid a hand on the door. It was cool again. He pressed himself against it and spoke low and soft, using magic to project his words to Bricne. “He isn't a Changeling, Bricne,” he said. “He's mortal, he is no threat to you.”

Bricne giggled, the sound sending a chill through Charys.

“Oh, sweet Puck,” Bricne whispered, his own voice carrying on his own sickly sweet magic. “You don’t understand. It isn’t just about the Changelings, you know.”

“What is it about?” Charys asked, hoping Minoru was still all right. Hoping he was distracting Bricne enough.

“You wouldn’t care,” Bricne said, sounding lazy and uninterested. “Nobody ever does.”

“Tell me!” Charys called out. “Make me understand!”

There was quiet on the other side of the door, then, with a soft click, it began to swing open. Charys pushed it, hurrying it up, and slipped inside. Minoru was slumped in an armchair. Bricne stood in the center of the living area, playing fire across his fingers. Tossing it back and forth between his hands. Watching Minoru. Minoru whose skin was too pale now. Minoru who wasn’t moving. Minoru whose chest neither rose nor fell.

“No,” Charys whispered, taking a stuttering step forward. He halted as Bricne turned on him, the fire in his hand blazing up. “Why?” Charys asked, his eyes on Minoru’s body. The empty shell that was once so vibrant, so curious, so pissed off at Charys for dragging him into the unknown.

Unbidden, thoughts of what could have been, of what might have happened if Charys had been a mortal, if he had been just some flirt sitting down to talk to an attractive man, instead of *this*. Minoru would be alive. And someone else would have to deal with Bricne.

“Why?!” Charys shouted, his voice loud and cracking on his tears and anger. “Why the hell did you do it? He wasn’t a Changeling, why does it matter?”

“He’s seen Tir Na Nóg,” Bricne said with a shrug. “We’ve carried on as though nothing has changed, but it has. Mortals conquer, Puck, and we still let them come and go from Tir Na Nóg as though they wouldn’t try if they wanted.”

“Try what?” Charys asked, staring astonished at Bricne, trying to wrap his mind around this idea. “How could they possibly conquer us? We have *magic*, Bricne, we aren’t exactly pushovers!”

“It doesn’t matter if they could succeed or not,” Bricne said. “Though, the Changelings know our weaknesses, so if they wanted...” he trailed off, staring

down at Minoru's body. "It isn't about that, though." He looked up at Charys, eyes wide and bright. "It's about them *trying*. Because they might. They might and even if they lost, we would have to fight... it could destroy the spirit of Tir Na Nóg."

Charys drew in a deep, steadying breath, focusing his mind. "So you thought you would take things into your own hands?" he asked, distracting Bricne as he felt the tickle of ice in his fingers. "You thought you would save us from a threat that doesn't even exist yet? By killing your own kind?"

Bricne turned to him, hands up, ready for a fight. "I will not let the secrets of Tir Na Nóg leak out. If I have to be the only one protecting our home, so be it. But I will not stand by and watch mortals gain the knowledge that could destroy us!"

"They think we're a *myth*, Bricne," Charys said, keeping his hands at his side. "They don't believe in Tir Na Nóg. Not anymore."

"They could," Bricne said. "They will. One day." His eyes were bright in the flicker of his flames, his face pale, his hair wild.

"You're mad," Charys said. "And it's time to go home."

He raised his hands.

Chapter Four

What Fools these Mortals Be

The battle ended as it had begun, in darkness and in silence.

Charys hated silence. It made him feel alone, and if he *was* alone, it only enhanced the loneliness. That was why he'd set the phonograph playing at the café. It was too quiet there. It was why he'd talked so much with Minoru, why he hadn't insisted the other man leave—at least, that was what he had been telling himself, that he was avoiding the silence he couldn't stand. That talking to Minoru would ease his loneliness—and it had. Not because it broke the quiet, but because Charys found himself drawn to Minoru. Found himself enjoying the company, the conversation. Pretending he was just a normal bloke chatting up an attractive man.

So he had not pushed Minoru to leave. He had kept quiet. And his own silence was the reason Minoru now sat, slumped and dead, in his own living room.

Silence and foolishness.

"I'm sorry," Charys whispered, staring down at the man whose life he had destroyed. Bricne was gone—not dead, never dead, but back in Tir Na Nóg awaiting his fate. There was nothing left for Charys to do.

Except.

Unless.

"I'm so sorry," he said again. He strode forward and scooped Minoru up—the thin body was heavy in its stillness, and even with his Fae strength, Charys had trouble getting a firm grip. Once he felt confident in his hold, he closed his eyes and stepped through the door he had opened for Bricne only moments before and was in Tir Na Nóg once more, the throne room opening up before him in an instant.

Bricne knelt before his Queen, arms bound behind his back, body bent double and wracked with pain. His clothes were torn and bloody, cuts and welts red and raised on his exposed skin. But Charys ignored him, ignored his torture, and strode up to the dais, laying Minoru's body on the ground at Tani's feet.

“What does my sweet Puck desire?” Tani asked, her voice hard and cold with her displeasure—he *was* interrupting Bricne’s well-deserved punishment.

But for once, the matters of the Fae were less important to Charys than this one mortal’s life.

“Please,” he implored, his voice quiet and choked, his gaze steady on Minoru’s blank, empty face. “Please, my Queen, bring him back.”

She was quiet for a moment, waiting for him to look on her and make his plea. But he could not raise his gaze. She might be his Queen, but he could not look away from Minoru. Not now. Not after everything.

“Mortals are not like us,” Tani said in a bored voice. “They live only one lifetime, and then they die. That is the way of it.”

“He shouldn’t have died!” Charys shouted, finally looking up at her. She blurred before him as tears stung his eyes. Where was all of this emotion coming from, all of this anger and despair? How could one mortal man bring all this out in him? “He shouldn’t ever have been dragged into this!”

“That is no one’s fault but your own.”

Charys hung his head, shame heating his face. “I know, my Queen,” he said. “And for that, I ask you only this: take my life, and return him his.”

Behind him, he heard Bricne draw in a breath. Heard him start to laugh. Fought the urge to fight him again, to kill him this time. Instead, he stayed bowed over Minoru, trying not to listen. Trying not to care.

“Your precious puckish puppet has fallen in love with a mortal, my Queen!” Bricne called out in a hoarse, strained voice. It may have been moments for Charys, but clearly Bricne’s torture had already gone on for a while. “He’ll never want you now,” he continued. “You know what they say, once Faes feast on mortal flesh—”

His voice was cut off in a grunt. Obey or Roahn had hit him again, silenced him.

“Please,” Charys whispered. His body shaking with rage and fear and unshed tears.

A moment of silence passed, and Charys hated this more than any other silence he had ever been forced to endure. Then, he felt Tani’s hand fall lightly on his shoulder, and he knew his wish would be granted.

Finally, he let out the sobs he had been fighting. He fell over Minoru's body, holding tight to the last feeling he would ever have of this man he had not realized he wanted to know until it was too late. Clinging to what was lost to him forever.

Tani's hand tightened on his shoulder, and his world grew dark.

Chapter Five

Which Dreamed It?

In the end, I got my Happily Ever After. But it wasn't anything Disney would have written.

I woke up with a massive headache and cramped muscles, curled up on my tiny love seat, underneath a throw I'd forgotten I even owned. I think it was something my dad knitted for me when he went through his 'do it yourself' phase. I pushed it down to the end of the couch and sat up, stretching my muscles out carefully, racking my brain to try and remember how the hell I wound up sleeping on the couch.

I was fairly certain I hadn't been drinking. And as there were no bottles strewn about the living area of my apartment, I figured I could conclude that I was right on that front. But other than that and falling asleep watching the television—which was off, so that was out—I couldn't think of any reason why I would be on the couch.

The knock on the door was a welcome distraction from my confusion, and I got up and hurried over, ignoring my protesting leg muscles as they struggled to finish waking up from the strange position they had been forced into during the night. I pulled the door open and stared out at the man before me—tall and broad shouldered, with chiseled features and unkempt brown hair.

"Hi," he said, running a hand through his hair and mussing it up even more. "I, uh, just moved in across the way?" He said it uncertainly, like it was a question and it was up to me to confirm his living situation.

I blinked. "Charys?" I asked.

It was his turn to stare. He looked completely off guard, unsure what came next. Clearly I had gone off script. "You remember?" he asked.

"Was I supposed to forget?"

He shrugged. "Usually mortals have their memories erased after close dealings with Fae," he explained. "Unless they're Changelings, but that's different."

"Oh, of course," I said, nodding sagely, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a moment.

“For what?” I asked.

He looked relieved. “For dragging you into all that.” He gestured behind him as though the entrance to Tir Na Nóg was in the hall. For all I knew, it was. I shuddered at the thought, and a look of concern flashed across Charys’s features. He stepped forward, sliding easily into my personal space, looking down at me, studying me. I looked away. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I assured him. “Yeah. I guess someone just walked over my grave.”

The silence fell heavily between us, and I looked up and met his gaze. His eyes were wide open, his lips pressed into a thin line. “Don’t say that,” he said, grabbing my shoulders and holding my gaze. “Don’t ever say that.”

“I... okay then,” I said, pulling back a little. “Are *you* okay?”

He smiled, but it was a sad smile. “Yes,” he said. “I am. Now.”

I didn’t ask what he meant by that. I was fairly certain I didn’t want to know.

“Did you want to come in?” I asked, stepping aside, gesturing for Charys to enter. He studied me for another moment before nodding and walking past me into the apartment. I had a flash of *déjà vu* as he stood in my living room, hands in the pockets of loose hanging jeans.

I closed the door and stepped forward.

“Charys?” I asked. He looked away and, against my better judgment, I pursued. “Charys, what happened?”

After a moment, he looked up again, meeting my gaze with a defiant gleam in his own. “You died,” he said. “Bricne killed you.”

I stared at him. “The afterlife is pretty boring, then.”

Much to my astonishment, he laughed, loud and low and infectious. I smiled, wondering what was so funny about my death. He shook his head, catching his breath and regaining his composure. “No,” he said. “You died, but you’re not dead.”

“You realize that makes no sense, right?”

“It does when you’re dealing with Fae,” Charys said. He blew out a breath and shook his head. “I didn’t expect you to remember me,” he said. “I thought we could start over and put all this behind us.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

I stepped forward, reaching out to him. He hesitated a moment, then took my hand. "It's all right," I said. "I'm glad I remember."

"All of it?" he asked.

I thought of Bricne. I thought of fire and pain. I thought of the hope I had quietly harbored—that one day I would see Tir Na Nóg in all its glory, with Charys by my side. And, with a smile breaking out on my face, I nodded. "Yes. All of it."

I sat on the couch and pulled him down next to me. "Tell me," I said.

"I asked Tani to take my life instead," he explained, staring at my coffee table like maybe the massive coffee table book might tell him how best to break this news to me.

"You don't look dead," I said. I squeezed his hand. "You don't *feel* dead."

He laughed. A short, sad sound. Heavy after the mirth of earlier. "They took my immortality," he said. He blinked and turned to look at me. "They made me mortal. I can never go home."

I didn't know what to say to that. He had given up everything so I might live. I could only imagine how Obey and Roahn would have reacted to such folly—because I knew they would consider it folly. Tir Na Nóg was closed to him now, and he was going to have to figure out how to live as a mortal in a world vastly different from his own.

"Charys," I said, my voice quiet. "You'll find a new home. You'll *make* a new home."

He shook his head. "Where?" he asked. "This world is fine for visiting, but I never wanted to live here."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "There's nothing here that makes you want to stay." I held his gaze, keeping my expression steady, curious. After a moment, I leaned in closer, holding tight to his hand in mine. "Are you certain?" I asked again, my lips inches from his.

He only hesitated one more moment before closing the distance, pressing his lips to mine in a slow, tentative kiss.

The End

Author Bio

Wart Hill is a queer Trans man who hails from the wilds of western New York. In 2011, Wart graduated from his university Cum Laude with a bachelors in English and a minor in Classics, both of which have helped him grow in his craft. Writing has been Wart's passion for much of his life and he is thankful to have had the opportunity to participate in this event.

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PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE

By Nico Jaye

Photo Description

An artistic black-and-white photo. Although they face away from the camera, two handsome young men look over their shoulders at the viewer, their expressions reflecting surprise. They're naked, their bodies muscular and toned. The man on the left is slightly taller, his wavy dark hair complemented by the other man's short blond hair. The spacious training studio's hardwood floor shines underneath their bare feet, and sporting goods, including numerous stationary strike bags, line the perimeter.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Umm, our entire kickboxing team just walked in on us. I think we're OUT now.

Sincerely,

♡♥Ang *Miss Directed*♥♡

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: sports, athlete, college, geeks/nerds, public activity, kickboxing, humorous, costumes, Vegas, lots of fluff

Word Count: 16,182

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Author's Note

A big thank you to the M/M Romance Group for hosting this awesome event. Thanks also to Ang for providing the inspiring letter and to Natasha for sharing her incredible talents in creating such a fun cover. This story is dedicated to all of the smuff lovers out there who like their fluff with a side of smut. ;) Thanks for reading!

PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE

By Nico Jaye

Chapter 1

Prep Work

“C’mon, Wallace, move your ass! You expect that crescent to cut it at the Summit?”

Oliver stood near the locker room entrance and wound tape around his knuckles with a quick, efficient motion. He watched Team SFE’s coach for non-pros, Mr. Payne, hold up kick mitts for their women’s welterweight fighter, Patsy Wallace, to take aim.

Holy crap, Payne is in a mood tonight.

Shaking his head and pulling on his gloves, Oliver turned towards one of the strike bags at the perimeter of the large and airy training space. With twilight edging in through the high windows, he stretched a little and shook out his shoulders before starting on some bag work. His lightweight gloves thudded against the strike bag, the noise both familiar and oddly comforting after the silence of being in the labs all day. His skin began to heat, sweat dampening his old Bay to Breakers tee, and he lost himself in the rhythmic contact made by his repeated jab-jab-cross combinations.

“Payne’s bringing the pain tonight, huh?”

Oliver jumped a little.

Surprised to hear his earlier thoughts echoed in words, Oliver glanced over to see that Derek Vance had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. Derek squared up with the bag next to him and began aiming punches at the target, his back to Oliver. Oliver cocked his head and returned his attention to his own bag. He wasn’t sure if Derek’s question required a response.

Mmmmm. Derek Vance.

Oliver snuck another glance at him. The team captain was a man of few words from what Oliver could tell. Since Oliver’s elevation three months ago to black belt, a.k.a. competition-bound status at their San Francisco Elite training center, he’d seen Derek regularly at SFE’s Advanced Sparring hours. Outside of Derek’s team-captain-worthy encouragement on the mats, however, Oliver could probably count the number of actual conversations they’d had on one hand.

Or one finger, even.

However, that didn't prevent Oliver from appreciating Derek's achievements in the ring, where he'd been the runner-up in his weight class at last year's Amateur Kickboxing Pacific Summit, or from welcoming Derek's words of encouragement and patience when fulfilling his team captain duties.

It didn't keep Oliver from trying to sneak a peek at what he thought was a tongue ring that had glinted at him the few times Derek had been close enough for him to spot it.

And it definitely didn't stop him from admiring the tight, compact frame that belied the fluidity of motion Derek brought to the sport. Or the muscular ass attached to it.

Oliver coughed and shook his head to clear his thoughts. *Derek Vance is not into you—or guys, as far as you know*, he told himself sternly and turned back to complete his warm up. In fact, given the number of hours he spent at SFE, Derek Vance didn't seem to be into anyone, but then again, there was no way for Oliver to know it based on the mostly nonverbal interactions they'd had over the last three months.

Nonverbal interactions which consisted of warming up near each other occasionally and, one Saturday afternoon, lending Derek his phone charger.

Oliver had just finished with a series of uppercuts and was moving to the sidelines to jump rope when another comment issued from next to him.

"Heard you'd be at the Summit this year," Derek said quietly, not looking up from his crouch.

Oliver halted his movement and looked around. There was nobody within a five-foot radius, so...

That comment apparently was meant for him.

"Ah, yeah—" Oliver cleared his throat and swallowed past a sudden dryness. "I'm gonna be competing this year. Super middleweight," he added when Derek didn't say anything else.

"I know." Before Oliver had a chance to register that Derek somehow knew his weight class, Derek aimed a particularly hard strike at the bag. "Good luck," he said between punches.

"Yeah, you too," Oliver replied automatically. He furrowed his brow before continuing. "I mean, I guess we'll see each other there, though, right? And

we're flying out together with the team on Friday," he said, offering a hesitant smile.

Derek glanced over, and Oliver was caught off guard by the intensity in Derek's grey-green-golden eyes. He'd never seen them this close before, and honestly, he'd never seen anything like them, period.

"Together... right. Yeah, I guess we will," Derek said, his gaze flicking down to Oliver's smile. Derek swiped his forearm over his brow, his muscles flexing with the movement as he wiped away some of the sweat that caused his short blond hair to shine. "Guess we will," he repeated, his lip quirking up for a millisecond before he turned back to the strike bag and continued to deliver punches with deft precision.

Puzzled, Oliver tilted his head and watched him for another moment, his gaze picking up the breadth of Derek's shoulders and the light tan that disappeared behind the black cotton of his tank.

Derek Vance. Voluntarily talking to him.

Right.

As he pulled his gloves off and grabbed a jump rope, Oliver figured that, by the end of the Summit, he might need all five fingers to count the number of conversations they'd had, after all.

The next day found Oliver at his usual Thursday night off-campus haunt: Game Night at The Underground. While playing Words with Friends on his phone could help him scratch the itch, there really wasn't anything that could take the place of the clacking of real-life Scrabble tiles or the rub of pencil on paper as the points were tallied.

"Thirty-six," Oliver announced before grabbing four tiles from the bag. He grinned as he added them to his rack, looking at his J-E-W-E-L proudly. While he might be studying biochemistry, he did his best to hold his own against his more artsy, Southside-major friends.

"Nice one, Ollie." Amanda's curly brown hair bobbed in its haphazard topknot when she reached over to grab the scratchpad. She wrote in the number and tapped the pencil against her chin. "So, Vegas, huh?" she asked casually.

Oliver looked at the other two players. Jin was rearranging the tiles on his rack, and Kevin was looking at him expectantly. "Oh, me?" Oliver said, glancing back at Amanda and pointing at himself.

She rolled her eyes and sent him a fond look. “Yes, genius. The rest of us aren’t going to Sin City tomorrow.”

“But we could be,” Kevin interjected, his eyes sparkling. “Just think,” he said, gesturing grandly, “crazy-awesome seniors—that would be us—on a crazy-awesome road trip. We could get a crazy-awesome convertible and trail a scarf behind us like in *To Wong Foo...*, *Bridget Jones*, or really, take your pick of any of those diva movies. It would be so awesome.”

“Uh, not to burst your bubble of awesome, Kev, but it’s nine hours from Berkeley to Vegas,” Amanda said dryly. She took a sip of her Sam Adams and cocked her head, sending him a pointed look.

“Not to mention it would cost a bajillion dollars to rent a convertible.” Jin didn’t even look up from where he was placing his S-O-L-I-D tiles onto the board.

“Yeah... and you also have that presentation in Psych 140 on Monday,” Oliver said gently. He glanced at his tiles and shifted them around, trying to spell something that wasn’t... what came to mind immediately. Looking up at the others, he continued, “Not that I wouldn’t love to have you guys there, though. That’s really sweet of you, Kev.”

Kevin pouted a little and flopped back onto his armchair. “It’s okay, guys, I’ll somehow survive the disappointment. It’s not like this is our *last year together* or anything,” he said pointedly.

“It’s not a bad idea, Kev. We just need to be a little more practical with the planning, m’kay?” Amanda waited for his acknowledgement with a raised brow.

“Fine,” Kevin sighed, reaching forward to play T-H-I-E-F. “But we’re gonna have Ollie scout things out while he’s there!” he exclaimed, regaining his enthusiasm for the venture.

“Uhhh... me? Scout?” Oliver didn’t know what to do, so, out of habit, he took his glasses off and cleaned them on the hem of his T-shirt. He wore them on schooldays when he wasn’t training, and when he put the frames back on, three faces were turned his way, each showing varying degrees of excitement and speculation.

“Yesssss... recon,” Jin said, his gaze showing interest for the first time. “And I’ll look up the different conventions and stuff that go on down there.

They have *huge* conventions in Vegas.” He went back to fiddling with his tiles and mumbling under his breath about Comic Con and *Supernatural*.

Kevin’s face lit up with excitement. “Oooh, this is gonna be awesome!”

“Just not the porn star convention, okay, Jin? I don’t think I could handle that much silicone in one place,” Amanda said with a shudder. She scanned her tiles quickly before spelling out S-P-A-R-K.

“Oh, ew.” Kevin’s choirboy features twisted in a grimace. “Yeah... no, not that one.”

“But the Bellagio is supposed to have these great circulating art collections,” Amanda said, picking up on the recon theme.

“And you’ve got to check out the gay clubs, Ollie. Pleeeease.” Kevin batted his big brown eyes at Oliver.

“And the straight ones, too,” Jin piped up.

“And anything in between!” Amanda’s leering wink was practically cartoon-worthy.

Oliver watched them volley instructions back and forth, his head swimming. He finally broke into their excitement. “You guys know I’ll be there for the Summit, right? The International Kickboxing Association’s competition?” He looked around, his brows raised expectantly. “That’s the reason I’m going, kiddos.”

“Yeah, but... you can’t kick butt *all* the time, can you, Ollie?” Kevin attempted another round of puppy-dog eyes.

“And if you’re not gonna let loose here, then you should at least let loose in Vegas,” Jin pointed out.

“But I don’t need to let loose.”

“But you *should*,” Kevin encouraged.

“Ollie. Love.” Amanda pinned him with her blue-eyed gaze. “I say this with the deepest abiding affection for you and your many nerderiffic ways. You have *got* to get out more.”

Oliver frowned. “But I’m out right now. With you guys.”

“We don’t count!” She cleared her throat and collected herself. “Well, we do. But you’re not gonna take us out to dinner at Rumson’s or go home to have

us meet your mom or even just bring us back to your apartment to spend the night with you—and that one drunken near-miss with Kevin is something of which we never speak, okay?”

They all nodded gravely.

“Good,” she said with a pleased smile. “So what I’m saying is that you need to learn to live a little. Between school and your kickboxing, it’s like you have zero time for anything else when I *know* that’s not true. It’s been five months since you and Abe broke up,” she said, naming the business student with whom Oliver had shared an ill-fated relationship during the spring semester of junior year. “I think it’s time for you to get back in the saddle,” she finished with an uncharacteristically gentle smile.

“Yeah, Ols, saddle up!” Kevin grinned mischievously. “You know what they say—*save a horse, ride a cowboy.*”

Jin groaned and threw a lemon wedge at Kevin, who deftly dodged it. “Really, Kevin? Really?”

Kevin’s look was pure devilry wrapped in cherubic dimples.

Amanda rolled her eyes at them both and turned to Oliver. “Just think about it, okay, Ollie? Y’know... finding someone to bat those pretty green eyes at might not be all that bad. And if the opportunity presents itself while you’re there...” She shrugged lightly. “Live a little.”

Oliver looked at the three of them. They’d been through a lot ever since finding each other as floormates at their dorm in freshman year. He knew Amanda could be stubborn and wickedly smart, but she also usually understood what was best for them even before they themselves could be aware of it.

In the end, he nodded.

Amanda smiled. “Good. Now it’s your turn.”

He stared at his tiles resolutely, willing them to spell anything other than the one word that came instantly to mind. Oliver fiddled with the B tile until he finally heaved a sigh.

“Okay, but... no comments.” He eyed each of them.

They nodded, and Kevin even crossed his heart with a solemn expression on his face.

Oliver placed his tiles on the board, and the other three burst out laughing.

“I said no comments,” Oliver reminded them, but he was grinning, too.

“I know, but... if this isn't a sign that you should live a little, I don't know what is.” Amanda's tone was Sahara-dry as they all looked at the word Oliver had just played.

You really couldn't blame him, though.

After all, B-L-O-W-J-O-B-S *was* worth ninety-two points.

Chapter 2

Fight Night

At SFO on Friday afternoon, accompanied by his team and coaches, Oliver boarded an airplane for the third time in his life, and, two hours later, found himself surrounded by noise, lights, shouting, more lights, and the faint smell of cigarette smoke. His eyes went wide when he saw the rows of slot machines that stood just outside their arrival gate.

Yup, definitely not in Kansas anymore, Toto.

As he made his way to the baggage claim area, he spotted a banner that greeted all visitors to McCarran Airport: *Remember—What Happens Here Stays Here.*

He shook his head at the antics suggested by such a slogan. A small grin snuck onto his face, though, and Oliver couldn't resist. He slid his phone out of his pocket to snap a picture and sent it to his friends.

To: Amanda J., Kevin W., Jin C.

From: Oliver Reyes

Attachments (1)

*"what happens here stays here" ...unless you're doing recon?
=)*

With a last look, Oliver tucked his phone away and hurried to catch up with the team. After grabbing his equipment bag from the carousel and hefting it onto his shoulder, he made his way outside into the autumn-warm air to join the SFE group. Oliver wasn't chatty by nature, but he made an effort when team veterans Izzy Leong and Patrick McGuinness approached him, the competition newbie, with welcoming smiles.

As they were ushered onto the hotel shuttle, he noticed that Derek hadn't taken his headphones off since boarding the plane.

Vegas was big.

Really freaking big.

Oliver thought that he'd become accustomed to city life after studying at Cal for the last few years. After all, Berkeley itself was a pretty sizeable town, and San Francisco was gigantic compared to his speck-on-the-map hometown up in northern California.

When he was five and his family had moved from Portland, Oregon, to Crescent City on the far northern stretch of the California coastline, Oliver had known in the vague ways of childhood that things were somewhat different. He'd always stuck out a little in Crescent City with his slightly ethnic last name and his fascination with things that went pop and fizz. Life was pretty white bread up there—much more so than in Portland—and people weren't always that receptive of the "other", despite California's stereotypically hippy-dippy tendencies.

Adolescent boys certainly hadn't understood Oliver's otherness.

Luckily, karate provided a way to defend his preference for playing with his chemistry set over all other things. He'd much rather see potions bubble up and explode, with boy's best friend, Rafi, lying by his side, than spend the day riding bikes and camping out with his classmates. Karate wasn't so much about fighting other kids, though; it was more about giving him the confidence and knowledge that he could.

He sprouted at least three inches in the summer after eighth grade and another four over the course of freshman year, and the teasing stopped in high school. Even so, Oliver continued with karate because he enjoyed it, and, in junior year, he shifted his focus to its full-contact cousin, kickboxing. After joining a couple of clubs in high school, he found a solid group of friends in a handful of fellow science lovers who shared his passion, and, with a growing sense of confidence, he was lucky enough to enjoy a quiet, fanfare-less coming out to them and his family in his senior year.

Heading to a new city for college had been hard because he'd had to leave behind his family, his friends, and Rafi, but Cal was a top school for everything, including the sciences with which he'd always been so obsessed. The university had even sealed the deal with a small scholarship, making him an offer he couldn't refuse. College, especially a liberal one like UC Berkeley, had been an amazing opportunity to spread his wings.

However, college—even a crazy place like UC Berkeley—hadn't prepared him for the Strip.

The buildings were huge, their façades shiny and glistening with the reflection of the millions of lights that surrounded them. Their hotel was on the north end, and the slow cruise up the Strip was unbelievable. People flocked the streets in the crisp autumn air, and everywhere he looked there was something new to see.

It was one thing to experience Las Vegas through a movie screen or television set; it was quite another to experience it in the flesh. Every tall building, every person, every attraction—they came together to present this incredible amalgamation of no-holds-barred, zero-accountability fun.

It was rather disappointing, then, to realize that everyone at SFE was all very much accountable for their time there.

Seeing the program for the IKA's Amateur Kickboxing Pacific Summit brought things into perspective, though. The two day event hosted at Treasure Island would begin early on Saturday morning, and Oliver felt a thrill to see the signs in the hotel that advertised the competition. After assigning rooms and having everyone drop their bags off upstairs, Coach Payne and Mr. Carney, the team's manager, hustled them through a quick dinner and distributed copies of the program.

"I'm gonna give Angie a call first and then head up." Terrence Lake, a super heavyweight fighter and his temporary roommate for the weekend, held up his phone with a quick smile. Terrence then turned away and began dialing his fiancée before Oliver could respond. Holding back a grin at seeing such besotted behavior from a man who looked like he could bench press a Volkswagen, Oliver shrugged easily and tapped the "up" button on the wall panel.

The elevator dinged, and he stepped inside. He'd just pushed the button for the twelfth floor when he heard a quick "Wait up!"

Holding the doors open by reflex, Oliver watched, brows raised, as Derek Vance jogged into the lacquered wood-lined space. His headphones were on again, and Derek gave him a sidelong glance as he pushed the tenth-floor button.

"Thanks," Derek said, his lips tipped up in a brief smile.

Oliver returned a shy smile of his own. "You're welcome."

As the elevator began to move, Derek returned his gaze to his iPhone, and Oliver—god help him—couldn't keep his own eyes off of Derek.

Derek's cropped blond hair looked soft, and his broad shoulders were evident even under his slouchy blue hoodie. He watched as Derek's lips moved with whatever he was listening to on his phone. In the hush of the elevator, Oliver expected to hear at least a hint of music or a bass line, but instead, he heard nothing.

Curious, he leaned a little closer, only to jump back when Derek's eyes flicked up to watch him with raised brows.

His face burning, Oliver ran a flustered hand through his tousled brown hair and gestured vaguely in Derek's direction. "I—ah... I was just—" Oliver coughed and cleared his throat when his voice pitched into another octave. "Listening to anything good?"

Derek had peeled off his headphones, which were now curled around his neck. Oliver didn't know why, but a faint blush showed under Derek's tanned skin when he said, "It's—it's nothing." He fiddled with the iPhone and shut it off, but not before Oliver could hear a faint *estoy bien, gracias* filter through the headset.

Brow furrowing, Oliver opened his mouth to ask about that, but Derek was already stepping out of the elevator.

"See you tomorrow," Derek called over his shoulder.

"Yeah... see you."

Oliver looked at his reflection in the mirrored elevator doors when they slid shut.

Spanish? Why is he learning Spanish?

From what Oliver had gathered in his last couple of years at SFE, Derek Vance wasn't in school; instead, he worked odd jobs in construction around his training and competition schedule. In kickboxing, he was good—really good—and actually had sponsors as an amateur fighter. In fact, there were whispers around the training center that Derek would go pro any day now, which would make him one of SFE's youngest professional fighters at the age of twenty-three. Rumor had it this Summit could be the tipping point for that decision.

Which still did nothing to explain why he'd be listening to a Spanish lesson.

Unabashedly curious, Oliver exited the elevator on the twelfth floor and slowly made his way down the hall, its swirl-printed carpet subtly lit by the golden sconces lining the walls.

His mind wouldn't let go of Derek. Derek and his smooth, tanned skin. Derek and his thickly muscled arms. Derek and his blue hoodie. Derek and his Spanish lessons.

C'mon, Oliver, is your first freaking competition tomorrow or what?! Get a grip!

Shaking his head at his wandering thoughts, Oliver let himself into the room and was busy unpacking his shaving kit when Terrence entered. Oliver resolved to put Derek from his mind for the rest of the night.

He was successful.

Mostly.

Really, he managed to sleep at least seven hours that night, and with so much rest for the competition, he should be unstoppable.

He was definitely not unstoppable at the competition... unless his face stopping his opponent's right cross counted towards that definition.

Oliver's competitive debut had been exciting, but short-lived. While he had made it through the first round in his super middleweight division, Murray Spode had been his second round opponent. Spode was well-known in amateur circles and had soundly trounced him, leaving Oliver a blossoming shiner across his left cheekbone as a memento for his time in Las Vegas.

Oliver touched his cheek gingerly and winced. The artificially cool air in the convention center-slash-ballroom helped ease the sting, but the underlying throbbing hadn't ceased since his match yesterday. Thankfully, the Summit's full schedule had kept him busy and distracted with the many events that he attended throughout the weekend. As they'd progressed through the competition's matches, though, the number of SFE fighters still in contention had slowly dwindled down to one: Derek Vance in the light heavyweight championship match.

The air was buzzing around the spacious room, and everyone's focus was centered on the mats in the middle. Cordoned off by waist-high barriers, there was an elevated ring with blue and red pads that matched the colors of those found at SFE, and the two fighters, together with their trainers and support teams, waited at the sidelines.

The elegant cream-and-white ballroom with its large chandelier in the center set an unlikely stage for the physical athleticism on display that weekend, and the air buzzed as the room slowly filled to capacity. As Oliver made his way through the milling crowd, he spotted the black and orange SFE training jackets near Derek in the far corner.

A plastic barricade separated the spectators from the official ring, and at one corner, three judges sat at a long table. Nearby, SFE's coordinated uniforms and training jackets presented a united face at the front of Derek's corner. They were one of the largest teams there, competing in nine different events, and the fact that Oliver was a part of this exclusive group caused a spark of pride to flare inside him. His days in the lab doing his experiments were always so solitary that this type of team achievement brought fulfillment on a whole different level.

"Hey, rookie!" Izzy's voice rang out over the excited hum in the room. Her dark head, which was streaked with pink, popped up above the crowd, and she motioned him over.

"Hi guys." Oliver gave them all a small wave, then raked his hand through his hair out of habit. He did kinda feel like the fresh green newbie this weekend, despite his matching black and orange track jacket.

"Oh... that's quite a souvenir you have there." Izzy's button nose scrunched up when she spotted the bruise on his cheekbone.

Oliver chuckled. "You should see the other guy."

"I think I did when they handed him the title belt," Evan, one of their middleweight fighters, snickered.

Izzy elbowed Evan, who winced. "Don't be a jerkface, E."

"I don't see you collecting any belts, either, big man." Terrence's voice was deep and amused.

"Yeah, well, none of us have. Except Derek, maybe," Evan grumbled while rubbing his side.

Oliver looked up towards Derek and saw his intent expression. At the Summit they competed in their uniform's kickboxing trousers with the suit top optional to show level of experience, and the shirts indicated whether the kickboxer fought under full-contact or semi-contact rules. Derek was an experienced fighter and stood topless in his protective helmet and gloves, an

orange stripe running down the side of his black silk-satin pants. They always trained in T-shirts or tanks, so this was Oliver's first time seeing Derek in fighting attire. He drank in the sight of Derek's sculpted torso, the skin over his pecs stretched smooth and tight.

Coach Payne was speaking to Derek in an uncharacteristically controlled voice, his movements focused and intense as he ran through a few last minute tips. Derek nodded, and when Coach Payne released his shoulders to exit the ring, Derek glanced over at the SFE group, his gaze catching Oliver's.

Oliver's mouth fell open, and his mind blanked. Derek's brows lifted before he nodded briefly, and Oliver finally figured out how to move long enough to wave back in greeting.

He blushed when Derek smiled back at him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the International Kickboxing Association's championship match in the light heavyweight division!" The master of ceremonies' voice boomed over the PA, and Oliver shifted to look towards the center of the ring. "This afternoon's match for the light heavyweight title features two fierce competitors who have proven their mettle here at the IKA's Amateur Kickboxing Pacific Summit. From Team Seattle Sakurasaru, at six feet tall and weighing 174 pounds, please welcome West Donahue!"

The ballroom rang out with applause with an especially vocal group in green and white training jackets shouting loudly in the far corner. A tall, dark-haired man in green and white kickboxing pants stepped forward to stand at the side of the announcer.

"And from Team San Francisco Elite, at five feet ten inches tall and weighing 172 pounds, please welcome Derek Vance!"

With a grin on his face, Oliver clapped loudly alongside the rest of SFE's team. Izzy's cheers echoed in his ears, and Patrick let loose a piercing whistle. Derek joined his opponent and the emcee at the center of the mats, where a referee in black also now stood.

As the referee went through the rules with the two fighters, Oliver sized up Derek and his opponent. West Donahue might have the height advantage, but Oliver knew that Derek packed a sizable punch, his lower center of gravity making it harder for someone to knock him off his feet. Derek's muscles were impressive without being bulky, and his light heavyweight class—heavier than

Oliver's despite his own six feet in height—was just testament to Derek's discipline and dedication towards honing his physical strength.

Derek and West tapped gloves in the middle of the ring and stepped back. The bell rang loudly, and Oliver held his breath.

The two fighters approached the center, shuffling their feet and shifting their weight. Derek threw the first punch, a solid jab-cross combination that landed on West's torso, and Oliver finally remembered to breathe. West quickly countered with a side kick, which Derek parried. They circled each other, exchanging blows, bobbing and weaving with grace and skill.

They moved so quickly that Oliver could hardly keep track of the punches and kicks landed versus blocked. The first round went by in a blur, and by the end of the second round, it was clear the two men were evenly matched. The combination of Derek's strength and agility was countered by West's height and reach.

In the minute-long break before the final round, Izzy nudged him and leaned over. "He's looking pretty good up there, isn't he?"

Oliver glanced up at Derek, whose golden skin glistened with sweat. Unlike his opponent, though, Derek's chest wasn't heaving, his breathing still fairly even despite the exertion. Watching the rise and fall, Oliver was distracted for a moment before he cleared his throat and looked back at Izzy. "Yeah, he's looking pretty good. I mean—I think he might be winning."

Izzy raised her brows, but didn't say anything. "Yep, that's what I was thinking." Her lips quirked up, and she turned to her other side to say something to Patrick.

Before Oliver had a chance to question that half-smile on her face, the bell rang, signaling the beginning of the third round. As Derek and West approached each other for the last time, the audience collectively leaned forward, each person eager to get a closer view of this final bout.

The punches and kicks flew, arms raised for blocks and legs stabbing out to seek contact. Even though Derek took an uppercut to the chin early in the three-minute round, he didn't go down and recovered quickly enough to land an impressive semi-circular kick in the next exchange. His final blow, a cross-counter to the jaw in response to West's quick jab, hit its mark just as the bell rang for the last time.

The match was finished, and because there hadn't been a clear winner, it would be up to the judges to determine the winner. Derek and West stood in the center with the referee between them while the crowd murmured as they all awaited the judges' decision.

"It's gotta be Derek," Izzy muttered under her breath. "They'd be crazy if they didn't vote that way."

Oliver silently agreed, his gaze alternating between the judges' table and Derek, whose expression was carefully blank and stoic under the intense scrutiny. He'd removed his mouth guard, and his lips were parted as he took in breaths, the lights of the chandelier shining off of his short blond hair.

Finally, a series of clicks and soft thuds indicated the PA system was once again live.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer stated. "The winner of the International Kickboxing Association's Amateur Kickboxing Pacific Summit's light heavyweight division, by a unanimous decision, is your new champion, Derek Vance!"

At the announcement, the referee lifted Derek's arm in the air, and the room burst into applause. Oliver clapped and yelled, catching Izzy when she flailed sideways into him. They laughed together with the team, all of them cheering loudly.

Oliver looked up at Derek, and his heart stuttered in his chest.

Derek, Mr. Carefully-Blank-and-Stoic, was grinning, two perfect dimples bracketing his wide smile.

Chapter 3

In Which Tequila is Diablo

The SFE celebration of Derek's win was jubilant, and, after many congratulatory toasts had been made over an elaborate buffet dinner, their group migrated to a hotel room party at the MGM Grand. A couple of fighters from Los Angeles's Iron Fist Kickboxing were hosting, and the suite was lavish and loaded. Despite having the most reason of all of them to join the festivities, though, Derek had bowed out after dinner, making excuses of an appointment to see a longtime friend.

From his vantage point on the suite's deck, Oliver looked out at the twinkling lights of the Strip while nursing his second Tanqueray and tonic.

"You doing okay there, Oliver?"

Terrence's voice broke into his thoughts, and Oliver glanced up to see that he was the subject of a concerned gaze.

"Yeah, I'm fine, but I might head out soon." Oliver gestured vaguely with his drink, his movement encompassing the spacious suite, the deck with its heated private pool, and the partygoers scattered throughout. "This whole Kardashians setup isn't really my thing," he said with a wry twist of his lips.

Terrence laughed easily. "Kardashians, man? Really?"

Oliver blushed and mumbled, "Hey, it was a clue on Jeopardy..." He looked up to see Terrence grinning, and Oliver chuckled a little at himself. "Okay, okay, and my friend Amanda might have made me watch an episode or two. She says that with her allergies she doesn't get to eat junk, so she should be able to watch it."

Terrence snorted a laugh. "Well, you do what you wanna do, man. I'm just gonna give Angie a call and then hang out a little more," he said as he took his cell phone out of his pocket. "Hey, if you leave now, you might even be able to catch that Kardashians show on TV tonight," he said with a grin.

"Oh, shut it, Terrence," Oliver said, but it lacked heat and was accompanied by a reluctant smile.

Terrence laughed. "Shutting it! Except I gotta talk to Angie." Terrence lifted his phone to his ear and grinned his shit-eating grin.

“I’ll catch you back at the room, then.” Oliver gave him a quick wave before he finished off his drink and wandered back into the suite. After setting his glass down in the small bar area, he managed to slip out of the room unnoticed.

Oliver made his way through the blinking and jingling chaos of the casino floor and stepped out into the cool autumn air. He’d been indoors all day and now welcomed the opportunity to walk back towards the north end of the Strip. Even at a quarter to midnight on a Sunday, the streets teemed with people, and he was struck again by the dichotomy between seeing Vegas from afar and actually experiencing it.

A group of girls in silk leis and high heels teetered past him, one of them wearing a blinking tiara and a sash. Someone blew a whistle and called out, “Hottie alert!”

Oliver looked around, and a short Asian woman yelled, “That’s you, babes!” He met her gaze, and she winked cheekily before her friends dragged her off. She blew him a smacking kiss, and their group giggled down the street in the direction of the elevated crosswalks.

He shook his head and grinned. For all he knew, she could be a third grade teacher or an investment banker, but here, she was just another Vegas goer who was out having a good time. Oliver turned up the block to begin his walk back to Treasure Island only to stop in his tracks at the sight of a bold sign on the sidewalk.

His brows shot up.

THIS WEEKEND ONLY! Halloween Hedonism at SPIN – The Strip’s Only LGBT Club!

Doors open at 9PM!

His gaze followed the direction of the arrow to see a small two-story building tucked in between the MGM Grand and the casino next door. The cream stucco façade was pristine, revealing nothing of what could be found inside, while a silver and black sign lit up the word “SPIN” above the wide doorway. To the side, a few latecomers were lined up for entry.

Oliver found his feet moving of their own will. As he approached, he could hear a faint bass rhythm underlying a dance beat that came and went each time someone opened the doors. When he stood a few feet from the entrance, Oliver bit his lip, knowing it was decision time.

On the one hand, if the suite party wasn't really his thing, then SPIN might as well have been his attempt to colonize the moon with Barbie dolls. On the other hand, Kevin would die—or at the very least go spastic with glee—if Oliver were to do some of the requested “recon” there.

And you can't say the opportunity hasn't presented itself, said a voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Amanda's. *Just go live a little.*

He nodded to himself slowly.

Right. How often am I in Vegas, anyway? I can just check it out.

Decision made, Oliver approached the line with a more confident step and took his place behind... a heavily muscled man in a spandex police uniform. *What's that about?* Brow furrowed, Oliver reached out and, after a moment's hesitation, tapped him on the shoulder.

Oliver cleared his throat. “Excuse me?”

The dark-haired man turned around, and Oliver saw kind eyes behind a plain black half-mask. A friendly smile stood at odds with the menacing brow line that featured prominently on his face. “Yes?”

“Is there... is there some kind of dress code tonight?” Oliver returned an embarrassed smile, knowing that he sounded completely out of place, yet somehow, for some reason, not really caring at all.

Blame it on Vegas.

The “officer” chuckled. “Yeah, babe. Halloween, y'know?” He glanced at Oliver's jeans and black polo shirt. “Ah. Well, you *could* just wear that, but you'll probably be the only one. Costumes at SPIN are really popular, and guests dress to impress just on the regular Masquerade Nights. With Halloween, we're going all out!” He paused for a moment before leaning in. “Don't worry, though,” he whispered conspiratorially. “They usually have some stuff you can buy at the door.”

Oliver nodded, relieved. “Great. Thanks, man.”

“C'mon, Jerry, let's head inside.” A tall, red-haired man in a sexy jailbird costume—*who knew they made those?*—leaned over, his face hidden by a matching black domino. He gave Oliver a quick smile before tugging the handcuffs that were fastened around his and Jerry's wrists.

“Sorry, gotta go. See you on the dance floor!” Jerry flashed him a smile and followed his jailbird past the ropes.

Oliver moved forward to take their spot at the front of the line.

Jesus.

Sexy Jailbird. Spandex Cop.

Oliver swallowed thickly past a lump born of both excitement and trepidation.

What have I gotten myself into?

Oliver adjusted the horn on his head and had second, third, and fourth thoughts about his plan to live a little his last night in Vegas.

Damn you, Amanda.

He took a fortifying gulp of his gin and tonic, then looked up to survey the room.

Because *crap*.

He was a fucking unicorn.

Repeat: he was a *fucking unicorn*.

Apparently arriving late to Masquerade Night meant the only costumes left for purchase were the ones nobody really wanted to wear. His options had been limited, to say the least. He could've been, in no particular order, a tree (complete with a pair of spandex briefs that caused a "branch" to protrude in the area of his dick), a Hugh Hefner-esque playboy (*ugh, seriously?*), or a Raggedy Ann doll (*yes, Ann, not even Andy*).

And while the Borat mankini *had* been less expensive, at least with the unicorn costume he could keep his pants on.

Oliver coughed and shifted a little where he stood. Because, while he was grateful to have kept his pants on, he had actually been convinced to lose his shirt.

Oliver's lips quirked up at the memory of the two women who had played dress up with him as their semi-willing victim. He'd never admit it, but their enthusiasm had been a little fun, actually.

He'd stepped up to the counter just inside the doors and paid his ten-dollar cover charge. After taking the crisp bill from him with her purple-polished fingers, the cashier, whose name tag read "Monique", had looked him up and

down, taking in his nondescript jeans and polo shirt with a gaze made even more feline by her cat's eye contacts. Her dark skin was flawless, and a pair of furry cat ears peeked up from behind her heavy bangs.

"You gonna wear that inside, hon?" she'd asked, her expression doubtful, but her voice not unkind.

Oliver had bit his lip, shaking his head slowly as his gaze darted of its own accord to the sales booth that had caught his eye.

Monique perked up, her Cheshire cat grin completely appropriate for her attire.

"Ooooh, okay. Natasha! Hey, girl!" She leaned back to call out to the brunette woman in Minnie Mouse ears who was manning the booth next to hers. "A-plus prime comin' at ya, darlin'."

Natasha looked up from her phone screen and, upon seeing Oliver, immediately set it down on the counter. Her mouth formed an "O" of excitement, and she glanced at Monique before looking back at Oliver.

"Ooooh. This. This is gonna be *fun*," she'd said, a gleam in her eye.

When she'd shown him his admittedly very limited choices, he'd taken a deep breath, squinted his eyes, and pointed at the plastic package with the picture of a shirtless man bearing a golden horn on his forehead. Natasha and Monique had shared a conspiring grin and set to work.

They'd even convinced him that his costume would only be complete if they drew a little "cutie mark"—whatever that meant—on him.

"Uh... where?"

"Your butt."

"What?"

He'd jumped when Monique had grabbed his right ass cheek.

"Right there, hon."

"Um, no. Nope. Not happening."

He'd drawn the line at losing his pants, but after they'd pouted, he'd acquiesced to a little heart on his chest. The gleeful look in their eyes when they'd pulled two tubes of lipstick out of their makeup bags had been worth it.

So here he was, twenty minutes later: shirtless, glittery gold unicorn horn perched atop his head, pink-and-red heart on his pec, and a giant rainbow-

colored horse's tail attached to his rear via a belt loop on his jeans. The girls had even provided an iridescent white half-mask to go with the Masquerade Night theme.

Oliver sighed.

Sexy Jailbird and Spandex Cop were looking a hell of a lot more attractive as costumes right about now.

Of course, he'd made a beeline for the bar to acquire some liquid courage. It wasn't every day that he found himself shirtless among mixed—and, from some of the looks he was getting, interested—company.

Interested? In a six-foot-tall pony? Really?

Oliver shook his head and swallowed down the rest of his drink. With the glass in hand, he leaned back with his elbows on the bar counter to look out over his surroundings.

The air was surprisingly temperate, the slight coolness of the blowing AC mediating the heat generated by the bodies that were sweating and grinding on the dance floor to a hip-hop-infused electronic beat. The room was dark and large with a double-high ceiling and stairwells at each corner. At the top of the stairs was a balcony-like second story from which club goers could observe the dance floor. Dimly lit hallways led off the main floor towards destinations unknown.

Oliver took it all in and made a decision.

Well, he was here. And after paying an extra twenty bucks to ensure he fit into the costumed theme, he was damn well gonna do his best to enjoy himself.

Only... he might need a little more Dutch courage first.

Oliver turned to face the counter and was about to signal the bartender when he felt a hand at his (bare!) waist.

“Dance with me.”

The words were just audible over the hip house music, and, startled, he looked over and saw the owner of that low voice through the strobe lights and haze of the club.

A slightly shorter man whose face was hidden by a cowboy hat and a dark half-mask stood next to him, his hand still curved around Oliver's waist. Even

this close, the dim lighting meant Oliver couldn't make out much of his features beyond a pair of shapely lips, but holy hell was his body stacked. Thick muscles layered his shoulders, his biceps and arms toned and roped with obvious strength, and a brown leather vest covered his otherwise bare torso.

Oliver's mouth went slack with want.

He remembered the banner from the airport stating that what happened here stayed here.

That slogan? *It felt like a promise.*

Coughing, Oliver finally found his voice and, somewhere, some bravado.

"Um... drink first."

That sensual mouth quirked up at the corner. He licked his lips, and Oliver caught a flash of metal by the glow of the club's blinking lights. *Tongue ring. He has a tongue ring, Oliver's libido shouted.*

The masked stranger nodded and turned to get the bartender's attention, telling him, "Two shots of Cuervo."

Shit.

Tequila.

After a traumatizing experience during his sophomore year at Cal, Oliver had avoided the stuff because *tequila was Diablo.*

"Uh..."

His companion turned to him and tilted his head inquiringly.

Vegas, Ollie. Your last night here. If not now, then when?

Oliver swallowed down his protest. "Um, nothing." He gave a half-smile as the bartender plunked two overflowing shot glasses on the counter. "By the way, I'm Ol—"

"No names, Sparkles," the mystery man interrupted, his masked gaze flicking up to Oliver's glittery horn. "Otherwise, what's the point of the costume?"

"Right... Jesse James."

The cowboy smirked, but didn't correct him. He leaned in instead, whispering, "I hope what they say about horn size is true..."

Oliver's cheeks burned. He felt about twelve feet out of his depth, and the shivery feeling in his stomach was either excitement or terror. He hadn't decided which yet. As he took the salt shaker from the masked stranger, feeling strong fingertips brush against his own and linger there, Oliver was inclined to think the former.

The tequila went down like battery acid, but the fuzzy, warm effect of it, combined with his evening of successive gin and tonics, was almost immediate. He wasn't sloppy by any measure; it wasn't as though he couldn't see straight or anything. Rather, the alcohol flowed through his body, leaving him just a tad bit... uninhibited.

When impatient hands tugged him towards the dance floor a moment later, Oliver followed that set of broad shoulders and shapely ass without a backwards glance.

“Oh god... *fuck.*”

Oliver cursed as he arched his neck, his head tipping back against the wall. They'd found their way down one of the numerous hallways that led off the second floor balcony area.

JJ (as in “Jesse James”, as Oliver had come to think of his mysterious cowboy) murmured indistinctly against his pulse, the metal bar in his tongue scraping against Oliver's skin.

Okay, so perhaps Oliver was slightly more than just a “tad bit” uninhibited at that point.

But fuck it, he was in Vegas, and maybe their trip to the dance floor had just ended up being a five minute detour on their way to a dark corner upstairs. Sure, it was kinda slutty—*maybe just a little?*—but again, it was Vegas, and he was taking Sin City's slogan to heart. Besides, Oliver wasn't planning to see hot-stranger-in-the-cowboy-outfit ever again, and it wasn't like he was some blushing virgin saving his metaphorical maidenhead for a mythical unicorn.

He snorted at the thought when he remembered his costume.

Well, you know what I mean.

JJ glanced up at the sound, his glare evident even in the dim lighting and through the half-mask he wore.

Oliver looked down at him. JJ's features were masked under the costume and darkness, but the faint glow trickling around the corners of the never-ending hallway picked up a soft sheen off the smooth skin of his biceps. The cowboy hat had fallen back on its string, catching under his chin, and his hair—lightish brown or maybe blond?—was shadowy in the darkness. JJ ground against him, his vest-covered torso and denim-clad hips pressing close, and Oliver groaned.

No matter. Oliver's eyes slid shut as he reached for JJ. Whatever color it is, however he looks, it doesn't matter because he feels so goddamn incredible.

Their lips met, and the kiss swiftly moved from caressing touches to sharp nips and wet tongues. It was Oliver's first encounter with a tongue ring, and so far he'd give it a ten out of ten, would recommend, would *definitely* bang. Oliver reached up to cup a strong jawline, stubble prickling his palms, while JJ's hands slid up his sides. Oliver gasped when JJ's thumbs rubbed teasing circles around his nipples.

“Sensitive?” There was a smile in that husky voice, and JJ didn't wait for a response. He ducked his head to lick at Oliver's right nipple while his fingertip continued to brush against the other. Oliver groaned, his hands sliding behind to sift through JJ's soft waves of hair.

JJ moved away and blew on the stiff, wet peak. A shiver ran down Oliver's spine at the same time the press of his cock against the seam of his jeans grew unbearable. Oliver arched his back, trying to get closer somehow, and JJ chuckled darkly, breaths puffing softly against Oliver's chest. His hands moved to grip Oliver's hips, pressing them back against the wall in an unexpected display of strength.

Oliver bit back a moan. *Fuck, that's hot.*

Tacitly obeying, Oliver stopped, even letting his masked cowboy move his arms so that Oliver's palms lay flat against the wall. Finally, JJ resumed his movement downwards. He licked a stripe down Oliver's side, coming to center to tickle his belly button with his tongue. When he followed Oliver's dark happy trail south and paused at the edge of his jeans, Oliver could only choke out a soft “*please.*”

Oliver's breath grew ragged when JJ finally unbuttoned his fly. The touch of those strong fingers on his dick almost undid him, and he couldn't hold back a moan as JJ eased his now-hard cock up and out of Oliver's standard white briefs.

JJ's fingers curled around his length, and Oliver thrust into his fist, pleasure racing through him. He was just thinking, *handjobs, hell yeah—I'm so on board with that*, when the feel of moist, wet heat enveloped his cock, taking him by surprise.

He bit his lip to muffle his cry, but even in his distraction, the noise seemed loud in the deserted nook they'd found. The intense warmth spread, going down and down until it engulfed his cock whole, JJ's lips meeting his hand where it was wrapped around the base.

Fucking unbelievable.

Oliver watched as he slowly pulled off and felt the bar in JJ's tongue trail along the underside of his cock, leaving his erection cool with wetness in the open air. JJ daubed at the head softly, causing Oliver to gasp. After blowing lightly on the moist tip, JJ touched his tongue to Oliver's cockhead again, keeping it there to wiggle it under the foreskin that had pulled back, revealing a head whose shine was visible even in the low light of the hallway.

JJ kept one hand around the base while he sucked at the head, teasing with licks that were alternately delicate, then strong. Based on the harsh breaths that brushed against his sensitive cockhead and the movement of JJ's other arm, Oliver guessed JJ's right hand was busy stroking himself.

So incredibly hot.

Oliver's climax was growing inside of him, building up to an explosion. When JJ ducked his head to mouth at his balls, Oliver panted and curled his hands against the sturdy wall, the textured stucco rough against his fingertips. "I'm close," he warned.

In response, JJ bobbed up and down on his cockhead once more, his mouth utterly wicked as he swirled his tongue around the tip. At last, he stood up, the stroking hand at his open fly proving Oliver's suspicions correct.

Oliver whimpered at the loss of friction on his throbbing cock, but quickly found relief when JJ lined up his own erection against Oliver's. Oliver brought one hand forward to cover them both, and they stroked in unison.

"Fuck... *fuck*," JJ kept saying, the words punching out of him with each strong tug.

"Yes, yes, oh god," Oliver cried out, his eyes squeezing shut as he felt the pressure build.

In the darkness, Oliver could only feel, and JJ's cock was thick and solid under Oliver's palm. Their lengths slid along each other, slippery with precum and hot with friction and arousal.

"Jesus Christ, I'm gonna come," JJ whispered harshly, and he began to twist his wrist at the top of his strokes.

Oliver's head dropped back against the wall, mouth falling open on a gasp, the sensations overwhelming him until he couldn't stop tipping over the edge.

Oliver fell into his orgasm until he was suddenly floating, spilling all over their hands and his belly, his cum striping hot streaks across his skin. With a shuddering breath, JJ groaned and came along with him, too.

His breathing still harsh, Oliver glanced between them and saw that, at the angle they had been stroking, it seemed both loads had ended up on Oliver's bare skin. He supposed, with a dazed practicality, that at least the cleanup would be easy. Oliver's lids fluttered shut, and he stifled a post-orgasmic giggle at how silly that must sound.

When something brushed against his pec, Oliver opened his eyes again to see JJ kissing the little "cutie mark" heart he'd forgotten the girls had drawn on him. A soft smile spread across Oliver's lips at the unexpectedly tender moment. JJ looked up and his own lips quirked into a smile, a dimple appearing at the corner of his mouth.

Oliver squinted in the darkness. *Something about that...*

But then JJ was unfurling their hands and stepping away. After zipping himself back into his jeans, he stripped off his vest and smoothed it gently over Oliver's abs and chest, cleaning off what he could of the cum that clung there. JJ fastened up Oliver's pants, then tucked the vest under his arm and surveyed Oliver's bare skin.

Oliver was about to thank him, but JJ leaned in to kiss him on the lips, effectively silencing his words.

"Till next time," his cowboy murmured when he pulled back.

JJ turned and walked back down the hallway, the outline of his bare shoulders broad and muscular in the faint light.

Oliver tilted his head at the sight.

Really, is there something familiar about...

Oliver shook his head at himself.

No, no, it's impossible.

Between his earlier encounter with tequila, the fuzzy post-orgasmic high still wrapped around his brain, and the dim lighting in the hallway, it was clear that his mind was definitely playing tricks on him.

Chapter 4

It's a Scientific Fact That Morning Afters Arrive Two Days Too Early

After the nonstop drinking at the celebration dinner, the suite party, and SPIN the night before, Oliver's Monday was, to say the least, rather painful, and that had nothing to do with the colorful bruise on his cheekbone. The day began with a perky "Good morning!" from the hotel front desk, and that wake-up call for the flight back to San Francisco arrived a millennium too soon.

When Oliver had rolled out of bed to stumble towards the shower, Terrence, who had just walked into the room with a towel draped around his neck, had given him an odd look. That swimming feeling in Oliver's head had been an unfortunately familiar experience for him.

Because tequila?

Tequila was *Diablo*.

With the help of his friends Water and Coffee, Oliver somehow made it through both the morning and the flight back. Upon turning on his phone again at SFO, he could only thank whatever miracle had made his Ethics in Science TA blast a class-wide email canceling his only discussion section that afternoon. While it didn't mean he could skip his training session at SFE on Monday evening, Oliver at least had a chance to rest when he got back to his apartment.

He would need that rest for the sparring session at SFE because Derek?

Derek was riding him *hard*.

"Oliver, c' mon, I know you can kick higher. C' mon, hit me!"

Derek's words of encouragement fueled a small fire in Oliver, and he made an effort to stay sharp. He'd never sparred with the team captain before, so when Derek had paired everyone off and left Oliver for himself, he'd been a little surprised... and intimidated.

He didn't want to screw up, but he also wasn't anywhere close to the top of his game that evening. To make things worse, it was obvious Derek was still in peak form even after having gone through a full set of competition matches within the last forty-eight hours.

There's only one way to explain it, Oliver's tired mind provided. Superhuman.

In the regulation-sized ring where the team captain typically sparred at the side of the room, they traded unevenly matched jabs and crosses, kicks and roundhouses, until Derek had him up against the ropes. Derek pressed into him for a moment longer than necessary, his breath ghosting against Oliver's cheek. Oliver's heart pounded, and the smell of honest sweat drifted towards him before Derek stepped back.

“Again.”

So they sparred again, and Oliver tried his damndest to keep up. By the end of the hour, Oliver felt like he'd done battle with an eighteen wheeler.

He managed to stay on his feet through a blissfully hot shower afterwards, agreeing to something when someone asked him a question through the frosted shower curtain. His brain wasn't fully checked in today, which should really be known as the longest day in the history of ever, but it sounded vaguely like “womp-wuh-womp tonight?” He'd just ask about it when he got out.

The steam must've cleared away that reminder, though, because he was taken off guard when he pushed through the studio doors on his way out into the cool San Francisco air.

He'd just caught sight of Kevin, Amanda, and Jin, who were parked and waiting a few storefronts down in Kevin's trusty old Toyota Corolla, when someone laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, you coming with?”

A woman's voice broke into his thoughts, and Oliver spun around to see Izzy, Derek, Patrick, and a few other SFE fighters spilling out of the glass double doors. They were all in casual dress, their gym bags slung over their shoulders.

“What?” Oliver asked, brow furrowing. Was there a team meeting he hadn't heard about?

“Derek said you were joining us,” Terrence said. Next to him, Izzy nodded, her expression expectant.

Oliver stared at Derek, who returned an inscrutable look. “I... don't remember that.”

Izzy huffed good-naturedly before explaining. “We were gonna grab drinks at the Star to celebrate Derek’s big win at the Summit,” she said, her head tilting in the direction of the bar down the street. A mischievous look flitted across her face, and she grinned at him, nudging him with her hips. “C’mon, Oliver, you know you wanna. They have that retro jukebox, and something tells me those hips don’t lie,” she teased, putting her hands on his hips and wiggling them in time with hers.

Oliver flushed, his unruly thoughts turning to his spin on the dance floor just last night. Close by, he heard someone let out a strangled noise, and Oliver glanced at the group quizzically before turning back to Izzy.

“Sorry, guys,” Oliver said, including them all in his response as he gently peeled her hands off his hips. Between sleep deprivation, the Diablo he’d encountered last night that went by the name of tequila, and the sparring workout with Derek that he’d just survived, he was running on fumes. Thank god he had an excuse to skip out on socializing tonight. “I already have plans with my friends,” he said with an apologetic smile.

Izzy pouted. “Awww, you sure?”

“Yeah, sorry. Next time, okay?” he offered, meaning every word of it. After all, the invitation was appreciated, just not the timing.

“Alright, I’m holding you to that,” Izzy said, wagging her finger at him.

Oliver smiled at her, trying to soften the rejection. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

They turned to part ways, the SFE group chatting and Oliver heading towards Kevin’s blue Toyota, when he remembered something and turned around. “Oh! And congrats again, Derek.”

Derek looked back and caught his gaze. His lips quirked up in a way that caused something to flip over in Oliver’s stomach. “Thanks.”

Oliver smiled and ducked his head. “Well, have fun. If the jukebox plays, then show ’em your moves,” he joked, then panicked because what the hell did he think he was doing, kidding around with no-nonsense, Summit champion, and team captain Derek Vance?

Derek’s gaze raked over Oliver. “It’d be easier with a partner,” Derek said under his breath before looking back up with a half-smile on his face. “See you.”

Oliver's eyes went wide. *What the...?* He was left speechless as Derek jogged over to catch up with the rest of the team, tossing one last glance over his shoulder at Oliver.

Brows inching upwards, Oliver wasn't sure what to make of their exchange or if his fuzzy-brained-and-tired state simply had created the confusion. He shook his head at himself and trotted towards his friends, who apparently had witnessed the whole thing.

Amanda rolled down the passenger's side window, and Oliver imagined the expressions on their faces were likely a match for his own.

"Hey, Ollie," she called out from the passenger's seat. Her grin fell away when she got a closer look at him. "Ohmigod, what happened to your eye?"

"Hey guys, sorry for the wait." He entered through the rear passenger door and took his seat. "Oh this? Just a little souvenir from my competitive debut," Oliver said ruefully as he touched his cheekbone.

"Poor Ollie," Amanda said, the concern evident in her voice.

"Nah, it's okay. Hardly feel it now."

"Hey, no worries on the wait—we had plenty of entertainment," Jin said from the spot next to him.

Kevin finally found his voice. "Uh, yeah," he said, slowly turning around to face the backseat. "What was that guy...?"

Oliver shook his head. "I don't even know."

"But it looked like he..."

"Seriously, guys, I have no clue, and I'm kinda dead on my feet."

Amanda leaned around to glance at him and clucked sympathetically. "Yeah, no more questions for Ollie. I'm gonna venture a guess that whatever you've got is gonna need a Double-Double and chocolate shake to set things right."

"Destination, In-N-Out. I'm on it," Kevin confirmed as he started up the car.

"You're not feeling well? Did you catch something while you were in Vegas?" Jin asked, a concerned frown flitting across his face. "Man, that sucks balls."

At the phrasing that unintentionally brought up a recent such memory, Oliver felt his cheeks burn. "What? No, I—I didn't—I mean," he stammered, trying to come up with a decent explanation. He hadn't necessarily caught something... unless one counted the incredibly hot cowboy he'd somehow managed to land. As he searched for another explanation, though, his mind unfortunately was not cooperating.

Amanda whipped her head around and pierced him with an assessing look. Her eyes went wide, and she crowed, "Ohhhh, I know what this is." Her expression was equal parts impossibly smug and salaciously gleeful.

Oliver groaned, half-afraid of what might come out of her mouth, yet knowing it was a freight train he would never be able to stop.

"What?" Kevin asked as he steered the car out of the Mission District and in the direction of Fisherman's Wharf.

"Don't answer that," Oliver told her in a halfhearted attempt to stop the train, anyway.

Amanda steamrolled over him, practically bouncing off the cloth upholstery. In fact, her seatbelt might have been the only thing preventing her from flying out of the open sunroof. "Ollie's not sick, he's just exhausted." She paused deliberately before continuing. "*Sex-exhausted*," she stage-whispered-slash-announced.

Kevin's squeal could probably be heard in Oregon. "Whaaaaat? I knew it! *I knew it!* Spill, Ols, every juicy detail. Did you or did you not save a horse and ride a cowboy?"

At the memory of his masked companion's costume, Oliver choked on thin air and then broke out into uncontrollable laughter.

There was a chorus of *what, huh, and c'mon, tell!*

They were pulling into a parking space a block away from the In-N-Out when Oliver finally recovered long enough to recount his unlikely tale.

It seemed the answer to tequila was ten hours of sleep.

By late Tuesday morning, Oliver felt human again. He made it through his two lectures and lab section intact, and his senior thesis experiment was actually cooperating for the first time since he'd begun working on it at the beginning of the semester.

Unlike a lot of his peers, Oliver had no intention of going straight into medical school after college; instead, he was hoping to get hands-on experience in the field first. His project on gene therapy for the treatment of cancers was an established enough topic already, but he planned to apply the approach to animals and, eventually, veterinary medicine.

Ever since the news of their dog Rafi's illness and untimely death had broken his heart in freshman year, Oliver had been driven to find a path to help in some way—any way—that he could. Cancer was a horrifying thief that had stolen Rafi from them far too soon, and it was only when his family was exploring the limited options for care that he had realized the sheer lack of research and data supporting cancer treatments for pets.

Oliver tried to stay active in the field on a personal level by volunteering and keeping current on the latest pet and veterinary news. With his soft spot for creatures big and small, he looked forward to his weekly play sessions with the critters at a local rescue shelter. He was on his way there Tuesday afternoon when he heard a friendly greeting.

“Hey, Oliver!”

He turned to see Izzy approaching him from down the street with a wide smile on her face. She looked sporty with her blue yoga pants, a white windbreaker, and a San Francisco Giants baseball cap pulled over her long pink-and-black ponytail.

“Izzy, hey! What's up?” He waited for her just outside the whitewashed entryway to Rufio's Rescue, which was decorated with orange and black streamers in honor of Halloween in two days' time.

She gave him a half-hug in greeting, then pulled back to tip her hat up a little. “Not much,” she said, squinting into the sun with a smile. “Heading back to the BART station, that's all.”

“Oh yeah, I didn't think this was your usual spot. What're you doing out here in Berkeley?”

“Just lunch with a friend,” she said with a vague gesture behind her.

“Cool.” He smiled and turned towards the entrance, putting his hand on the door. “Well, I'm gonna—”

“We missed you at the Star last night,” Izzy said quickly.

Oliver stopped mid-push. “Really?” he asked, unaccountably flattered. He was the newbie on the team, after all, so to be included so easily as part of the group meant a lot to him. “Thanks, it looked like a lot of fun. I’m sorry I couldn’t make it—I wasn’t feeling all that great yesterday, actually.”

“Awww, well, are you feeling any better?” Her gaze flicked to the bruise that had at least started to fade into a closer-to-skin-tone yellow.

Oliver smiled reassuringly. “Yeah, this thing doesn’t hurt anymore, and I’m feeling pretty great. Honestly, it was nothing a good night’s sleep couldn’t cure last night. I might even see about a rematch with Derek to try to redeem myself after our Monday session. Don’t want the team captain to think he’s carrying dead weight,” Oliver said with a small chuckle. He did his best to ignore the butterflies he had at the idea of actually approaching Derek.

Izzy’s mouth tipped up into a smile. “I’m sure he’d be happy to oblige.”

“Did you guys have fun last night?”

“It was so much fun,” she said, grinning. “Derek got us all a round of shots, and then we sang along to some old ’N Sync stuff on the jukebox.”

Oliver laughed because he couldn’t begin to imagine Derek singing along to cheesy boy band music. It just didn’t compute. “Well, I’d definitely love to see that. Next time you guys go out, I’ll be there, I promise.”

“You’d better—I haven’t forgotten!” Izzy said with a teasing scold. “You should come out with us tomorrow after sparring. We’re hitting up Halloween karaoke at the Star.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am,” Oliver said, giving her a small salute as he headed inside. “See you tomorrow!”

“Bye, Oliver!”

Chapter 5

In It to Win It

“Better. Much better, Oliver,” Derek said as they both straightened up after their latest series of exercises. They each faced a heavy kick bag at the perimeter of the training studio, Derek first demonstrating a move, which Oliver would then repeat. Derek swiped his forearm over his brow and smiled at him.

Oliver flushed from the compliment and the attention, pleased to have made a decent showing tonight. Sparring hour was over, and they’d taken off most of the protective gear worn for that session. However, Derek had asked him to stay afterwards to run through some of the moves on which Oliver had lost points on his Summit scoring sheet. Thus, with Coach Payne’s blessing to stay late, they’d begun some punch and kick drills while everyone else had filed out.

“Hey, you guys coming to karaoke night?” Izzy called out from the entryway to the locker room. She had on jeans and a jacket already, her bag dangling over her shoulder.

“Nah, you go ahead,” Derek said with a glance at Oliver. “We’ll be there after.”

Izzy shrugged. “Alrighty, suit yourself.” She disappeared back down the long hallway that would lead out into the lobby. The sound of conversation was just audible until the group left the training center, and after that, there was just quiet.

For some reason, Oliver’s pulse quickened when he realized they were well and truly alone. Derek was watching him with an enigmatic look, and Oliver felt unaccountably nervous all of a sudden.

Stop it. Stop. It. Nothing to be nervous about. Nothing.

“So, I heard about Monday’s ’N Sync concert. Are you gonna be singing some Backstreet Boys tonight? Maybe a little One Direction?” Oliver asked with an uneasy chuckle as he rushed to fill the silence.

Derek’s lips quirked up, and he stepped closer, slowly closing the distance. “I might be more of a Boyz II Men kind of guy.”

“Oh?” Oliver’s voice came out squeaky. “Stuff like ‘Motownphilly’ or ‘Water Runs Dry’? Classic, man. Classic,” Oliver said, nodding his head.

Derek cleared his throat and said in a low voice, “I was thinking more along the lines of ‘Hey, Lover’.” He started humming the chorus with a half-smile on his lips, and Oliver jolted when he remembered the lyrics about a “crush”.

Shit.

Ugh. No, no, no. He can't know about my stupid crush. He can't. No, no, it's not possible.

When Derek didn't stop after a few notes, Oliver flushed fiery red and broke eye contact. “Quit horsing around,” Oliver mumbled, moving to grab his towel from where it hung on one of the horizontal bars on the wall. He stood by the stacked mats and wiped the sweat off his brow.

“You should know I like horsing around. Especially with ponies,” Derek said, his voice much closer than Oliver expected.

Ponies?

Um.

What the actual fuck?

Alarmed, Oliver made to turn around, but Derek pushed his body close, his torso flush against Oliver’s back. Oliver tipped forward, bracing himself on his forearms against the stack of mats as Derek crowded him. “Except I kind of miss that colorful tail of yours,” Derek whispered into his ear, a hand brushing against Oliver’s waist.

Oliver’s eyes went wide, and he flushed hot and cold. The heat of Derek’s body lit up his skin at every point of contact.

No.

What?!

No.

Fuck.

No, it's impossible.

No. Fucking. Way.

I don't believe it.

He must have said that last one out loud because Derek spun him around, keeping Oliver in place with his palms on his shoulders. “What’s there to believe?” Derek asked, his thumbs lightly caressing Oliver’s skin.

Derek’s lips quirked up into a smile, and Oliver stared.

Studying that mouth up close for this length of time, it... well, it might not have been so impossible to believe.

His breath hitched.

Holy shit.

Just this weekend that mouth had been wrapped around—

The thought cut off when Derek covered his lips with his own. *Jesus Christ, that confirms it.* Oliver’s lids fluttered shut on a short moan. He wouldn’t forget those lips or that tongue ring—*shit, the tongue ring, god it felt good*—any time this decade.

Oliver’s body got on board a step ahead of his brain, and he pressed up against Derek. Without breaking the kiss, Derek shifted to grasp his waist, his thigh slipping between Oliver’s legs. The friction caused Oliver to moan, and his head tipped back as he took in a shaky breath.

When Derek traced kisses along his jaw line, his hands sliding under Oliver’s blue Cal T-shirt, Oliver finally found his train of thought.

“Wait, how did you—”

He stopped short when Derek lifted his head, the interruption bringing a glare to his face that was definitely familiar. That look spoke volumes.

Oliver coughed and nodded, mock business-like. “Right. Fuck now, talk later, got it.”

The smirky little side smile that Derek gave him at those words almost made the embarrassment he felt at saying them worth it.

Almost.

And then Derek was peeling off his grey tank, then Oliver’s own T-shirt, those strong hands coming up to trace lines across the muscles of his back, and Oliver stopped caring about what he’d said. Oliver returned the kiss, his lips slotting against Derek’s like they were made for each other.

Derek pulled him close and shifted them sideways. With a sigh, Oliver went with the movement, lost in the tangle of their mouths and tongues, until his back hit the horizontal bars lining the far wall of the training center. He grunted softly at the touch of the cool wood against his back.

“What... what do you want to do?” Oliver asked, breathless. His hands smoothed over the warm skin of Derek’s shoulders, and he watched Derek’s face, still incredulous that he was here in this moment with him. Those beautiful eyes were heavy-lidded with desire, the mosaic of colors nearly lost to the darkness of his pupils.

Derek gave him a look that made Oliver shiver. “I—” Derek started, his voice low, “I want to fuck you.”

Oliver’s brows shot up at the same time his cock went rock hard. “You—I—wow, okay, um,” he stuttered. “God, my dick loves that idea, but we don’t have...”

He trailed off when Derek unzipped the pocket on his nylon sweats to pull out a condom and a packet of lube.

“You... you just carry those around,” Oliver choked out, fascinated.

“Since Sunday, yeah.”

When Derek lifted a questioning brow, it was all Oliver could do to nod. He swallowed hard before saying, “Okay.”

Derek’s lips turned up in a breathtaking smile, his hands moving down Oliver’s arms. “Good,” Derek whispered into a kiss, his fingers lacing with Oliver’s. His grip was firm, and Oliver watched wide-eyed as Derek lifted their arms above shoulder level, fitting Oliver’s fingers around one of the horizontal bars near his head.

“So good,” Derek repeated, dropping another kiss onto Oliver’s parted lips. “Now you hold on,” Derek instructed, smoothing his hands over Oliver’s fingers, “for less talk, more *this*.” He reached down and pushed beneath the waistband of Oliver’s sweats, palming and rubbing his hard length through the press of his protective compression shorts.

Oliver thrust into the possessive hold, his heart racing when Derek moved to strip him of his pants and shorts. Oliver’s dick was hard, suffocating inside the tight training gear, and the feel of the cool air in the kickboxing center signified freedom. Derek jacked him a few times, his palm cupping the foreskin around

the head at the top of each pull, which had Oliver gasping by the time Derek removed his hand.

Derek hooked his thumbs into his waistband and quirked an eyebrow. "You like that?" he asked with a slight smirk as he pulled off his own sweats and a white athletic supporter. At least seven inches of thick, veiny cock bobbed free, the flared head angling in the direction of a circular dragon tattoo that rested on Derek's left hip.

Nodding, Oliver stared at Derek's cock. *Christ, that looks good.* Now that he could see Derek in the full light, he knew his dick was easily the biggest he'd seen in person in his limited experience.

A half-smile on his face, Derek took himself in hand and stroked, leaning forward to kiss Oliver deeply. His other palm curled around the back of Oliver's neck, his grip firm yet gentle. The metal bar piercing Derek's tongue slid across Oliver's lips, teasing him and exploring the depths of his mouth.

Swallowing hard, Oliver spoke up. "I—it's been a while for me."

Derek glanced at him, the soft expression on his face taking Oliver by surprise. "For me, too." He brushed his lips tenderly against Oliver's mouth. "We'll go slow."

After that, Oliver was lost to sensation.

Derek apparently hadn't forgotten the sensitivity of his nipples because he set his mouth to them, laving one, then the other, with touches that were maddeningly soft. The delicate licks drove Oliver wild, especially when the occasional touch of hard metal provided a solid counterpoint.

"Jesus, good... that's really good," Oliver hissed under his breath.

The teasing continued, alternating between the two stiff peaks, and Derek's gentle licks and occasional nips sent tiny zaps of fire down Oliver's veins, centering on his stiff cock. He squirmed, finding minimal relief in the brushes of Derek's skin against the smooth, wet head of his dick.

Derek had truly taken the idea of going slowly to heart, and it was only when Oliver let out a soft whine that he looked up.

Oliver swallowed thickly and had to clear his throat before saying, "If you keep that up, I might just come from that."

A spark of interest lit in Derek's lust-blown gaze at the same time he pulled back. "We'll explore that another time," he said, his voice rich with promise.

He cast one more look at Oliver's nipples, which stood at attention now, pink and shiny.

Oliver's brows shot up, and his cock twitched with interest.

Jesus, stop. Don't come yet. Don't. Come. Yet.

With a half-smile, Derek dropped down to his knees, his hands braced on Oliver's hips. He shifted forward to press his lips to Oliver's skin, one light kiss on each side of his erect cock.

There was a beat of stillness, their breaths audible in the empty room. A shiver of anticipation tripped down Oliver's spine.

Finally, his cock was engulfed in a shockingly familiar wet heat, while Derek's hands curved around his ass, his fingers clutching Oliver's cheeks tightly. Oliver's back bowed, and he gripped the wooden bar harder, his body seeking more contact somewhere... *anywhere*.

God, the blowjob was even better than he remembered.

Or maybe that was because he could see his partner this time and fully appreciate Derek's golden skin and taut muscles, in addition to the sensations brought on by his incredibly talented mouth. Maybe it was because he now knew the man on his knees was, rather improbably, his crush Derek Vance, whose physical talents and quiet confidence he'd admired for quite some time.

Oliver shut his eyes, sighing as he felt that wonderful tongue ring brush along the underside of his cock.

Maybe it was just because this moment was pure magic.

With one last kiss to the tip, Derek pulled off and moved back. The crinkling sound of plastic made Oliver look down, and he watched as Derek broke the seal on the envelope of lube, then dribbled it on his fingers.

After setting the packet to the side, Derek placed his other hand gently on Oliver's hip and met his gaze with a wicked look. "Turn around," he said softly.

Oliver bit his lip and obeyed, turning to face the wall of wooden bars. His hands automatically found again the bar that he had been holding, which was still warm from the heat of his grip. He rested his forehead on his arms, his breath uneven, as he waited.

The tongue came as a surprise.

Oliver gasped when he felt Derek's hot breath against him. The hand on his hip moved behind him to hold his cheeks open, allowing Derek to lick a stripe up from the base of his balls and across his hole. Derek's tongue left behind a wet trail that caused goose bumps to prickle Oliver's skin.

Nobody had *ever* done that before, and holy hell it felt crazy.

The tip of Derek's tongue circled Oliver's rim, dipping inside a few times, before he moved back. Oliver could feel Derek's breath against his skin, the short puffs of air suggesting that Derek was just as aroused as he was. With a last lick, Derek pulled away, his breathing harsh and ragged. Derek's fingers, warm and wet with lube, massaged his balls for a moment before sliding over to press softly at his hole. The touches were light, gentle, and they were driving Oliver insane.

Oliver sometimes fingered himself a little when he jerked off, so the first and, eventually, second digits weren't too out of the ordinary. The arousal humming through his veins from that incredible blowjob also might have distracted him.

The third finger, though, was entering into long-neglected waters.

When Derek began to press in lightly for the third time, Oliver hummed, the stretch somewhat foreign, but definitely not forgotten. Honestly, he'd bottomed only twice before, trying it for a brief period with Abe, who had then proclaimed that he preferred to keep that position for himself. Oliver hadn't minded either way as he'd found pleasure in both roles.

Derek smoothed a comforting hand over the small of Oliver's back. "Good?"

Oliver came back to the present, glancing over his shoulder and catching a look on Derek's face that left him breathless. The tip of Derek's finger slipped in to join the other two. "Ah, ahh... just... different," Oliver said, his voice husky. "Different-good, though. Yeah, definitely different-good." He sighed when he felt one of Derek's probing fingertips brush his prostate.

"You're different. Different-good," Derek said, his voice low. "That's what I like about you." He punctuated his words with a lingering bite to Oliver's rounded left cheek.

Oliver ducked his head, grinning into the skin on his arm, secretly thrilled by the unexpected confession. God, he wanted to talk about feelings, too, but right now, he wanted to get fucked even more.

“You know what I like about you? What I like the most right now?” Oliver asked teasingly. His breath caught when Derek slowly flexed his fingers, the movement stretching him gently... deliciously.

“Hrm?”

“Your dick. So put it in me.”

Derek growled under his breath as he stood, swatting Oliver's ass on his way up. “Such a brat,” he said, his harsh words belying the affectionate tone of his voice. Oliver felt Derek's fingers slip out of him and, shortly thereafter, heard the ripping of the foil condom wrapper. Oliver's cock was hard, leaking precum, and he couldn't get a hand on it.

Moments later, Derek's body bore down on his, his chest hot against Oliver's back. Oliver shuddered when Derek lined up his cock against his ass.

“‘Put it in me,’ you say, you greedy boy,” Derek whispered into his ear. “Is this what you're so hungry for, Oliver?”

With those words, Derek pressed forward, the head of his cock meeting initial resistance until it slipped in to breach Oliver's hole. Oliver grunted, and Derek pushed in slowly, not stopping until his hips met the smooth skin of Oliver's ass. Derek's groan was nearly as loud as the gasp that came out of Oliver's mouth once he was in to the hilt.

Derek?

God.

Derek felt phenomenal.

Oliver moaned into his forearm, and his eyes squeezed shut as he tried to process the myriad of sensations, the feeling of Derek inside him making his body soar. He forgot about his desperation for a hand on his cock because honestly?

Derek might make him come just from this.

With his hands on Oliver's hips, Derek began a slow slide-thrust rhythm, the movement achingly drawn out.

Jesus. Is he trying to kill me? Fuck going slow. I want it fast, and I want it now.

“Forget what I said about slow. Please, oh god, just forget that part and go fast now,” Oliver pleaded when it seemed like Derek would be content to stay

like this, pressed together but barely moving, forever. Between the blowjob, the fingering, the *licking*, and everything else that had led up to this moment, Oliver felt like he'd been waiting for his orgasm for ages.

Derek's hands traced patterns up and down his ribs before coming forward to skim across his chest and brace his shoulders. He didn't say anything, but he huffed a breath, his response evident in his body's next movements. Derek thrust his hips faster and deeper, arms tightening across Oliver's chest to hold him in place.

"Yes, oh god, yes," Oliver said, his mouth parting on a harsh gasp.

"You like that, Oliver?"

"Yes, oh god, I do, I really do."

"What do you like?" Derek asked, his fingers digging into Oliver's shoulders.

"You. God, I like you and your dick," Oliver said. His eyes fluttered shut as the sensations built to a frenzy. "Fuck."

Derek's hand wrapped around Oliver's cock, jacking him with a firm grip and twisting at the tip in the way that Oliver loved, and that was it.

He was done.

Oliver cried out as he spilled over Derek's fingers, his orgasm pulsing through his body. The pleasure hit him in waves, his back arching and his hips jerking.

"Jesus," Derek whispered from behind him. His thrusts turned erratic before he stilled completely.

Derek climaxed with a moan, and Oliver thought he heard his name issue forth on a whispered breath. Derek's fingers tightened around Oliver's dick while the arm across his chest squeezed him close. With a sigh, Derek rested his forehead on Oliver's back for a moment, brushing his lips against the sweat-kissed skin there.

As they came down to earth, Derek pulled Oliver's hands off the bar and gathered him close, his chest to Oliver's back, their bodies still connected as one.

Derek turned Oliver's face towards his and looked into his eyes. Those lips—now so incredibly familiar in more ways than one—quirked up into a

smile. He tweaked Oliver's nipple gently, causing him to gasp. "I can't wait to explore these with you, too," Derek said with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

Oliver blushed, and Derek grinned before leaning in for a kiss.

Even more encounters with Derek?

He was definitely on board with that.

After carefully pulling out and gathering the trash a moment later, Derek headed towards the garbage can in the corner, revealing his bare backside for the first time. Oliver couldn't suppress a small burst of laughter.

Derek tossed everything into the wastebasket and shot him an affectionate look. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Oliver managed, gasping. "You—you just—"

Derek moved closer, watching him with a slight smile. "I what?"

Oliver took a deep breath and blurted it out.

"You have a *cutie mark*."

Derek's brows shot up. "A what?"

"A cutie mark."

"Uhhh..." Derek looked even more confused.

Oliver swallowed down his next chuckle. He motioned for Derek to turn around and gestured towards Derek's right ass cheek. Or, more specifically, the little bird wrapped in fire that was tattooed at the crest of it. "That," he said, meeting Derek's gaze and pointing, "is a cutie mark."

Derek covered it with his hand and turned back around with a look that suggested he was questioning Oliver's sanity. "I'm still not clear on what that is, but it's actually—"

"Oh. My. God."

They both froze.

Oliver blanched, and Derek looked stunned.

When a loud cough echoed in the room, they whipped their heads around in unison.

Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit.

Izzy stood at the entrance to the locker room with Patrick, Terrence, Evan, Patsy, and the rest of the SFE competition team.

They stared at each other, and Oliver felt particularly naked—even more so than simply because he wasn't wearing any clothes.

He had no idea what to expect.

It was silent for a long moment until finally Izzy spoke.

“You owe me ten dollars,” she said to Patrick.

What?

Derek recovered faster than Oliver and stepped to the side, blocking Oliver from sight. He cleared his throat and spoke loudly, seemingly uncaring of the fact that he, too, was stark naked.

“Oliver and I are both adults, and what happened here was after hours. If you have a problem with either one of us, speak now.”

Another moment ticked by, and Izzy coughed gently.

“No problem on our end, nosiree,” she said loudly. “All we have to say is it's about damn time.” Izzy arched her brow at them and held Derek's gaze. She then turned around and clapped her hands. “All right, folks, let's leave the lovebirds alone—looks like they won't be joining us for karaoke night, after all,” she said wryly, ushering everyone out of the training room. “C'mon, let's head back to the Star and get plastered so we can all try to drown our embarrassment over what we just walked in on.”

Her words trailed off as the group moved farther down the hallway towards the exit.

Oliver stared after them for a moment, only startling when Derek cleared his throat.

He looked at Derek, who was watching him closely. “Are you okay?” Derek asked, his tone gentle.

“I—What was that about?”

Derek sighed, then met his gaze with an apologetic look. “Well, in case it wasn't clear, Sparkles, I think both of us are *out* now.”

Oliver blinked rapidly, processing the information. “I... that’s... surprisingly, that’s okay with me, considering how they took it right now. It’s not like I’m in the closet or anything—I just didn’t think there was any reason you guys would need to know.”

He thought for a moment, remembering the “fuck now, talk later” promise. *Well, it seems like later is now.* Oliver glanced up at Derek and took a deep breath. “But what I want to know is, I... at the club, how did—”

Derek cut him off, seeming to anticipate the question. “You started training at this club three years ago, and I’ve been following your progress ever since,” Derek admitted, his lips curved in a rueful smile. “I couldn’t wait until you got to competition level so that you’d finally be training... with me. And when I saw you at the club—”

“Wait, that’s what I want to know. How did you even know it was me?”

An unlikely blush stained Derek’s cheeks, and he cleared his throat. “When my friend Joey told me where he was celebrating his birthday, I figured I’d show up just to make an appearance, then cut out. But that all changed when I saw you.” Derek stepped closer until he was right in front of him and traced his finger over a scattering of moles on the curve of Oliver’s right shoulder. His hand skimmed down Oliver’s arm, stopping to outline a turtle-shaped birthmark near his elbow. Derek’s lips tilted up at one corner as he explained, “I’d recognize these anywhere, even five hundred miles away and under a black light.”

Oliver’s eyes widened. “So... you knew right away?”

“One hundred percent.” Derek met his gaze, the expression on his face determined. “And as soon as I saw you, I knew I finally had a chance with you.”

Oliver needed a minute to digest that. He drifted backwards, completely blown away, until he could finally slump against the stack of mats where their clothes lay scattered. He’d had no idea his crush was even a possibility, let alone...

“Wow. Okay, um. Wow.” They watched each other for a beat. Holy shit, now that it looked like he might actually get to keep Derek—and that Derek had been watching him with just as much interest all this time—Oliver was at a loss for what to do next. “This is just a lot to take in.”

After a moment, Derek glanced around the studio and strode over, comfortable in his nudity.

Jesus, his flawless, toned, and impeccable nudity. That could be mine.

With a cough, Oliver tried to restrain his ogling.

“Maybe it’d be easier to take in over a drink and a bite to eat?” Derek asked, wearing nothing but a soft smile. He offered Oliver his hand.

Oliver stared at that open palm, then looked up into Derek’s familiar face. He looked like happiness, hope, and a future, all rolled into one. An answering smile spread across Oliver’s lips, and he slipped his hand into Derek’s.

“You asking me out, cowboy?” Oliver teased him as Derek helped him up. He straightened by Derek’s side and gave him a playful nudge with his elbow.

“Yeah,” Derek said with a small smile, returning the nudge. He bent down to gather their clothes together before turning back to Oliver. A warmth blossomed under Oliver’s skin when Derek grabbed his hand again and laced their fingers together. They made their way towards the locker room, hitting the lights on their way out.

Derek cleared his throat. “And if we happen to end up getting naked afterwards, then I wouldn’t be opposed to that, either.” Derek shot him a cocky grin, and Oliver rolled his eyes.

He couldn’t find fault with the statement, though, because, after a late supper and cocktails at Little Owl, that’s exactly what they did.

And that’s exactly what they continued to do for many Pacific Summits to come.

The End

Author Bio

Nico Jaye is a fan of all things HEA and has dragged her romance collection along for her moves from San Francisco to Los Angeles to Chicago to New York and back. She thinks reading is awesome and loves that she can hang out night after night with crinoline-wearing debutantes, brawny firemen in suspenders, and werewolf shifters with Scottish brogues. An overall feline enthusiast, Nico enjoys sharing cat pics and gifs and welcomes readers to find her online so that they can squee over the kitties together.

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