

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 13

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Volume 13

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 13.

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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[Arizona sunrise](#), [Yellow sunset with boats](#)

[Poollicht](#), [Perfect white beach](#)

[Sunset in Prague](#), [Purple mountain sunset](#)

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

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RAISING CADE

By Jonathan Penn

Photo Description

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

Story Letter

Dear Author,

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

Sincerely,

Lori

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

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

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

Content Warnings: graphic violence, rape, PTSD

Word Count: 38,195

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Dedication:

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

Acknowledgements:

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

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

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

RAISING CADE

By Jonathan Penn

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

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

Prologue

Friday, April 4, 2014

1:40 a.m.

I must be crazy!

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

Why didn't I think to wear something practical?

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

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

He fucks my mouth relentlessly.

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

Fingernails dig into the nape of my neck.

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

He cries out a name... or something.

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

I rise and extend my hand.

He reaches into a front pocket.

I take his forty dollars and walk away.

Chapter One

Friday, April 4, 2014

5:00 p.m.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Elliot, it's okay.”

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

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

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

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

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

funny was even more important. Every letter you wrote made me laugh. Other than your letters, I bet I could count the number of times I laughed over there on one hand.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah,” Alan agreed, “it’s almost like we were two different people back then.”

“Did you know it’s not a ‘*regular*’ high school anymore?” Elliot made air quotes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Who?”

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

Nothing.

“*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“When’s the last time you got laid?”

“Elliot!”

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

“Let’s just say it’s been a while.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, Elliot... I don’t know if I—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh." Elliot looked surprised.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Jeans?"

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

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

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

“Any what?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two

Friday, April 4, 2014

8:00 p.m.

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

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

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

“Honey! I’m home!” wafted back from the living room in her lovely, lilting drawl.

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

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

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

“So... how’s statistics coming along? You ready for the final?”

“I’ll be fine.” Cade looked out the window, but he could feel her giving him the eye.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s their announcement of next year’s season. They’re going to do *The Laramie Project*.”

“Again?”

“What do you mean again?” she asked.

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

“You mean the GOD HATES FAGS people?”

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

“They make me sad.”

Yup, there’s my Sabrina.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cade looked away. “I think that’s enough, Sabrina.”

She persisted. “Growing up... you were the happiest person I’ve ever known. But, that’s not you anymore. That part never came back.” She pressed

her cheek to the back of his hand. “Cade...” She reached up and gently took his chin, turning him to face her. “You put up a great front, babe. You joke and you laugh a lot... but you’re not happy.”

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

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

“Cade. I love you. I just want you to be okay.”

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

The doorbell rang.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ryan grimaced. "I don't know about that... I'm not failing any of my classes—"

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Cade asked, caustically.

"Nothing." Ryan's cheeks turned pink. "Look, can we just..."

"Just what? Just *pretend* we like each other?"

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

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

Ryan visibly shrank. "I don't know if uncomfortable's the right word..."

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

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

Cade stepped back.

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

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

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

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

"Whatever! I still say that's what's going on here."

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

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

“Because he obviously has the IQ of a guppy.”

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

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

“Ryan is *not* OCD!”

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

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

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

“Cade! Really?”

“So, what *do* you see in him?”

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

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

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

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

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

Last year, when he'd arrived as a freshman, and she was starting her junior year, she had taken him under her wing. He had moved in to share the condo their parents had purchased for them two years before, and they had once again become inseparable as she'd shown him all the ins and outs of campus life.

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

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

He took a deep breath and counted to ten.

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

Stumble

Friday, April 24, 2010

11:27 p.m.

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

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

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

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

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

constantly popping into my head! Am I supposed to not say them just because some idiot who can't tell I'm joking might get all bent out of shape?

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

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

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

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

I don't think to check the monitor first.

I snatch the door open.

Eric!

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

Fuck.

Chapter Three

Friday, April 4, 2014

9:30 p.m.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, pumpkin?"

"Uh-huh".

"What?"

"But, Vince, we just got here a min—"

"Hmph."

"Right."

"Okay, *okay!!!*"

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

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

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

"I'll head out too."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alan hesitated. “Maybe you’re right.” He let the corners of his mouth turn up a little.

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

“I’m always right. Your place, or mine?”

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

Chapter Four

Friday, April 4, 2014

10:00 p.m.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fuck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What the fuck do I care?

Cade shook his head and looked down at his feet.

He closed the door quietly and walked away.

Fall

Friday, April 24, 2010

11:39 p.m.

Eric takes a step into the foyer.

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

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

"Out of town for the weekend."

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

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

"Eric, please."

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is all so fucking ludicrous! A couple more weeks and I'll no longer have to lay eyes on Eric, or any of the other jerks I've been saddled with

through four years of high school. Just a few months, and I'll be walking the ivied halls of academia, where maybe there's a chance I'll meet a decent man. The allure in that siren song of freedom, contrasted with the pitiful farce of the horny boy now wagging his dick at me is more than I can stand. I try, but I can't help myself. I turn my head aside as a giggle escapes me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There’s fury in his eyes.

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

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

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

I don’t stand a chance.

Chapter Five

Saturday, April 5, 2014

11:00 a.m.

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

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

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

What were the chances?

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

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

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

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

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

"Screaming? I screamed at you last night. Or yelled." The man took a deep breath. "I was looking forward to forgetting that last night ever happened, but..."

here you are. I just want you to know, it's not something I do on a regular basis."

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

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

"My roommate, Sabrina, sent me for veggies. She's making dinner tonight for Ryan, the Jumbo Jersey Jock."

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

"That would be a long story."

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

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

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

It was clear Cade wanted to change the subject. "Well," he flashed his best warm-and-winning smile, "if you'll recall where we were about twelve hours

ago, you'll notice my condo's right around that corner over there," Alan said, pointing.

Cade turned and looked. "Great! I've returned to the scene of the crime."

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

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

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

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

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

"So... is that a, 'Yes, I'd love to have dinner with you tonight'?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Full Frame?”

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

“*That* would be my long story.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Meat.”

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

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

“Any particular kind of meat?”

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

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

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

“So, where is this seven forty movie playing?”

“Right up the hill at the old Carolina.”

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

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

“Six o’clock is fine by me. Can I pick you up?”

“Why don’t I meet you.”

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

Cade took out his own phone. “What’s your number?”

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

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

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

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

Alan walked off toward home.

Chapter Six

Saturday, April 5, 2014

6:00 p.m.

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

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

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

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

“More trouble with Ryan?”

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

“Well, is that an improvement?”

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

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

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

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

Alan flagged down the waitress.

“What can I get for you?”

Alan looked at him. “Wine list?”

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

“And are you ready to order?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Seriously?”

“No. Though my dad is breathtakingly wealthy. You said your parents took ‘all of you’ there. You’ve got siblings?”

“Four sisters. You?”

“Nope. Only child.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alan laughed deeply.

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

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

It was Cade's turn to laugh.

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

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

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

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

"Mmm."

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

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

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

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

Cade hesitated. "Drama."

"You're into plays? Acting?"

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

"You sing and dance?"

"Oh, hell yeah!"

"I'd pay to see that." Alan leaned back, his eyes twinkling.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alan leaned slowly forward and touched the tip of his tongue to the sauce-covered blob while looking up and riveting Cade with a lascivious gaze. Then he wrapped his lips around the bite and snatched it away. He chewed for a moment, cocking his head back and forth from side to side, a quizzical expression on his face. He swallowed and smiled. “That’s amazing!”

“What?” Cade asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Some churches marry gay and lesbian couples, if that’s what you’re asking.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Marine!” Alan scowled, playfully.

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

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

“Somehow I doubt that all preachers’ kids are as perspicacious as you.”

“Um... does that mean, like, judgmental?”

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

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

“So, if it’s not nature or nurture, what makes you different?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Always!” Alan raised his soda glass again.

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

“Under.” Alan confirmed.

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

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

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

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

Crash

Friday, April 24, 2010

11:44 p.m.

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

I have to do something!

I have to get away!

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

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

Fuck! I'm falling!

Backwards!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It dims...

It's dark.

Chapter Seven

Saturday, April 5, 2014

9:30 p.m.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He felt, more than saw, Cade bristle.

"I think that bigots piss me off!"

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

"Exactly."

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

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

"You sound a lot like Sabrina."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And... they're alphabetized?"

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

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

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

"Seriously?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Elders?"

"Oops."

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

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

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

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

“I’m sorry,” Cade mumbled, leaning further away.

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

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

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

“I do.”

“We could just—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Eight

Friday, April 11, 2014

11:30 a.m.

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello?"

"Alan, it's Cade."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh yeah, by the tennis courts?"

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

"Sounds great!"

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

"Shoot."

He gave Alan the address.

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

"Cool. Thanks, Alan."

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

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

He went bounding up the stairs of his building two at a time, hoping he wasn't too late. He rounded the corner at the top of the stairwell to see Alan leaning on the wall beside his front door. Even in his rush to apologize, he couldn't help noticing that Alan's jeans were a bit baggy, and his pale blue dress shirt was loose enough that it failed to ripple its way down his abdomen. Still, Alan was the hottest thing he'd ever seen leaning outside his door. "I'm so sorry. I got held up. I would have called, but I thought I could still get here before you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So, when you said you like musicals, you weren’t kidding!”

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

“That’s cool. I mean, I’m glad you’re not into it just to fit the stereotype.”

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

“Sure, it’s really nice now, but it’s gonna get chilly when the sun goes down.”

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

They walked down the street in a silence that felt comfortable. In fact, now that he noticed it, each time he had been with Alan he’d felt comfortable. They

turned in at the entrance to the gardens and walked past the parking area, onto the main path leading toward the center.

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

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

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

They turned and headed that way.

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

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

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

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

“It’s Greek to me.” Alan’s smile beamed from ear to ear.

Cade groaned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I do eat other things, you know.”

“Ah, so you’re omnivorous?”

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

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

“If he asks nicely.”

Cade maintained a deadpan stare.

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

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

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

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

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

“Lots of things. Nothing specific.”

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

When they got back to Cade’s parking area, Alan said, “Let me grab my jacket.” He walked over to a rusty brown Civic hatchback and opened the passenger door. It probably wouldn’t look so bad when it wasn’t parked next to a new S-550, Cade thought. Then, he noticed a scratched and faded bumper sticker on the back that simply asked, “*Got Hope?*”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He stiffened when he saw where this was going. He should have put two and two together; should have known Alan would have concerns. It occurred to him that this was probably as difficult for Alan as it was for him, so he decided to try and head him off at the pass. "If you're trying to find a polite way to say you've never been with a prostitute—"

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

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

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

Fuck!

He couldn’t tell Alan any of that.

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

But... he had to say something.

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

He wasn’t comfortable talking about this. “You mentioned practical concerns, and those I can address. I know what I do is risky, but I take every precaution I can to mitigate those risks. I have a regular testing regimen; I get a full battery of tests once a month and, as of a week ago, I’m clean. I have a copy of the results, if you want to see them. I go downtown to the public clinic because, I mean, what would they think at Student Health about a guy who comes in once a month? The last thing I need is to—”

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

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

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

"So, you're not worried you might catch something?"

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

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

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

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

"But what? Did I do something wrong?"

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

"Are they bad?"

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

Cade's eyes widened. "Wow!"

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

"What? Oh, shit! Sorry. No. No! It's not that, it's... it's the hair. I mean... oh, damn..." He felt like such a jerk. This was obviously something Alan was sensitive about, and he was sending all the wrong signals. Memories of the

month he'd spent in the hospital flashed through his mind. They wouldn't even let him have a mirror at first—said it was better if he didn't see what he looked like.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wow.”

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

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

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

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

“Thanks.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His other hand was resting on Alan’s leg, and he felt Alan clench his thigh muscles. As Alan squeezed, his already rock-hard cock swelled and throbbed. He clenched again, and the head flared in concert. With each of Alan’s squeezing pulses, the dusky lavender hue took on crimson highlights. Cade was mesmerized. It occurred to him that while he had seen a lot of cocks, he had

never actually taken the time to appreciate one. Right now, he felt he'd never seen anything quite so magnificent.

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

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

“Are you okay with this?” Alan asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alan's body jerked in a powerful spasm, and Cade felt the heat of his load as the first spurt shot down his throat. Alan's body rocked and trembled as wave after wave of his orgasm ripped through him. Eventually, the spasms began to subside, and Cade let himself move again, squeezing with his lips and sucking out every last drop.

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

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

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

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

Burn

Friday, April 24, 2010

11:53 p.m.

I'm alive.

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

I must have blacked out.

How long?

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

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

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

Oh, fuck. Eric!

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

He looms over me, swaying, grinning.

He squats beside me and squeezes my crotch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh, fuck!

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

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

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

He spits again.

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

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

I'm trembling.

This isn't happening. Please!

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

"Eric. No."

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

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

He pushes the tip of his cock against my hole.

I weep.

No.

Please—

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

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

The lights dim...

Please! PLEASE!!!

This can't be happening...

HELP!!!

Help me...

...it's dark...

...help...

Chapter Nine

Sunday, May 11 2014

5:00 p.m.

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

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

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

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

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

They smiled at one another.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alan stopped bobbing at the top of a stroke, and waited a moment before going down slowly, gently gliding his bottom teeth down the underside of

Cade's rock-hard cock. Cade whimpered when Alan was down as far as he could go, his nose pressed into Cade's curly brown pubes. Alan felt the stretch of Cade's dick pushing into his throat, and he stilled himself long enough to let the muscles relax. Then he growled and pinched both of Cade's nipples and bit down gently on the base of Cade's dick.

Cade gasped.

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

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

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

Alan didn't falter.

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

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

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

Another whimper escaped Cade's lips.

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

"If you... Oh, fuck!"

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

"Oh, God!" Cade screamed.

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

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

Cade let out a long sigh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cade closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Bum Looker!” Alan scowled, then smiled.

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

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

Cade tapped the screen and handed the phone over.

Alan said, “Hey, Sis. What’s up?”

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

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

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

“Still... I could see how hard it was for you.”

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

“Yeah, it seems like the dementia is destroying her mind the same way the Parkinson’s is destroying her body.”

“It broke my heart when I couldn’t tell if she even recognized me.”

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

He could understand Rachel’s resentment, but considering how just being in the same room with what was left of their mom had made his stomach churn to

the point he felt like he was being turned inside out... he could also understand why his other sisters had a rough time being there. He also knew that now was not the time to try and explain all that to Rachel. "I'm here to help you from now on, Rach."

"Little brother, you are truly a Godsend!"

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

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

"That works for me."

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

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

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

"Take care, Rach."

"You too. Bye."

"Bye."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, Elliot told me about that.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is that a Purple Heart?”

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

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

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

He didn’t know if it was his embarrassment showing, or what, but Cade released his shoulder, and Alan went into the bedroom and got the right box. “Sorry. I should have said, *second drawer*.” He handed Cade a small, slim white cardboard box tied with a red ribbon.

Cade slipped the ribbon off and opened the box, taking out a gray plastic card. “A key to your condo?”

He wasn't sure how to read Cade's raised eyebrow. "It's really not such a big deal." He heard himself say the words as he looked at the way he'd wrapped it. So, yeah, he had meant it as kind of a big deal. But it felt right. He didn't want Cade to freak, though. "I mean, you're here a lot... and I want you to be here whenever you want. It's just... practical—like today, when we had to split up for lunch, it would have been easier if you could have just come back here whenever you were ready."

Cade was looking down at the key in his hand, and nodding his head.

He cupped Cade's chin, and gently raised it till their eyes met. "I also want to be sure you know that I trust you." He had given this a lot of thought. He'd decided weeks ago that whatever had happened to Cade, it almost certainly involved some kind of violation of trust. And, if Alan wanted Cade to trust him, he thought that a demonstration of his trust in Cade would be a good place to start.

Cade nodded again, and smiled, maybe a little weakly. "Thank you, Alan. This means a great deal to me."

He looked into Cade's eyes, hoping to see some kind of green light there. He couldn't be sure, but as he gazed at Cade his heart sped up, and his breath came short. Somehow, it took Alan by surprise, over and over again, what an intoxicating effect Cade had on him. One minute, he was in charge of his world, knew what he was doing, knew what he wanted and how to get it. Then, one look from Cade and he was a blubbering idiot. A love-struck, blubbering idiot. He knew it was too soon, but he was thirty years old and didn't want to waste any more time... and this feeling was stronger than...

Cade looked worried again, but Alan couldn't stop himself. He rested his hands on Cade's shoulders. "Cade... I want you to know... I... I think I'm—"

"Whoa!" Cade stiffened and stepped back. His gaze darted around the room for an instant, and then he looked down at his watch. "I just remembered... I've got a thing..." He turned toward the door.

"Cade, wait." Alan couldn't believe how foolish he'd been.

"I have to go." Cade didn't look back as he walked toward the door, but he held up the key card and waved it, saying, "Not sure how long I'll be... but I'll be back." He opened the door and stepped through. "Don't keep dinner for me." He pulled the door shut.

Alan's heart was pounding in his chest, and in his ears. He stood, staring at the door, not knowing what to do, sure that he couldn't take watching Cade run

down the hallway again. He was also sure that going after Cade right away would be a mistake. He had taken the key with him, and said he'd be back.

He went to the kitchen and put the hamburger patties and the cheese back in the fridge, chewing himself out for pushing too hard, too fast. He had thought he could count patience as one of his virtues, but Cade had this stunning ability to make Alan want everything all at once.

As his heart slowed, he started thinking about Cade's defenses, how quickly they came on, and how running away seemed to be a major strategy. He wondered how many times his heart could take watching Cade disappear. He wanted to help Cade work through whatever it was that was making him so unhappy, but without knowing what it was... *Oh, God...* he felt helpless!

The moment he heard that word in his head, things started clicking into place. He *hated* feeling helpless! Both times he was wounded, that had been the hardest part... and now... He had worked so hard the last few years to learn how to deal with strong emotions, but helplessness still made him crazy, almost panicked, like he had to do something—anything—to feel strong.

It occurred to him that Cade's sudden loss of control looked strangely familiar. Not that Alan had ever run away from anything, but that feeling of having to do something *right now*... He wondered if maybe Cade was feeling helpless... or something like it... Or, probably, Cade was avoiding feeling... whatever it was.

Alan resigned himself to the fact that the "*whatever it was*" would have to wait. All he could do now was be here, waiting, whenever Cade came back.

Chapter Ten

Sunday, May 11, 2014

6:00 p.m.

Cade concentrated on running. He deliberately focused on the sensations, the solid jolt as each foot hit the concrete sidewalk, and the burn in his chest each time he gasped in another lungful.

He didn't know what he was running from, or where he was running to. He didn't care. He just needed to run.

Halfway down the hill, he spotted the roof of The Bar a couple blocks over. The sight snapped his attention away from his focus on the moment. He was filled with memories of the place, the smell of hot men and alcohol, the pounding music, and the heady rush of strutting through a crowd of admirers, picking one out. It had always been intoxicating. It made him feel powerful.

He couldn't run much longer, and he still needed desperately to keep moving. He remembered that it was Sunday afternoon... well, evening now, but early enough that some of the crowd from the afternoon Tea Dance would still be hanging around—especially *this* Sunday—the ones whose relationships with their mothers were on the rocks. Any one of them ought to be an easy mark—something to keep him from thinking about whatever the fuck was going on with him.

Just as he rounded the corner, his breath gave out. He doubled over at the waist and hung his head as he gasped to fill his chest. When he was able to stand again, he looked around the street and was relieved to see that he wasn't being observed. There was a space between the two buildings on his left, and he stepped into it, leaning against a painted concrete block wall. The solid bricks held the lingering warmth of the sun that was now sinking to the horizon. He leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes, taking slow, deep breaths. His knees felt wobbly, so he checked out the gravel around his feet, and then slowly slid his back down the wall till he was seated on the ground.

His heart still pounded, and he felt heat and moisture collecting in his eyes. His throat was tight. He was *not* about to cry! He took in as deep a breath as he could, and held it. Then, he pushed it out as hard as he could, clamping down with his chest muscles.

He stared at the wall opposite him, and tried to figure out why he was such a wreck. He thought he knew what he wanted—what he'd always wanted. And he was damned sure Alan was about to offer it. So, why was he freaking out? Why was he always in such a goddamned turmoil? What was it that made his life so... so tempestuous? Why hadn't two years of therapy fixed him? That ought to be enough to fix anybody. There must be something inherently broken and wrong about him!

He thought back on his last two years of high school. When he and Eric had been together, he'd been expected to provide regular blowjobs, but Eric rarely reciprocated, so he usually jerked himself off while he was blowing Eric. By their senior year, the sex had become pretty mechanical—almost mundane in its predictability.

After he'd gotten out of the hospital, he hadn't had sex of any kind for about a year. When the wet dreams started, he'd resorted to whacking off again, but not very often. In his second year at home, he'd found that he couldn't even get hard on the nights after he and Marilyn had spent the day in court, watching Eric's trial proceedings. After the day he'd testified, it had been weeks before he could get it up again.

By the time he'd started college—two years late—he was back to a pretty regular regimen of beating his meat, and that seemed to suffice. But, by the start of his second year at Duke, he was itching for something more.

Not sure exactly what he wanted, or how to go about finding it, he'd gone out to a bar and had started up a conversation with a nice-looking guy. They'd ended up in a bathroom stall with Cade on his knees. Having a hot, hard dick in his mouth after such a long time made Cade feel like he'd found an oasis in the middle of the desert. The silky smooth skin, the blistering heat, the guttural sounds emanating in concert with his ministrations—he'd actually been surprised by just how good it all felt, or, maybe more like, surprised that he'd forgotten.

He had managed to swallow most of the guy's load, and he wiped his chin on his sleeve as he stood up. He was about to ask for a phone number, but before he could, the guy was holding out a couple of twenty dollar bills and thanking him for a good time. It was one of those moments where everything changes, suddenly.

Now, eight months later, he could feel that man's sperm tingling on his tongue as if it had been only moments ago. And, he could feel the bizarre sense of power that had washed over him in the moment of taking the man's money.

A solitary tear rolled down his cheek. He swiped it away immediately, then wrapped his arms around his legs and rested his chin on his knees. A shiver ran through him.

He took a few more deep breaths. That was enough thinking. Thinking never got him anywhere, except into deeper shit. He told himself that Alan deserved better than a fucked-up jerk who couldn't keep his shit together. Someone who couldn't even face his problems, let alone share them. He doubted he could ever open up to Alan. Even a guy that patient wouldn't wait around forever. Better to stop hoping for that. What if he crashed and burned—totally lost his mind? Alan was too good to be dragged into that kind of shit storm.

Cade knew how to survive. He pushed up off the wall, and reached around to dust off his butt.

He gave his polo a tug to straighten it, and wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands for good measure. Scared? Hopeless? Broken? Fuck that shit! The one-and-only, original Cade Bishop had a way to fix this.

He stepped out of his concrete and gravel refuge, then strode across the street, and into The Bar.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim blue and purple lighting inside the club, he scanned the room. The crowd was sparse, as he'd expected, but the stale odor of beer and hot bodies lingered in the air. There was a guy sitting at the bar by himself, his back to Cade, wide shoulders in a painted-on shirt. That looked like as good a place to start as any.

He hadn't done this in over a month, but he'd lost none of his customary swagger. He walked right up to the guy and leaned on the bar next to him. "Hey, good-lookin', wanna have a good time?"

Cade's lascivious grin was met by an equally lewd smile on a face that Cade suddenly knew had probably not been called good looking in a very long time... if ever.

But, the guy was smiling, and nodding his head. "Whadyuh have in mind, suguh?" Cade found some southern drawls enchanting, like Sabrina's. This guy's twang was nothing like that. He couldn't even be sure if the slurring was due to alcohol, or if the guy just talked that way all the time.

"The alley out back is pretty private." He turned toward the door, indicating with a nod that the man should follow. As the man stood, Cade remembered the

consequences of making assumptions. He rested a hand on the man's chest. "Forty bucks for the best blowjob you've ever had."

"Yeah, fine... let's go."

He led the man out of the club and around the side to the alley, checking carefully as they went to make sure there was no one lurking in the gathering shadows. Satisfied that they were alone, he turned to face the stranger. The man somehow looked even less appealing in the dimmer light of the alley. There were sagging creases beside his eyes, and it looked like he was in the early stages of developing jowls. He tried to remind himself that faces didn't matter. This wasn't about the guy's face—wasn't about *this* guy at all. This was about what Cade wanted. Still, he didn't feel the usual rush.

"I been needin' this a long time," the man drawled as he dug a rather smallish penis out of his pants.

Cade shuddered and felt a lump forming in the pit of his stomach.

The man took a step closer, gripping the base of his cock with one hand and reaching out to grab Cade's wrist with the other, guiding it toward his hardening dick.

Cade flinched at the touch and tried to pull away, but the man held tight. "Where you think you goin' suguh?"

"I can't... look, I changed my mind, okay?" He tugged at the man's grip again, but it tightened.

"I don't think so. We have a deal, 'best blowjob *evuh*', didn't you say, suguh?"

"Stop calling me that, and let me go."

The man squeezed Cade's wrist and released his dick, grabbing at Cade's shoulder with his free hand and pulling him closer.

"I said let me go right now!"

"No way, boy," the man growled, digging his fingernails into Cade's wrist and pulling Cade's hand to his crotch. "You're gonna give me what I want, or I'm gonna take it!"

With those words, something snapped inside of Cade. It was like he no longer needed to put two and two together. All at once, everything made sense. He knew where he wanted to be, and it wasn't struggling in some dark alley.

He knew who he wanted to be with, and it wasn't the horny old bastard twisting his arm.

He yanked as hard as he could and wrenched his wrist free from the man's grip. He staggered backwards, stumbled, and then sat down, hard, on the concrete as he pulled his phone free from his pocket. As the man took a step toward him, he held the phone up and pushed a button.

The bright flash stopped the man in his tracks, and he put a hand up to his face. "What the fuck are you doin' you little sumbitch?"

Cade's fingers were flying over the touch screen. "Sending your picture to my boyfriend, the ex-Marine!"

The man shook his head. "You are one crazy motherfucker."

He hit *Send*, then held the phone up again, pointing it at the man as he slowly rose to his feet. His hand trembled slightly and his eyes darted around the alley as an image flashed through his mind of the last time he'd looked into eyes burning with rage. *Please let this work!* "I'm walking away. And you don't get to touch me!"

The guy must have had a few brain cells to rub together, because his face softened and he raised both hands in a gesture of surrender. "I don't need no trouble," he said, as he backed away. After a few steps backward, he turned and kept walking. "Crazy sumbitch," he heard as the man disappeared around the corner.

He checked his wrist. It hurt, and he could see where the fingernails had bitten, but there was no blood. He turned and walked the other way out of the alley.

Chapter Eleven

Sunday, May 11, 2014

7:00 p.m.

Alan sat half sideways in the old leather chair, his right leg slung over its arm, his foot bouncing, as he thought about how much his life had changed. Of course, the last few months had been nothing but change, with all the “*big*” changes—the ones others could see—like his injury, and leaving the service...

But that wasn't what mattered to him now. It was more like... how his *heart* had changed.

He thought back over the last five weeks since he'd met Cade Bishop.

As little *moments* flickered through his mind, it struck him how most of them included laughter... funny things Cade had said, or done... funny things Alan had said and done that wouldn't have happened if Cade hadn't been there... times that might have been annoying, or embarrassing, but being with Cade somehow turned them into fun.

Those few *moments* that were confusing, or painful—or both—they only underlined the one thing Alan couldn't get away from... and didn't want to. This young, arrogant, beautiful, self-centered, brilliant, sexy, young... very young man had stolen Alan's heart.

He had known the risks, and he'd taken them. Given the chance, he would do it all over again. Now, it seemed like only time would tell how those risks would be rewarded. He'd opened his heart, his life, his home. He had no regrets, but he couldn't make the man accept what he wanted to give. Would Cade Bishop be the great love of his life... or another painful lesson he'd have to figure out what the hell he was supposed to learn from?

He imagined how it would feel if Cade came back and handed him his key. Or, worse yet, dropped it in the mail. He blinked a few times, thinking of lessons he'd learned, some of which had been deeply scarred into him with physical pain. He wondered why this one threatened to hurt even worse. A tear slid down his cheek.

His heart leapt when the phone on the table next to him started playing “Getting to Know You”, from *The King and I*—another one of Cade's little jokes.

He picked it up and tapped the screen. A photo appeared of a big man with an angry look on his face. It occurred to Alan that maybe he wasn't the only one whose jokes fell flat sometimes, because there was nothing funny about the guy scowling up at him.

The phone vibrated and Alan tapped to get Cade's text.

>this fukr bugng me at th bar

>comng home now

Near-panic at the thought of Cade being in danger got mixed up in his head with the fact Cade had used the word "home" and he sat, frozen, for several seconds while he got the wires uncrossed. He sprang up from the chair and shot out the front door, not stopping to close it behind him. He flew down the hall and grabbed the top of the handrail to catapult himself around the corner into the stairwell. He almost took flight a couple of times as he bolted down the stairs two and three at a time. He slammed his way through the heavy front door and into the parking lot.

Dark thunderheads gathering in the night sky barely registered as he zig-zagged between cars to cut a diagonal across the lot and toward The Bar. He'd only gone a few more strides when Cade appeared around the corner at the bottom of the hill, heading Alan's way at a speed-walker's pace. Alan was about to call his name, when Cade looked up and, even from a hundred yards away, he felt their eyes lock. Cade started running, too.

He slowed down as Cade reached him, and he captured Cade in a strong embrace. Cade wrapped himself around Alan and sobbed. Alan held on tight and waited patiently until the crying stopped and Cade's breathing became more regular. He squeezed a little tighter. "Talk to me, Cade."

Cade heaved a sigh, but didn't move, his head lying heavily against Alan's shoulder. Finally, he said, "It feels so... so safe here."

He waited some more, then gave Cade another squeeze and said, "I may not have known you very long, but I'll bet there's never been a time when Cade Bishop was speechless."

Cade gave a weak laugh. He placed one hand on Alan's chest and leaned back a little, wiping his eyes with the back of his other hand. Then he made what looked to Alan like a brave attempt at a smile. "I may have done a little growing up tonight."

"Really?"

“Really.”

Cade just stood there, looking into Alan's eyes, so he thought he'd better prod a little more. “You gonna tell me about it?”

Cade turned his head to the side and looked out over the old ball field. Alan waited patiently for him to gather his thoughts.

“Four years ago...” Cade looked back at Alan, “...my boyfriend raped me.” Cade swallowed—hard—and took a deep breath. Alan felt his heart break a little. “It kind of brought my world to an end. Everything I had known... it was just gone. That's a big part of what hit me tonight. When that guy started messing with me, demanding, pushing, the very first thought that came to my mind was... this time, I had you!

“I knew—*knew*—you'd be there for me if I called. I knew I could trust you. When I heard that word in my head—*trust*... it was like, the last four years went flashing by on fast-forward. I realized that it's been four years since I trusted anybody, other than my folks, of course, and Sabrina... oh, shit!”

“What?”

Cade wiped his eyes again. “Sabrina. Now that I think of it, I guess I haven't trusted her... in some ways.”

Alan couldn't help smiling. “Like, trusting her to pick the right boyfriend?”

“Ouch!” Cade gave him a playful shove. “Okay, that's enough scrutiny for now.” Cade returned his head to Alan's shoulder, and Alan pulled him in a little tighter again... and waited.

“Although... um, actually, there's more...”

Alan almost laughed. He'd figured that once Cade got started, there'd be no stopping him.

“I realized tonight how important trust is. Trusting you... needing you... didn't make me weak. It made me strong.” A small sound escaped Cade. Alan thought it might have been a laugh, but he wasn't sure. “It helped me see that I can trust myself—that maybe I can take care of myself.

“You went through a war... well, I guess, two wars, and...” Cade looked up. “Look at you! You're this amazing, wonderful, generous, kind person. You actually seem to be happy! After what I went through... I don't know... I... it was like I didn't want to go on. I didn't know how.

“My mom and dad... Sabrina, they were there for me. They took such good care of me. It was like... I couldn't let them down, you know? I guess I just did the best I could, but it was for them. I knew they'd worry if they thought I wasn't okay, so I put all my energy into looking like I was.

“It's like I've been... numb, for the last four years... or frozen. I haven't really felt anything, except... well...” Cade laughed, “...worried—there's been *plenty* of worried.

“That Navy Cross got me thinking... I know they don't hand those out unless some pretty fucked-up shit happens to you. I mean...” Cade reached up and laid his palm lightly over Alan's heart. “These scars...” Alan brought his hand to Cade's wrist and squeezed gently, pressing Cade's hand to his chest. Cade's voice quivered a little. “They're permanent.” Leaving his hand there, Cade turned and looked out over the empty ball field again. “Bad shit happened to both of us, but—”

“Cade, it wasn't—”

“No.” Cade looked back. “I'm not comparing. There is no comparison. It's more of a...” Cade chuckled, “I guess it's a *contrast*.” Cade turned to look at a car that was driving slowly up the hill. Then, he turned back and gazed into Alan's eyes. “I'll never know what you went through over there, but whatever it was, however bad it was, it made you stronger.”

Now it was Alan's turn to look away. He didn't feel strong. He felt like this slender young man held his future in trembling hands. He desperately needed to know where Cade was going with all this, and the question must have shown in his eyes, because Cade said, “I can't even begin to imagine being in a war. I mean, what happened to me was bad... but... look, this isn't even about *what happened*. It's about what comes after the '*what happened*'.”

Cade stood straighter. “I learned a life lesson tonight, Alan... what happened to me, years ago... I let it win. Yeah, it was awful at the time, but afterward, I let it take over and run the show. I just couldn't face it... couldn't take it on. It didn't dawn on me till tonight, but I must have decided back then that I needed to keep everyone at a safe distance... maybe, if I didn't let anyone get close, then no one would be able to hurt me again.”

A gentle rain began to fall. Cade turned his face up into it and took a few deep breaths before returning his gaze to Alan. “When I look at you, I know I don't have to be this way. I know I can be strong too. But *strong* doesn't mean being the person I would have been if it had never happened. I always thought I

was supposed to... you know, just ‘*get over it*’ or something. Now, I think maybe I’ll never get over it, just like you’ll always have these.” Cade softly rubbed up and down Alan’s chest. “Now, I’m thinking maybe I don’t even need to get over it. I just need to figure out how to keep it from stopping me. I’ve missed out on four years of my life. If I’m not careful, I’ll miss out on you.”

Alan slipped his hand upward to cover Cade’s, where it rested on his chest. A thousand thoughts and feelings swirled in his head and his gut. His heart ached. He wanted to know more. He wanted to help Cade—to reassure him—to convince him nothing bad would ever happen to him again. He felt a crazy need to kill the motherfucker who had put this sweet, beautiful man through hell. But what he needed most was *this* Cade. The Cade who was strong enough to stop running. He had so many questions. There was so much he wanted to say. But he knew this wasn’t the moment—there’d be time later for all of that. He bent and pressed his lips lightly against Cade’s. Leaning back a little, he said, “We’ll just have to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Then he intertwined their fingers and brought their hands down between them as they turned up the hill and headed toward home.

Chapter Twelve

Sunday, May 11, 2014

7:30 p.m.

Cade got to try his new card key on the big glass door, because Alan hadn't grabbed his as he'd rushed out.

They walked up the stairs in silence, still holding hands.

Alan stepped aside at the door to the condo, nodding his head and motioning for Cade to precede him. When they were both inside, Alan closed and bolted the door, then turned and wrapped his arms around Cade's waist. He pushed him against the wall as he pushed his tongue urgently into his mouth.

Cade was relieved that nothing fell this time. Within moments he was lost in the passionate heat of the kiss. But then Alan eased up and pulled away, taking a deep breath. "Can we sit and talk for a while? You said a lot, but there's more I'd like to understand."

"We both know I love to talk, and I promise I'll tell you anything you want to know, but..." he reached out and started rubbing the heel of his hand up and down the front of Alan's sweatpants. "There's something I need from you first."

Alan gave a gentle shake of his head and then smiled. "In that case, how 'bout some music to set the mood?"

"You wouldn't happen to have the Pearl Bailey cast of *Hello Dolly*, would you?"

Alan shook his head. "I might have the movie soundtrack from *Peter Pan*."

"Seriously?"

"No."

Cade laughed. "Well, you know what you've got over there. You pick." He felt a spark from the way Alan was looking at him.

"I think I can find something appropriate." Alan went over to the shelves and ran a finger along a row of CDs. He pulled one out and slipped it into the player. The music started as he walked over to the window wall, grinding his hips with the rhythm of a heavy bass beat. He set about drawing the heavy burgundy drapes across the windows.

Cade didn't recognize the song. At first he thought it might be Barry White. But, no, the voice wasn't low enough. Maybe it was that guy whose father killed him... Cade snapped to attention when it hit him how utterly irrelevant the conversation in his head was, given what was happening right in front of him!

Alan turned from the windows and locked eyes with Cade. Cade couldn't help smiling as Alan slowly peeled his T-shirt, from the waist, up, over, and off. Alan tossed the shirt aside, without even looking to see where it landed.

Cade stood in the center of the room, transfixed.

Alan came around from behind the sofa and sat down on the arm, facing Cade. He crossed his right leg, placing a white leather ASIC with red and blue stripes atop his left knee. Alan looked up and riveted Cade's gaze. Then, he looked back down at his foot. He took hold of the end of one lace and pulled ever so slowly, tugging inch by inch until finally the knot gave way and he let both laces dangle, swinging.

For a moment, Cade didn't know if was Alan was trying to be sexy, or funny, but watching Alan's movements made Cade feel sexy, so he went with that.

Alan looked back up at Cade, then down again as he used both hands to slip the shoe ever so slowly from his bare foot. He wriggled his toes and flexed his foot a few times. As he raised his eyes to Cade's again, he raised the shoe as well, so that they were looking at one another just over the top of it. Without breaking eye contact, Alan flicked his wrist and sent the shoe sailing through the air. A big grin broke out across Alan's face and Cade felt his knees go weak.

Alan began to repeat the process with his left shoe, glancing up from his foot and locking eyes with Cade periodically, as if there could be any question that Cade's attention might have wandered. He had never witnessed anything like this. He had seen some grainy videos of male strippers on YouTube, but he'd never imagined his own private floorshow! Before Alan, the only person he'd ever gotten naked with was Eric, and there had been nothing the least bit creative about the way Eric undressed.

Once Alan was barefoot, he rose slowly to his feet and then slipped his sweats down over his hips, revealing all his perfect curves and bulges, beautifully framed and accented by a white jockstrap. Alan wiggled the rest of his way out of the sweats, then kicked them aside.

He sauntered slowly toward Cade. With each step, his hips swayed in time to the music. Cade thought he might pass out before Alan even made it over to him, but as Alan drew near, he managed to hook an index finger into the waistband of Alan's jock, steadying himself.

Alan put both of his hands behind his head, his biceps bulging, and he thrust his pelvis forward, grinding his crotch into Cade's. Alan closed his eyes and let his head sway gently back and forth as his hips bucked and rolled, rubbing against Cade. He could hardly believe his eyes. Here was this... this earthy Adonis... but he wasn't a God, he wasn't some fevered fantasy, he was hot flesh and coursing blood, writhing against Cade—his for the taking.

His attention was momentarily yanked away from the man before him when the refrain of the song started, and he realized it was Marvin Gaye singing about "Sexual Healing". He leaned in and ran his tongue slowly down the length of Alan's bicep, and kept going, all the way into the furry armpit. He paused there and inhaled deeply. The scent and taste of Alan was almost too much, and he began to feel dizzy.

He held his grip on Alan's waistband, and with his other hand, slowly rubbed the pouch that seemed to be stretched to its very limit. His palm and fingertips swept over the nubby texture of the fabric, the sensations intensified by the heat emanating from within. Alan moaned, and looked down, biting his lower lip.

Cade gave a squeeze to the pouch and a tug to the waistband. "Can I take this off you?"

Alan looked up—a gleam shimmering across the surface of two black pools. He nodded.

Cade hooked a thumb under each side strap where it met the waistband and then slowly slid his thumbs down the straps towards Alan's ass. Midway, he sensed the hollow depression formed where Alan's glorious glutes met his rock-hard thigh muscles. Alan's cheeks were dimpled on the sides, with the promise of power! Cade bit his own lip because he was afraid that if he didn't distract himself somehow, he might come in his pants.

He pulled both leg straps away from Alan's thighs as far as they'd go. Then he released them and they snapped against Alan's thighs. It drove Cade just a little wild to hear this gorgeous hunk of man meat whimper. He snapped the straps again, to draw that sound.

He slipped the fingertips of both hands into the wide, white waistband and pushed it down. The beautiful cock he'd been learning to love sprung out and slapped against the much-too-tight fly of Cade's jeans. He released the strap, and it slipped to the floor. Alan kicked it aside.

Alan undid the top button of Cade's 501's and then looked up. "We don't have to go any further tonight than we already have." He tugged on the sides of Cade's fly and the second button popped open. "To me, sex is best when there's no plan, when there aren't expectations." The third button separated. "Just go with the flow..." the fourth, "...do what feels good in the moment. I've loved everything we've done. I don't need more." As the last button popped free, Alan looked into Cade's eyes.

Alan pulled Cade's T-shirt over his head, and pushed his pants down. They both realized at the same time that Cade's shoes were in the way. They laughed as Cade seated himself in the armchair and let Alan finish stripping him off.

When they were both naked, Alan pulled Cade up from the chair, knelt before him, and started nuzzling his crotch.

Cade took Alan's chin in his hands and tipped his head up until their eyes met. "Uh-uh. We've done plenty of that." Cade tugged gently upward on Alan's chin, and steadied him as he stood. Then he leaned in close and whispered, "I want to know what you feel like inside me, Alan."

"You don't have to prove anything to me. I mean, there's no need to rush this. We could even try it the other way around first." Cade arched an eyebrow. "Don't get me wrong, Cade. I want you, but only if you're sure you're ready."

"How will I know till I try?"

Alan stepped back and looked Cade up and down, seeming to take in every inch of him. "Don't move." Alan turned and walked to the bedroom. He returned with lube and a condom. He placed them on the table beside the armchair.

Alan sat down, and Cade stepped before him.

Alan reached up and took hold of Cade's cock, saying with a playful pout, "It's too bad you don't want me to suck you tonight. I've only been doing it for a month, but it's like my tongue already knows every detail of you. Sometimes, when you're not here, I think about how you feel in my mouth. I imagine slipping the tip of my tongue up this long vein on the side..." he ran his index

finger along the vein, "...and licking circles around this crease between your head and your shaft." Alan traced the line as he described it. "Then, I picture flicking my tongue back and forth across this little ridge on the underside."

Cade was startled by how hot Alan's dirty-talk was making him. When Alan said that last bit about flicking the ridge, Cade's cock actually twitched in response to Alan's words alone. Cade didn't want to break the mood, but he couldn't resist the temptation. "Are you trying to say that your tongue knows my dick like the back of its hand!"

Alan's explosion of laughter knocked him against the back of the chair. He held his sides and rocked back and forth. Every time he appeared to be recovering, another wave would hit him... After a full minute, he was able to sit up straight again, and he wiped the tears from his eyes.

"Okay, so, my tongue is best friends with your dick... but, it hasn't even met your backside. What say we introduce them?"

"I've always liked making new friends," Cade said as he turned and bent over, playfully wiggling his ass at Alan.

"Not like that, Cade. Come a little closer and stand up." Cade complied and Alan slowly stroked him from his shoulders, down his sides, caressing his legs all the way to the ankles, then all the way back up, then slowly down again.

Alan fondled Cade's cheeks and then used his thumbs to spread them open. Cade would have given anything to be able to see what was going on back there, but it all felt so good, he closed his eyes instead and concentrated on sensations he'd never felt.

Alan pressed a finger to Cade's opening. Cade gasped. He clenched down and felt his hole beginning to wrap itself around the tip of Alan's finger. He gasped again and relaxed as Alan continued to knead his cheeks with one hand and finger his butt with the other.

Even with his eyes closed, there was no mistaking the difference between a finger and the hot, wet tip of Alan's tongue when it flicked across Cade's opening. Cade felt himself falling forward, but there was nothing he could do to arrest the motion.

Alan wrapped his arms around Cade's waist and held him tight. "I've got you, Cade."

Alan kept a firm hold on Cade's hips until he'd steadied himself.

“Turn around so I can see you.” Alan gently guided Cade’s hips as he pivoted. He reached over for the lube and squeezed a small drop onto the tip of his middle finger. “Are you sure you want this?”

Cade didn’t hesitate. “Sure as sure.”

Alan reached between Cade’s legs and pressed the slippery fingertip against Cade’s hole. Cade moaned as Alan pressed inside. “How is that, Cade?”

“It’s good.” Cade let his eyes fall closed and licked his lips as his head tipped back. As Alan’s finger began to move slowly in and out, he squirmed his ass, loving the feel of the penetration. “Mmm. Very good.”

Alan added a second finger, and Cade felt a tiny twinge. He stopped squirming as an unwanted, “urmph,” escaped his lips. Alan stopped. Cade opened his eyes and looked down into Alan’s.

It was obvious that Alan was worried about hurting him, and Cade wanted nothing more than to convey that Alan was blowing his fucking mind, and he didn’t ever want it to end. “Really, really good, Alan... please.”

Alan smiled. “Trust me with a little multitasking?”

Cade couldn’t imagine what might be next, but he nodded. He knew he could trust Alan with whatever he wanted to try. He felt Alan resume the two-fingered pressure on his hole, but just as he thought the twinge was returning, Alan’s mouth engulfed the head of Cade’s cock. Cade looked down and was dumbstruck by the image of his dick slowly disappearing into Alan’s mouth as teasing fingers twisted inside him.

It didn’t even seem intrusive when Alan worked a third finger into Cade’s butt. He could feel all three digits as they worked around one another, stretching him open until they were in as far as they’d go.

Alan stilled his hand as he slipped his lips up to the very tip of Cade’s cock. He took a deep breath. Then, those three fingers pressed deep inside, pulling Cade forward into his mouth and rubbing a spot Cade had heard about but always assumed was overrated. Suddenly, Cade felt like his dick was a mile long, and he could feel each and every glorious inch of it, from the tip, twitching in the tight heat of Alan’s throat, all the way down, deep beneath what he’d always considered the base, right down to where Alan’s finger rubbed... rubbed against what felt to Cade like the very foundation of his being.

Alan came up for air and then started a gentle rhythm, using his embedded fingers to pull Cade into his mouth and then guide him slowly out. Cade closed

his eyes again and gave himself over to a new world of sensation. He began rocking back and forth, matching Alan's motions. It didn't take long before he knew those sensations were about to overtake him. Cade could picture his entire body flying apart as every molecule exploded in a different direction.

He rested one hand on Alan's shoulder and with the other he tapped Alan under the chin. Alan looked up, without releasing Cade's cock from his mouth. "I'm ready, Alan," Cade whispered. "I've got to feel you inside me."

Alan slowly pulled off Cade's cock, trying to swipe the tip with his tongue as it bobbed away. He eased his fingers out of Cade's ass, and Cade felt a strange mixture of emptiness combined with the phantom sensation that something was still there. Alan slid out of the chair and sat on the floor in front of it. "You should ride me the first time. It gives you the control. If it hurts too much, or you decide you don't like it, you just stand up, and it's over."

Alan tore open the condom wrapper and sheathed his dick. He reached up with both hands and guided Cade's palms to the arms of the chair, showing him how to steady himself and control his descent. Then he squirted lube onto his cock and used one hand to spread it up and down.

Cade looked down into Alan's eyes. There was so much he wanted to express... but there just weren't words...

Epilogue

Sunday, May 11, 2014

8:30 p.m.

He's looking up at me. I gaze down into his eyes and any vestige of hesitation I may have felt vanishes in an instant.

I place my feet on either side of his hips and grasp the arms of the chair for support as I squat.

I feel the pressure of him, pressed against my hole. I pause, and relax.

Then I squeeze, pushing against it slightly, and the tip slips inside. I pause again to learn how this feels.

It's hot.

And hard.

And a little strange.

And very intense.

And very right.

I nudge myself down by degrees and feel it getting thicker—the same way it feels when it pushes into my mouth.

I feel it stretching me open.

It burns, but it's a good burn.

I take my time.

Little by little, I work my way down.

I tighten my grip on the arms of the chair as I try to sense all my other muscles and relax them.

It's odd, but the hardness of his cock inside me makes me feel strong.

I slide down farther.

At last, I feel his balls, tight against my crack. It's almost like they're trying to squeeze their way in, along with the rest of him.

I lower my eyes to find him studying me intently.

I wish I could know what he sees.

I wish I could tell him what I see.

A new feeling washes over me! Or, maybe it isn't new. It's like what I felt for Max so long ago. Or even what I thought I felt for Eric... Damn! I actually did feel it for Eric once... before everything got twisted beyond recognition.

Without warning, he clenches his muscles. It makes his cock swell inside me, and sets off a tingling that starts in my ass and runs straight up my spine.

His cock throbs deep within me.

“Alan...”

I want to say it.

Those bottomless black eyes draw me in.

I know he wants to hear it, but our gaze is too intense.

I turn my head aside and bend forward, my chest leaning against his. I rest my chin on his shoulder.

“What is it, Cade?”

His solid hands cradle my back.

We embrace in silence.

Our chests pressed tight together, I feel our heartbeats—his and mine—distinct, but inseparable.

I gaze at his shoulder until I find the courage to murmur, “I know what you wanted to say before... before I panicked.”

He nuzzles the side of my neck with his nose. “Don't worry about that now, Cade.”

“No, Alan... I need to tell you...”

In my heart, I know the day will come when I'll look him in the eye and say so much more.

“Alan... I think I'm falling for you, too.”

FIN?

Author Bio

Jonathan grew up in The South and, while this is his first work of fiction, he has been inventing tales for at least fifty years. He was probably also making stuff up during the two years prior to that but, as this was his pre-verbal period, there's no evidence one way or the other. An armchair linguist, he has taught himself to ask, "Where is the bathroom?" in seven languages. ~~He enjoys gardening,~~ He gardens, and enjoys red wines, cooking, theatre, and, of course, writing. Jonathan reminds himself every day how fortunate he is to have shared the best and worst of the last thirty-three years with the man of his dreams.

Contact & Media Info

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RANDY'S GHOST

By William Tate

Photo Descriptions

There are two photos to go with this prompt.

Photo 1: The first photo is of a fit, young, shirtless man, with disheveled blond hair. He sitting, hugging his knees, with his eyes closed and eyebrows slightly drawn. Clearly, he has lost something or someone. He himself seems lost.

Photo 2: The second photo is a man in a crisp dress shirt with dark hair and eyes. There is a sadness to him as well, as if he is waiting for someone that isn't coming.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

[Photo 1]

This is Randy, a 28 year old researcher. Ever since his car accident a month ago, he's felt completely lost. Wrong. He swears a puzzle piece from his soul is gone, but he can't explain it. He looks around his home and knows, down to his bones, that something is off. He can't sleep because of nameless nightmares and when he does finally sleep, he wakes up in the morning reaching for something that isn't there. That was never there. He knows he's losing it when just looking at the framed pictures in his apartment or knick-knacks that have no meaning, creates an unexplained anger. He wants to throw them across the room—destroy them. But only certain pictures, certain items. His anger makes no sense. Nothing makes sense anymore. His friends start to worry about him and think he needs to get out. Maybe meet someone. After all, he hadn't even gone out on a date in well over a year.

[Photo 2]

This is Chilton. He works for a med-tech agency from the future. When he was assigned the case to go back in time to obtain the info they needed (some data not recorded because it wasn't relevant in our time, but will be then: Ex. Experimental drugs for chicken pox, common cold, etc.) it was a simple task. Randy was researched and found to be the best person to infiltrate because he had access to the lab and it would cause the least ripple effect. After living with Randy for a year, it wasn't so simple anymore. With his assignment completed, Chilton had no choice but to return to his own time, and to wash Randy's and

everyone else's memory of him before leaving. Even his image was deleted from their pictures. But months after Chilton's return, the pain of leaving Randy behind is still with him. He'd loved before, but not like this. When an unexplained ripple is found, he must return and welcomes the chance to see Randy again, even if Randy can't remember him. He thinks if he sees Randy has moved on with a good life, he'll be able to move on too. So he goes back years (years in our time, not his) after he's left. What he didn't expect was to find that Randy had never moved on—with or without the memory of the time they shared—or that Randy's life is in a shambles it was never meant to be in. But, especially, the extreme pain of loss in Randy's eyes.

All Chilton knows or cares about is fixing it. But how?

Sincerely,

Jessa

Note to whichever wonderful author picks this: Okay, I know this was wordy and exact, but please feel free to change anything and have fun with it. I just want the general feel of what I've written but I'm be pleased as punch to be surprised too. The only thing I ask for is an HEA for poor Randy.

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: time travel, scientist, switch/versatile, masturbation, amnesia

Content Warnings: drug use, mild violence

Word Count: 23,582

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RANDY'S GHOST

By William Tate

He woke and reached out, Randy's heart seizing up as his hand made contact with nothing at all. There should be something... someone. There had never been a someone, a lover, so why was Randy so sure there had? He always slept in the middle of his bed, sprawled out. Nowadays he stayed to one side like he was making sure there was enough bed for... for... Who? His heart raced, his head started to pound, and he tried to remember what it was he had obviously forgotten, but no answers surfaced.

Every morning was the same.

Randy closed his eyes and tried to will himself back into the dream that he could scarcely remember. Back into the arms that held him so tightly, breath that rippled against the back of his neck, the lips that nudged and nuzzled at his ear. And the voice? Deep, calming. He never saw what the man looked like, but he could imagine from instinct alone. With any luck he'd meet a man like that someday.

When he woke from one of those dreams, he felt completely at peace, until he reached for his imaginary lover to bring him closer, to kiss him, hold him, and found only a bare, cold pillow. When had he gotten a second one? It didn't make any sense. Randy lived alone, always had. So many things didn't add up in his life.

Randy gazed over at his dresser at the photos he had on display. Why did he have a picture of himself sitting on a bench alone with the goofiest grin? He didn't ever smile like that. In another picture there was clearly an empty spot next to him in a group of friends. Empty like his heart.

Dragging his laptop onto the bed, he woke it up and went to the search bar. Typing in "gay men cuddle" Randy sifted through the images with a sad smile. He came upon more than one photo of a man cuddling a pillow. Not just any pillow though, one of those specially made ones meant to mimic someone holding you. Sleeping alone used to be a pleasure, now it was torture. He navigated through the sites until he found the perfect one. Now he was getting a boyfriend pillow? How pathetic could he get? But here he was, placing the order anyway. Would that make things better or worse, he wondered. Randy

imagined the feel of waking up with something at his back and an arm around him. It would be heaven. Then reality would set in, and he would recall that he was only ever someone's lover in an unobtainable dream. With a sigh and a roll of his eyes, Randy canceled the order and slammed his laptop shut. The only way to fix this problem of having no boyfriend and to cure his loneliness was to do what his friends said and get out there to search, meet people, and date. That or hit the sex store and get one of the blow-up variety. He wouldn't have to pretend to be attracted to or love an inflatable boyfriend.

On that note... Time to take a very cold shower before he could start his day. He didn't even have it in him to conjure the image of his dream lover or a celebrity or the guy at the Laundromat. What was the point? Taking himself in hand only reminded him of how lonely he was. Afterwards, Randy dressed for his job at the lab. As he fastened the last button at his throat, his head dropped.

There wasn't anywhere to go today or any other day. He's gotten so wrapped up in his daily routine that he'd forgotten he didn't have a job anymore.

He'd discovered he'd been fired after calling his employers to inform them of his need to take at least a few weeks off due to injuries sustained when he was hit by a truck. "Let go" is what they said. Something about him leaking testing results and stealing files. He had no idea what they were talking about, but the files were signed out under his name and had gone missing. Before he could investigate and try to clear his name, he'd been blacklisted in the scientific community, tossed out of chat rooms and research facilities. It didn't matter if he figured out how he'd been framed, which appeared unlikely in any case. Randy wasn't to be trusted, they said. He'd never work in a lab again.

A run was what he needed to clear his head, but he was still far from being able to handle one. Walking could be doable though. In retrospect, maybe he shouldn't have invited his friends along if he wanted to get away from it all. It had been awhile since they'd been together, though. He couldn't remember when the last time had been.

"You have to come with us tonight," Dan said.

Randy shook his head.

"We could hit a gay bar then, just for you. As long as you promise to say we're a couple if someone comes on to me."

Randy smirked but stuck with his decision. "No, I think I'll stay home."

"Come on, man, this isn't at all like you. Ever since that damn crash—"

“I bet he has a boyfriend.” Michelle chimed in. “That’s why he doesn’t want to go out looking for a guy. He already has one. Where are you hiding him?”

Close, he thought, I had one. Without a doubt he had. It was the only thing that made sense. What had happened to him? Did he abandon Randy when he had the accident? Was that the guy he remembered leaning over him before he passed out? Had Randy kept him so secret that even his closest friends and family didn’t know of him? Maybe they had a huge breakup right before the hit-and-run, causing his lover to clear out everything that belonged to him, inevitably forgetting a few things behind—the objects that Randy couldn’t place. What had he said to him that was so awful he would disappear from the face of the planet? How could either of them have walked away from something this strong? For all Randy knew, he passed the guy on the street regularly and he didn’t even say hello. What was he like? What had they been like together? Sometimes he wished he had died on impact when the truck hit him. Bystanders say he ran right out in front of it. He’d been tempted to have a do-over. The gnawing pain clawing its way through him must certainly be far worse than death. At least he wouldn’t be suffering.

He heard his name break through the chaos of his thoughts and stammered an apology.

Dan jogged circles around him. “I said, ‘Do you want to go to the movies with us?’”

“Nah. Really, it’s cool.”

“You gotta get out there,” Dan said. Apparently his best friend was not on the Randy-already-has-a-guy bandwagon with Michelle. “How else are you going to meet someone?”

“I did,” Randy said, then sighed when he realized it was out loud. Damn, he must seem insane to them. Who knew, maybe he was.

His friends exchanged a quick worried look, and Dan nodded once sharply, giving Michelle her cue to jump back in. “How about we come to your place then?”

“Guys? I seriously just want to be alone. Okay?”

“You say that now,” Dan said, “but later you’ll be rocketing through Tumblr trying to find the perfect video clip to jerk it to, and you’ll wish you’d have gone out with your best buds, so at least you could add my fine ass shakin’ it on the dance floor to that spank bank.”

“Wow, Dan. Really?” Randy muttered shaking his head. He was right, though. Dead-on. That was exactly how his night would end. It was kind of disturbing that he knew it. “Am I that predictable?”

“Yep,” Dan said and moved right back into dictating how the night was going to go. “We’ll get a pizza and watch movies—”

Michelle raised her hand. “I’ll bring snacks!”

“It will be like old times.”

As much as he hated being alone, at least he could entertain the idea of this lover he had in his dreams, think about what his presence in Randy’s life had felt like. “I really appreciate everything you are trying to do for me here, but—”

“Nope,” Dan said flatly. “Not taking no for an answer, Randy. We’ll see you at seven.”

He looked from one to the other of them, Dan’s stern look, and Michelle’s rapid, smiling nod. He blew out an exasperated breath. “Fine.”

Michelle jumped up and down like a toddler, her dark hair bouncing, shouting, “Yes!” She broke into a fit of giggles when people sharing the sidewalk with the trio shook their heads at her.

Randy couldn’t help laughing with her. If he was a heterosexual man, he’d date someone like her. Full of life and love and joy, always making him laugh. People said he’d been like that once too. They’d have made a great couple back then, but Randy was gay, not bi, and Dan had a serious crush on her, even if he wouldn’t admit it to her or himself. “Okay. I’ll see you both tonight. You might get there before me. I have to pick up my laundry. You know where the key is, let yourselves in and make yourselves at home.”

His new way to sort laundry included a pile of whose fucking clothes are these? It was by far his least favorite trivia game of all time. Wondering about what kind of man would wear these things took up most of his concentration. Some of the articles of clothing might be his from the period of time he couldn’t remember, but not all of it. This one was not his style, that one not his cut, not his size. His phantom boyfriend left more than emptiness behind. There were clues everywhere that spoke of his existence. The question was, where was he now?

“Something’s wrong!” Chilton exclaimed, “He wasn’t supposed to remember anything. They swore.” Chilton stroked his fingertips lovingly over

the monitor displaying Randy going on with his life without him. “They swore, even with me interfering with his death, that he wouldn’t remember a damn thing! I know him, Atric. He isn’t going to dismiss that nagging feeling as a stupid fantasy. We fucked up. I fucked up. They pulled me out of there so fast, they missed more than they usually do during clean up.”

“Yes,” said Atric, his favorite field analyst, and the closest thing to a friend he had, quickly flipping to a screen with numbers and random data. “I know, C, but...”

He tilted his head back and breathed in deeply. “But recovering the rogue items now will only make him more suspicious when they go missing. I know. There has to be something that can be done.”

“How does your father feel about your, for lack of a better word, entanglement with this target?”

“Randy. His name is Randy.”

“Was. What you mean to say is ‘His name was Randy.’ Chilton, it isn’t healthy to think of this one or any of them as being alive. They’re all dead.”

Chilton clenched his jaw. Atric knew not to use his hated first name when addressing him. People were always mutilating the pronunciation and Chilton preferred not to hear it in any case. He loathed the name his father gave him and insisted on calling him. He also refused to acknowledge Atric’s statement and how cruel and detached it was. Targets were only thought of as exactly that: targets. “My father doesn’t know. He can’t know. Ever.” He gave Atric a pointed look. “I can’t risk what he would do to him.”

“He would be none too pleased. Your secrets are safe with me. As far as I am concerned it is not anyone’s affair but your own.”

Chilton slowly exhaled a pent up breath. “Thank you.”

“You know if I come across a loophole, something that makes it so that you can go back... would you?”

“In three shakes of a lamb’s tail.” When he looked at him sideways with a frown, he amended, “I would, in a nano, Atric. I’d give up anything to see him again.”

“You time crossers and your fancy ‘lingo.’ You all say the oddest things after a long mission. I can barely understand you.” Atric tease lightly, but mirth soon faded.

“I was gone a long time, wasn’t I?”

“Longer than most. Shorter than some.”

Chilton nodded and silently pleaded for Atric to help him.

Atric sighed. “I cannot promise you anything.”

“The hope is enough for now,” Chilton murmured. He gave the field analyst a bow in deep appreciation, that the other man returned with an incline of his head, and briskly left the premises. They could both get into megatons of trouble for what they’d been discussing, as well as for Chilton’s brief view of Randy. Any contact at all with a subject after the mission was complete was punishable. Not by death, that would be far too humane, but by exile. For one of his breeding, a time crosser—as close to a god as anyone got—being stuck in their own era, cut off from history and the rise and fall of future civilizations, was the worst imaginable punishment. For someone in love being trapped millennia apart—there was no greater torture. Except perhaps if they took him to Randy’s grave or he was forced to watch his death over and over, and they brought the dust of his bones as a gruesome keepsake.

Every chance he got, he asked Atric to show him how Randy was progressing, much as it pained him to watch his nose dive into darkness. At least he is still alive. It was all that kept him going.

“I can’t watch you destroy yourself,” Dan said. “You know I’m here, we’re here to help you, but you have to want the help. I can’t force you to get clean and stop making porn.”

“There’s nothing wrong with what I do—with making porn. When did you get so judgmental?”

“Dude. Randy. I’m not judging you or anyone else. You all have your reasons for doing it. We all have our reasons for watching it too. It’s hot. I’m just saying that this is not the way for you. It’s killing you. It’s literally killing you, and we can’t sit by and watch it happen. You need to get out of it before it’s too late, before you catch something or get jumped when you’re fucking in an alley.”

“What are they going to take from me that isn’t already gone?!” Randy shouted back.

“I know you think you lost someone—”

Randy scoffed. “I did. How many times do I have to tell you? I have the proof!”

“Randy, buddy, that’s all in your head. There was never a man. He doesn’t exist. You haven’t had a boyfriend since that brief fling you had just before college. Unless you count the time you got drunk and felt me up.”

“No. He was here. He was. I can see him sitting right where you are now. And he said... he said... he told me...” Randy growled as the memory must have slipped down and out of sight, banging his palm against his forehead repeatedly. “Come out! Come out of there, I know you are in there!”

“Have you considered getting a psych eval or checking yourself in?”

“I don’t need to be thrown in the looney bin.”

“Maybe you do. They could help you there, Randy. They could take care of you. Get you clean. Get you off the streets and away from some of the scum I’ve seen come in and out of this apartment, and you wouldn’t have to worry about the rent or anything else except getting well!”

“No fucking way. You all think I’m crazy. I’m not. He was here. He was. I can feel him... I hear him. I see him. He isn’t just a ghost. Would a ghost leave all this behind?” He tossed clothing at his friend from the pile in the corner of his room. Chilton’s clothing.

“No, but those dudes you screw would.”

Chilton, watching the exchange from hundreds of years in the future, hung his head. Randy’s life had spiraled out of control after they had attempted to erase Chilton from his mind.

“This pile of shit was here before them.”

“Then a shopping trip you forgot about.”

“Not my size.”

“Hell, I don’t know, maybe you took them out of the lost and found.”

“Why the hell would I do that?”

“To freak us the fuck out like this. Is this one of your stupid, not at all funny pranks?”

“No! I swear to you, Dan. I swear there was someone, more than someone, he was ‘the one,’ as sappy as that sounds. He was everything to me. I can feel it.” Randy quickly spun around, staring wide-eyed at the chair in the corner where Chilton would sit and watch Randy pace around the room, talking him down from being nervous about a report he had to give at work. “I see him

now,” Randy whispered and walked toward the ghost of Chilton’s memory he apparently saw there. “He’s here. Dan, can you see him?”

Dan’s hand came to rest on his shoulder, squeezing lightly. “Randy, I’m sorry. There’s nothing there.”

Randy slumped and slid to the ground

“Let me help you. You have to get help.”

Randy nodded numbly. “No one there. Never was. Never will be.”

Chilton backed away from the screen and said, “I’ve seen enough.”

“Someday,” Dan said softly, “you’ll find someone.”

“No one there, never was, never will be,” he repeated several times more rapidly and rocked back and forth.

“Atric, turn it off!” Chilton shouted.

“Michelle!” Dan yelled over Randy’s chanting. “Call them. Tell them we’re bringing—”

The screen went dark, but Chilton couldn’t switch off the images he’d subjected himself to.

He’d spent so much of his life telling, even begging people to call him anything other than his first name. Randy though, the way he said it had made Chilton’s chest tight with grief. Grief for the parting that was coming, and soon.

“Chilton,” he gasped as his body arched gracefully off the bed, his head thrown back.

Not yet, he thought, stay with me. He moved to his knees and slipped his arm under Randy, pulling him up, their mouths meeting in a frenzy. Carefully, he sat back, losing the warmth of his lover only for a moment before Randy settled himself onto Chilton’s lap, meeting his eyes as he slowly took him deep inside of himself. Chilton groaned, the sound shaken by his shuddering.

He’d miss this most of all, the moment when their bodies meshed together, and Randy’s clear blue eyes peered into his, pleasure etched into his features. Nothing but pleasure and joy. What would he look like, Chilton had thought at the time, if, after I’m gone, he knew that I had existed? Would he go mad? The answer was far worse than he could have imagined. Worse than the most skilled extractors had witnessed or anticipated.

They slowly rocked together, Randy's hands sliding up and down Chilton's back, fingers digging in every few seconds as the pleasure built up again. Randy's eyes rolled back and fluttered shut. Chilton kept his own open, watching and memorizing every expression that came over him. He wanted to remember this forever, long after Randy forgot his name, and even after his bones decayed.

Gripping his ass, he guided Randy to lift up and down as Chilton began to thrust upwards a little more urgently. Randy's erection was trapped, grinding between their stomachs, and leaking now. His arms tightened around Chilton. Their lips found each other, the deep kisses only breaking for harsh grunts and moans traded back and forth.

Chilton switched off the memory enhancer device. He didn't need to see the rest; he knew what came next. Powerful orgasms for them both, and he'd cried on the inside as they'd lain in each other's arms afterwards, because he knew what Randy could not. That it was the last time they would ever come together.

There had been three more last times during that night.

They had taken turns until they were both sore and achy inside and out. As Randy had drifted into an exhausted sleep with the most satisfied, content smile on his face, he'd murmured, "Chilton... I love you." Long after he'd thought Randy was asleep, he'd whispered those words back. The truest ones he'd ever spoken.

Chilton hadn't slept that night or any other since.

He'd pulled this same job a few times before, his extensive training in the era Randy lived in made him an ideal candidate for missions conducted during his time period. He always went in thinking it was no big deal. It wasn't like he'd get attached even after all the time he and the target spent together. No point to anyhow, since soon enough he'd be zapped back to his time and leave his generous host behind with zero memory of their time together.

He'd made the mistake of falling for the first assignment. Leaving him behind had broken Chilton, and he'd sworn to never allow himself to be that vulnerable again. With Randy, he'd failed to keep his own promise. Had he loved outside of the missions? Yeah, once or twice, but again, nothing too terribly serious. Mostly he'd done what his mission entailed: befriending men, and sometimes women, to infiltrate their lives and gain access to something they held the keys to.

It wasn't unlike what Randy was doing now when he used those men. For sex, for drugs, for money, or shelter and food. He didn't care about any of

them; how could he when his heart was elsewhere? Even though they'd attempted to thoroughly remove all traces of Chilton from his life and memory, it seemed something in him knew that there had been a someone for him, and now he was gone. Chilton could relate, except he knew what he was missing. The ache in his chest was the gaping hole in his heart Randy once filled. The twitching of his skin was from waiting for a touch that wasn't coming. The throbbing deep inside his body from yearning to be joined with him. How was he supposed to move on, especially knowing that Randy never had and was suffering without understanding why? You can't fill a void you can't see, and you can't mend a heart you don't know has been broken.

Surely going from the peaceful, bright, optimistic, intelligent man he'd met to this mess of a human being he'd become was enough of a ripple to warrant going back. He seemed to be aging right before Chilton's eyes. He couldn't last long like that. How long had it been since he ate a proper meal or had a night of rest? For that matter, how long had it been for himself? And the drugs, the powders, pills, and the needles. If he hadn't contracted something already, it was only a matter of time before his luck ran out. His life was never supposed to turn out like this.

They'd met in a Laundromat, a rather strange place to meet the love of a lifetime. Then again, Randy Porter was only supposed to be one of many targets, not someone to affix his soul to. Randy would soon be instrumental in healing thousands of people from Chilton's own time. The research he was doing would be seen as completely useless by Randy and the world he inhabited. It wouldn't be reported or written about anywhere other than in his meticulously kept notes. People were dying, and Chilton's directive was to retrieve everything he could from the lost files of one Randy Porter. The easiest way to do this was to insert a spy into Randy's life, someone that could get close enough that the target would let his guard down and ideally invite the agent into his laboratory.

It had started with an innocent comment about Chilton's cinnamon-flavored candies. He'd discovered them on a previous mission and was obsessed with the flaming-hot treats. Randy, it seemed, hated them with a fiery passion. He'd said as much when he'd spotted the box as they did their laundry side by side. It wasn't a coincidence, of course, that they were meeting.

Chilton had popped several candies into his mouth at once, grinning at him, and immediately regretted the decision to show off. He teared up and ran for

the drinking fountain. Randy bent over double, laughing at his misfortune. Once he stopped, Chilton returned to his station, feeling a lot less confident about gaining Randy's interest. That is, until Randy introduced himself and shook his hand, which Chilton held on to longer than was necessary.

"I'm Chilton. It's pronounced Shil-ton, but it is spelled with a C-H. You know what? Don't worry about it. I hate my name. Call me C. Everyone else does."

Randy's nose wrinkled as if the suggestion carried with it an awful stench. "C? I don't think I can do that, man."

"Why not?"

"It's a letter of the alphabet, not a proper name. Do you have a middle name?"

"Yeah. But all parts of my name sound terrible and start with C."

"Humor me."

"Cordell. Chilton Cordell Chillemi."

"That's not so bad."

Chilton scoffed. It absolutely was that bad. He'd never liked his name and never allowed anyone to use it. His father used it regardless of his annoyance over it, or maybe because of it.

"It's a good thing it isn't spelled with a K. Three Ks? That would be a disaster." Randy smiled at Chilton's obvious confusion. "Hmm... I could work with Cordell. Let's see. Cor. Corey. Dell? Any of those sounding okay?"

They all sounded fine to Chilton. Randy could've called him anything he wanted, especially if he smiled like that. However, it didn't matter. No matter how Randy saying his name made him feel inside, in a few months he'd be long gone.

Randy looked up at Chilton when the silence stretched out between them. "I'm sorry, am I getting ahead of myself?"

"What about you?" Chilton said, abandoning the shirt he was attempting to fold and turning to study the target. "Do you prefer Randy?"

"Yup. I don't use my middle name. It was my dad's name, and he walked out on my family when I was still pretty young. Not something to divulge to a perfect stranger though, huh?"

Chilton laughed softly. “You know my full name and that I hate doing laundry and love flaming-hot cinnamon candies”—he stuck his tongue out to display the red stains. He’d be bringing a case of these back with him—“and now I know you come from a broken family and don’t like your father.”

Randy got busy sifting through the clothes in his basket. “It’s not that I don’t like him. I don’t even know him.”

He nodded. “I understand how that can be. I see my father nearly every day, but I don’t know him. Not like a son should.” He frowned, thinking about the last thing his father had said to him before his jump. “You know what he said to me the last time we spoke?” Hundreds of years after you will be dead and buried, he thought. Thinking about that was going to put a major damper on this mission.

“What did he say, Chilton?”

“He said, ‘Perhaps you will finally be of some use after all.’” Chilton clenched his jaw and stared into Randy’s clear blue eyes. “I’d say you and I are past the complete stranger phase of this relationship now.”

He’d thrown that word—relationship—out there on purpose, hoping to get a reaction from Randy that he could use to wedge himself deeper into his life. With any luck he’d manipulate Randy into giving him what he came for and get back to his own time stream before something serious developed between them. Randy seemed like a good guy, someone that, if things were different, Chilton could see himself with for real. Major ripple or no, he hated to be the one to send the other’s life off course. The quicker the mission, the better.

As Randy’s hand patted his shoulder and stayed there, squeezing reassuringly, Chilton knew he was already in too deep.

In the end, Randy decided to call him Chilton, no matter how many disapproving glares he got from him. But Chilton hadn’t yet stormed out, so he figured Randy assumed he’d get over it. Randy was right.

They chatted as they each folded their laundry, Randy holding up the conversation mostly. Chilton was more guarded, although friendly when he did respond. His attention was divided between absorbing everything the guy had to say and trying to figure out how to further things along without completely ruining his chances.

“Hey, Chilton?” Randy said. “Do you wanna maybe, I don’t know... go grab dinner with me?”

“Yeah, sure.” Chilton responded after a stunned moment. Randy had seemed more the type to wait for someone to ask him, or at the least get to know someone better before asking them out. “You know, I was going to ask you to point me in the right direction anyway. I’m starving, and I have no clue where to get a good meal in this town.”

“Not a date then. Got it.”

He almost seemed disappointed. Chilton opened his mouth to correct him and let him know it could be a date if he wanted it to.

Randy blurted out, “Do you like burgers?”

“Who the hell doesn’t like burgers?”

Randy shrugged. “I don’t know... Vegetarians?”

“Well, thankfully for you, I’m not a vegetarian. I definitely like my meat.” He could hear Randy swallow nervously. The unintentional message had been delivered. He hadn’t meant it the way Randy took it, but why correct him if it got him exactly where he needed to be?

“Okay, then,” Randy chuckled nervously. “Leave your basket here, we can pick it up later. I know the perfect place.”

It really was perfect. The food not so much—not when you were used to getting whatever you wanted at the push of a button—but the company was excellent. Beyond compare. Randy was everything Chilton might have looked for in a lifelong partner. Smart, funny, witty, kind. He’d held the door for so many people it was a wonder they ever got into the restaurant. He’d also overheard one of the customers lamenting about not having enough cash to get her child a drink or herself a meal, having left her money in a different purse. Instead of ignoring the child’s wailing and turning away or staring and rolling his eyes like everyone else, Randy paid for their entire meal. And Chilton knew in his gut that this wasn’t an act to impress him. It was the way Randy was.

He commented on it, telling him what a great thing he’d done. Randy shrugged it off like it was nothing.

“They needed help,” Randy said, “and I was able to help them. Anyone would do the same.”

Not so, Chilton thought, but he didn’t want to dash this innocent boy’s view of the world. He couldn’t see the ugliness even though it was all around them. Even now, there were people watching them as they sat together. Were they laughing too much? Was it that his hand came to rest on Randy’s for just a

moment when he talked about his dad? Why were people so intimidated by a simple touch?

Chilton craned his neck to view a very affectionate, young couple, a man and woman, kissing a few booths over. He did see one or two looks of disgust, but most people ignored them like it was normal or secretly smiled behind their menus.

He decided to push it and leaned over the table to get closer to a stunned Randy. His face was near enough that Chilton could feel Randy's breath on his cheeks, sweet from the soda. He had intended only to get close and judge the reaction of the other people in the restaurant, but this near to him, he could care less what others were saying or thinking. If there was to be a kiss, Randy would have to make it happen, Chilton was as far across the table as he could get without climbing on top of it.

Randy's gaze dropped to Chilton's mouth. There was a sharp short breath, and his eyes drifted back to the plate in front of him. "Um I..."

Well, shit. He'd scared him. Chilton moved back to his side of the table and laid into his own burger, cursing himself for messing up their friendly dinner. Should have kissed him anyway. Stabbing his fork into his fries violently, he jammed the whole lot of them into his mouth.

He heard a soft laugh and looked up to see Randy smiling at him. "You could have just kissed me," Randy said, echoing his thoughts.

Finishing his mouthful, Chilton swigged his soda and wiped his mouth with the napkin. "Am I too late?"

"Um, yeah. The moment is pretty well dead, Chilton. Better luck next time."

"Determined to call me by my first name, eh?"

"Guess so."

"Next time?" He studied him closely. "I thought I'd killed the mood." *Which would make it impossible to complete his mission.*

Randy shrugged and picked up a fry, twirling it between his fingers, watching it thoughtfully before making it dive into his ketchup puddle. "I'm an optimist," he said and popped it into his mouth. "Within reason."

Chilton walked Randy home. Actually, it started out as Randy walking Chilton home, but they passed Randy's place first.

He set his laundry basket down and indicated the building with a sweep of his arm. "This is me."

"So, I guess I can just find my way from here. It looks familiar. We must be close to my apartment."

Chilton could feel the heat coming off of Randy as he moved closer, and Chilton reached out to shake his hand. Instead those blue eyes gave him a slow down-up gaze, Randy's chest rose and fell once, and then he leaned in, placing his mouth close to Chilton's ear.

"Do you want to come up for a drink?"

It was a cliché move, but quite effective as it turned out. Chilton nodded and followed him up the steps. The moment that the door to Randy's apartment closed behind them, Randy dropped his basket of clothes, and Chilton did the same. Randy advanced, backing him up a few steps, and then Chilton had found himself flat on his back on what must be a couch, Randy on top of him.

"Oh, shit," he gasped as Randy's hips collided with his and started to grind.

"I need this," Randy said, leaning down and taking his mouth hostage with his lips and tongue. "I don't usually do this," he continued breathlessly, "not so soon, but I need this."

"I do, too," Chilton groaned, as he gripped Randy's ass and tugged, causing even greater friction. He was reeling from their first successful kiss. Heated and frantic, it hadn't been the kiss of true love, more like pure lust, but he'd loved it. He'd take anything Randy gave him, he only hoped he could give back half as much before it was over. "I'm going to come if you keep doing what you're doing," he said with some amount of surprise. Chilton hadn't thought they'd be this into each other and definitely not from the beginning. No one had ever keyed him up this fast.

"Then, come," Randy said, completely unabashed. "You can always take a shower after."

"No, I couldn't impo—"

"Play your cards right and you might not have to take it alone." Randy grinned and starting humping against him in earnest.

Hard to argue with that. Hard. Yes, they were both rock solid, and a shower would be wonderful. A shower with Randy's naked body pressed to his. The hot water and soap, slippery skin and, fuck yeah, you better believe he was

going to at least thrust against him and grip him in his hand. Pumping between his thighs and licking at his ear, his neck, he'd bite gently until they both—with a loud shout, Chilton came, followed shortly by Randy, their seed caught on the insides of their pants, chests heaving against one another.

“Next time,” Chilton panted when he caught his breath, “we’re doing this naked.” There would be no need for the inner fantasy reel then.

“You’re so sure there will be a next time all of a sudden. What’s gotten into you?”

“You.” At the slight frown Randy gave him, Chilton added, “Your joy. The way you’re looking at me now, it’s different than before. It’s telling me to trust this feeling that you’re glad you invited me up, and that even if I leave right now, we haven’t seen the last of each other.” He smiled and laid his palm on Randy’s cheek. “Do I have a reason to believe that?”

Randy nodded. “Hmm, you do.” He leaned down and kissed Chilton. Not the frenzied attack of earlier but a slow brush of lips and tongue, prying him open—not that there was much resistance on his part. Chilton welcomed him in, opening his mouth slowly to let Randy inside and wound his arms around him. Their tongues stroked together, pulling a deep moan from Randy, and he began the measured, even thrusts against Chilton. “Again,” Randy said. It wasn’t a question nor a demand, merely a simple fact stripped of politeness. We are doing this again.

But, this time, Chilton had other plans. His hand ran down Randy’s back across his hip and into the front of Randy’s pants where he grasped and squeezed the head of his cock.

Randy froze then began hurriedly unfastening his pants and tugging them down. He started on Chilton’s next.

“What about that shower?” Chilton said

“After this. Might as well be good and messy, don’t you think?”

Chilton’s mouth went dry.

Things went on like that for longer than most men would allow in his experience; weeks of the teasing strokes and lots and lots of kissing too, but not taking it any further than that first encounter. There was plenty of between-the-sheets action, with each of them letting the other have the occasional orgasm to

let the pressure out. The majority of the nights they got together, though, were spent hanging out like they were old buddies meeting up for the first time in years, but with a good amount of groping thrown in when the mood hit. Tonight might be different.

Chilton was in the shower, and he was running late. By now he should be dry, dressed, and ready to walk out the door to wherever they decided to venture this evening. Randy would be there any second, and there wasn't any time to prepare for his arrival. He soaped up his hair and quickly rinsed it out right as the knocking began. Turning off the water and wrapping a towel around himself, he went to open the door.

Randy took one good look at Chilton and laughed. "It would have been okay to let me wait, or yell out that you were in the shower."

"Did I miss some?"

"Yeah, it doesn't look like you rinsed at all. Actually, it doesn't look like you let it create suds before trying to wash it away."

Chilton ran his hand over his hair and felt how slick and slimy it was. "I was in a hurry. I didn't want to risk you getting bored and leaving or thinking I forgot about you."

Randy smiled, shifting in a way Chilton had come to understand was his way of adjusting a painful hard-on. "Can I?" Randy said, moving closer to the threshold.

Chilton stepped aside to let Randy in. "Hey, I'm just going to get back in and finish up. I'll be right out."

Chilton left Randy in the living room and returned to the bathroom. Jumping back into the shower, he gave his hair a more thorough washing.

Randy shouted over the running water, "I brought food and movies. I thought we'd stay in tonight."

"That's a great idea!" he called from the bathroom. "I'll be right with you."

Seeing Randy—especially the way his eyes lingered as they swept across him, and the slight shift he did that meant he was getting aroused from seeing Chilton in his dripping wet state—he hardened and throbbed. That would be no way to greet the other man, especially if this was only friends hanging out. He was never certain with Randy. Sometimes they had a charge between them and couldn't keep their hands off each other, and other times Randy played the

innocent, the friend. Maybe he should have answered the door naked, that would have shown Randy what kind of mode he was in. He let himself think about it, taking himself in hand and stroking to that fantasy. Answering the door, soaking wet and bare as can be. Randy would drop the food and DVDs and launch himself at Chilton, the door getting slammed shut behind him. Together, they'd rip off Randy's clothes. No barriers. Skin on skin, wet, sliding...

His pants grew harsher, echoing off the shower tiles, and he was mortified to think that Randy might hear him. As his groans started to become more uncontrolled, Chilton bit hard into his arm to silence them or at least dampen the noise.

Finally scrubbed clean, emptied, and dressed, Chilton came out to join Randy.

"What happened there?" Randy said, gesturing to the angry red mark on his arm, only partially hidden by his T-shirt.

He should have known that Randy would notice it. "Oh, that?" He cast about in his head for an explanation. "Dog bite?" It sounded much more like a question than he liked, but maybe Randy wouldn't pick up on it.

The other man's look challenged him, playfully. That gleam in his eye, the slight smirk, it only made him want to go back into the shower, dragging Randy with him.

"You don't have a dog."

Chilton wondered if Randy would get that look if he wrestled him to the ground and—"Ran into one walking home from work." He didn't have a place of employment yet, but Randy didn't need to know that. Courtesy of the agency, he had a bank account and papers in place that would ensure his well-being for at least a few months. After that, he needed to get his own money.

"Musta been a big dog to get you there."

"Yeah, I mean, not really. I squatted down to pet him, and he bit me. Dog must not have liked my hair or something."

"Uh huh... Listen. I know those marks are human. You don't have to hide from me."

"They're not like... no one did that to me. I'm not hiding someone in my bedroom or something."

“Self-biter, then? Nothing to be ashamed of. You know, we all jerk off. I did just before I left my apartment.” Randy shrugged and finished setting up the meal, opening containers and scooping rice onto both plates. That was not helping; the image of Randy cranking one out minutes before coming to his door. “I hope you don’t mind though. My friends Michelle and Dan will be over in a few hours. I promise I didn’t tell them where you lived, but they followed me here the other day, and they need to make sure you’re real. They’re giving us some time to ‘get to know one another better’”—he put air quotes around the suggestion—“eat, and watch one movie. I can cancel their invasion with one quick text, but I’m only allowed to do that if we’re... unable to accept company.” Randy grinned. “No pressure. Honestly. I’m good with whatever you want.”

The inside of his boxers rubbed and massaged him as he crossed the room and took Randy into his arms. “Well, I don’t know. Start with dinner and movie and see where it goes?”

“You know, I could have taken care of that for you.”

“I’ll remember that. Next time, I’ll ask.”

“Next time,” he echoed.

“Randy?”

“Hm?”

“I really like being able to count on a next time.”

“Me too, Chilton. Now eat before it gets cold, I’ll start the movie.”

He let him put the movie in but set his plate on the table. Grabbing Randy around the waist, Chilton tugged him into his lap. “Food can be reheated and eaten when your friends get here. I can’t have my way with you in front of them.”

“I don’t know if that is true. Michelle would think it was hot!”

Chilton chuckled. “Regardless. I want you all to myself. Besides, I don’t need your friends watching and calling me out on how awkward I am.”

“I think it’s sweet and trust me, they wouldn’t be correcting you, but would damn sure say something about my sloppy execution.”

Sloppy. Slippery. Saliva dripping down his cock. “I like the sound of sloppy.”

That gleam appeared, lips pulling up at one corner. Randy got down on his knees in between Chilton's legs and bypassed everything. Biting just above the top of his shorts, he clamped his mouth onto his cotton-clad dick. Chilton groaned, his muscles bunching, lifting him off the couch.

"Easy, baby, I'm just getting started."

Chilton sought out his eyes, watching them closely as Randy unwrapped him. His eyes widened, and he let out a soft gasp, reaching down to adjust himself. Taking him in hand to stand his cock up straight, Randy shifted and hovered his mouth above it. Those lips he enjoyed kissing lazily, feverishly, and everything in-between, and that he'd fantasized and thought about encircling his passion-thickened cock—they did just that. He turned his head quickly, without thought, biting hard into his own bicep as he shouted.

The smile in Randy's eyes seemed to say, "Dog bite, eh?"

Waiting for Chilton's verdict, Randy held his finger over the button to hit send on the message telling his friends to find other plans. They hadn't replaced all of their clothing yet. The meal laid untouched, the movie long since over and stuck on the main menu.

Chilton bit Randy's lip and dragged it between his teeth. "Will they mind if I kiss you in front of them?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On where your hands are, and how sloppy the kiss is."

"Mmm..."

He laughed. "You really do love that word, don't you? Will you cream your jeans if we go out to eat and order sloppy joes?"

"Depends."

"Depends on what?"

"On if your hands are under the table or you meet me in the bathroom."

"Cramped and gross. No thanks. I'll just get you worked up and take you home to my nice clean sheets."

"What's wrong with mine?"

“Nothing. In theory,” he added in a mutter.

Chilton frowned and waited for him to elaborate on his answer.

“I still haven’t actually seen the inside of your bedroom, you know.”

“Oh. We are changing that right now,” Chilton said, picking Randy up, his legs automatically locking about his waist. “We’ve got a few minutes.”

Randy laughed, and Chilton matched it. No one had ever made him feel this full to bursting with joy. A little voice in his head nagged and reminded him that it wouldn’t last. Precious few moments like this would be afforded them, but for now he would enjoy every second.

A rap on the door had his head whipping to the side.

“Chilton?” Randy guided his face back to look at him. “They can wait out there.”

Yeah, they could wait out there the rest of the night. He kissed Randy and blindly fumbled for the door knob, pushing through and laying Randy back onto his unmade bed. Towering over him, Chilton practically purred, “I like the sight of you in my bed.”

“You’ll be seeing a lot more of it,” Randy said, wiggling out of his boxers. Chilton gripped himself and started tugging.

“Chilton, no more fucking about. You have a condom?”

Chilton’s brain short-circuited. He stared down at him dumbfounded and unable to form a thought. Tonight would be different after all.

“It’s alright. I’ve got one in my wallet. You never know when you’ll need one.” He sat up, and Chilton pounced, pressing him back into the mattress.

“You stay,” he whispered, brushing his tongue over Randy’s slight pout. “I’ll get it.”

In the living room, he could hear two people, a man and a woman, arguing over who would top and who would bottom. Chilton wondered himself but was happy either way Randy wanted to play it. “We’re coming, just give us a second,” he said shakily.

“I don’t think you are. I don’t hear any screaming,” a female that must be Michelle said.

“Geez, Michelle. Don’t scare the guy off. Seriously though, Chilton, is it? Just do your thing. We’ll be out here listen—er, waiting.”

“And listening!” The two of them fell into excited discussion about Chilton and Randy’s sex life.

Chilton came back into the room to find Randy lazily stroking himself, his eyes hooded.

“Did you find it?”

“No, I...” Chilton watched Randy touching himself, moving his hand up and down. “They’re out there waiting to listen in on us. But I think we shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

“They won’t mind, trust me.”

“And, look, I didn’t want to say it before and risk sounding all attached and whatever.” He sat on the bed next to him. “I don’t want to have to rush it if we—”

“When.”

“What?”

“You said ‘if’. It’s not ‘if’, Chilton, it’s definitely ‘when.’ When we have sex.”

“Okay... when. When we have sex, and I hope it’s soon.”

“Now?”

Chilton grinned. “Not now. Moment’s over. Not that it needs to be perfect or all romantic or anything. But that’s not to say I don’t like you like that.”

“I really like you, too,” Randy said. “If that wasn’t obvious enough.”

Chilton leaned down and gave Randy a long, drawn out, passionate kiss. Not that he had much choice now that they were here, but Chilton decided he wouldn’t mind the extra company. The chance to show the people that mattered most to Randy—that cared about him—that he cared too. It was a dangerous game, adding in more people to the overall lie of their relationship. When had it become a relationship exactly? No matter. It was now, Chilton thought with surety. Pulling back slowly, he opened his eyes, watching Randy peer at him, seeing the same amazement in his eyes that he was experiencing. “What about now?” Chilton murmured, playfully.

Randy laughed and dragged him across his body. “I’m good with waiting, I know you want to. And really, I would rather we didn’t have,” here he raised his voice, “the obvious audience.” Everything went quiet in the hall. “That

doesn't mean we can't enjoy ourselves a little." He glanced down his own body to his raging erection and ground it into Chilton with a loud moan.

Chilton groaned in response. "How long before they bust the door down?"

"Few minutes, maybe, if we stay quiet. They'll think something is wrong if they don't hear some action, and they will in break in to rescue me."

"Well, let's not disappoint them." Chilton immediately moved down Randy's body, kissing the tip of his arousal.

"I'm clean, I promise."

That wasn't even a concern for Chilton. He took the head of his cock into his mouth. If Randy didn't care, that his friends were listening in, then he sure as hell wouldn't either. Especially since it wasn't Chilton's moans they would be hearing, not this time. That honor was all Randy's.

Chilton sat in the chair in the corner of Randy's living room, watching him pace and talk on the phone. It seemed that his lover had to leave and was none too pleased about it. He ended the call, hung his head, and sighed.

"I have to go in to work," he said and looked up at Chilton, "I'm sorry, the movie will have to wait. Again."

"That's alright, it happens. I guess, call me when you get back?"

"No, forget that. You can stay here. I'll run to the lab, get the tests in, and I'll come back, and we'll finish the movie."

"You sure? I mean, yeah, I'm okay with that if you are."

"Yeah. No sense in you having to leave and come back." Randy walked over and helped Chilton up. "Because, I'd definitely," Randy kissed him softly, "want you to come back. I'm going to make last night up to you."

"Last night was amazing."

"It could have been." He wound his arms around Chilton's waist.

"No, Randy, really, it was. All of it."

"I should have told them to go, shouldn't have let them come over at all."

"I liked meeting them. They're very nice."

"They really like you, in case that wasn't glaringly obvious." He chuckled lightly. "They'll probably dump me and keep you."

“Don’t even think it. I can tell you are all very close.”

“Yeah. Pretty close. Do you have anyone like that back home?”

“No, I don’t.” Chilton hugged Randy. He didn’t really have anyone, not anymore, except for one of the data analysts, Atric. He was a friend, though they weren’t nearly as close as Randy was with his friends

“I sense a story there.”

“I’ll tell it another time.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry I have to go.” His arms tightened around Chilton then abruptly let go. “Okay, I’ll be back. I trust ya not to rob me blind.” Randy winked. Chilton flinched.

The door closed, and Chilton stumbled back to the couch. Robbing him was exactly what he had in mind. He glanced over at Randy’s laptop, which was purring and throwing off way too much heat on the table in front of him. It was open and running. No password required, all he had to do was point and click and steal everything he had. He had to for the sake of all of those people, but could he do it after what Randy had said? He hated himself. He hated the system he worked for, but he didn’t have a choice. They were all counting on him to deliver. If this held what they were looking for, Chilton would be recalled, probably before Randy could make it home to him. He’d never speak to him again. They would never get the chance to make up for the interruptions of the night before, never hold each other again. More than likely, though, they would leave Chilton there to collect all of the notes that he kept at the laboratory as well.

He removed from his pocket the small device they’d given him in case an opportunity like this arose. It was slim, metallic in color and makeup, silvery in the light, and it could hold the data to a thousand super-computers, supposedly. It had other uses he wasn’t privy to knowing. Such a small trinket, and yet it could bring down or restore worlds depending on the whim of the user. Chilton stared at it, then finally set the device next to Randy’s laptop and watched the theft occur.

Waking to Randy’s kiss was interesting. One moment he was dreaming, the next Randy was peppering him with kisses, working his way from shoulder to his mouth and focusing his attentions there.

“Mm... hi. I hope you don’t mind I fell asleep.”

“No, no, of course not. I took much longer than I thought I would, sorry about that.”

“It’s not a problem,” he said and smiled sleepily. “I’m glad you’re back.” He swung his legs over and sat up, running a hand through his hair. Taking in Randy’s haggard appearance, he said, “We can do this another time. I’ll get going now, so you can get some rest.”

“Come to bed with me.”

The edge in his voice, the hardness, clarified the reason he wanted Chilton to stay. He didn’t know how to respond to Randy’s raw need. He’d been hoping for it, begging for Randy to have a burning desire for him, but faced with the flames, he wasn’t sure he’d make it out of there unscathed.

Clearly mistaking his silence for tiredness, Randy helped him stand and stepped back to give him room to stretch. “If you can’t keep your eyes open, we’ll just go straight to bed, and you can sleep.”

“Suddenly, I’m not all that tired,” he said.

“Then maybe we’ll pull an all-nighter.” Randy smirked and took his hand, leading him to the bedroom.

Everything looked the same as it had the last time they’d managed to make it to this room, except for the large box in the middle of Randy’s bed.

“I made a detour on the way home last night. Well, we made a detour. Michelle and Dan insisted on coming with me.” He urged Chilton forward and sat on the bed, taking off his shiny, black dress shoes. Chilton reached for the box and lifted the top. Inside was a pillow. He took it out and looked over at Randy, puzzled.

“I wanted you to be comfortable when I finally persuaded you to stay overnight.” He smiled and started to unbutton his shirt, which Chilton’s eyes tracked. “Keep looking, there’s more in there”.

“I rather like what I’m looking at now.”

Randy playfully rolled his eyes and stopped stripping, much to his disappointment. “Please, look in the box, Chilton.”

Chilton grumbled, but he turned his attention back to the gift box, finding a long cozy robe and basic toiletries inside of it.

“There were matching slippers, but I didn’t know if you were a slippers kind of guy or what shoe size to get.”

Saying nothing, Chilton tossed the pillow onto the bed, put the rest of the items into the box, and came over to take over where Randy had left off with

the buttons. Before long they were both naked and stretched out together, happily kissing, laughing, and rolling about the bed.

This was it. He was it. And yet they wouldn't last through the change of the season. How fleeting their love affair would be, sweeter because of it. He had to think of it that way, or he wouldn't be able to deal with the knowledge that it would be over before it really began. He wouldn't be able to enjoy himself, revel in the love he found regardless of its tragic fate. Their love would be staying here—in the past... and it would be forgotten. He couldn't change any of that, he only had an impact on the here and now, and even then, only as long as this mission lasted.

“Chilton?” Randy said with a cautious narrowing of his eyes. “Where are you in your head right now? You seem miles away.”

Light-years and centuries, he thought. “I'm sorry. It's nothing. I'm here with you.”

“You better be. After all we went through to get here.” Randy grinned.

Chilton chuckled, and the pair wrestled some more, Chilton winding up on top with Randy's hands pinned above his head. He gazed down at Randy for a long moment before placing a sweet kiss on his lips.

“I rushed home to you.”

Chilton really liked the sound of that, and he smiled warmly.

“I may or may not have broken a few speed limits on the way.”

That, he did not like. “Randy... While I do like the image of you hurrying home to be with me, please, don't put yourself in danger. If something were to happen to you...” Chilton let go of his hands and stroked his cheek tenderly. What could he say? “I'd be lost.” That was the truth. The mission would fail, and he'd lose someone he deeply cared about. He'd never be the same. “It's reckless. You could get killed or kill someone else or—”

A warm, strong hand wrapped around his awakening erection and squeezed possessively. Chilton stopped lecturing, gave a pained moan, and dropped down to kiss Randy, forcefully delving into his mouth. Later, they would talk about Randy's disregard for his own safety and his very unfair way of deterring Chilton from making his views known. However, as his lover so eloquently intimated, it wasn't time to argue.

Chilton shifted off of Randy enough to slide his hand down to play with his cock until it too grew and hardened, then moved his fingers down to rub around

his rim. Very slowly he pushed the tip of his middle finger in while kissing him, sucking lightly on his tongue. Randy whimpered. Chilton took it as a sign to continue and went further, slipping the finger in and out of the tight channel.

Randy fumbled blindly in his bedside table and produced a bottle of lubrication and a condom. It appeared to be the very same one he'd come so very close to using the night prior. Taking his hand away from Randy's ass long enough to apply lubrication to it, he reinserted his finger, slipping a second in and gently pumping and massaging his gland. Randy bucked and undulated his hips, begging for more with his moans. He was ready, and Chilton couldn't wait a minute longer to finally feel his tight chute around him, to be one with him. Chilton rolled to the side, kissing him, nibbling his lips. Quickly and efficiently, Chilton slid the condom on and covered it with a generous amount of the lubrication.

"I don't think I've ever wanted anything as badly as I want this," Randy breathed.

"Mm. Then I better not keep you waiting any longer." Chilton pulled Randy's leg up and to the side and prodded at his ass a few times before he found the right angle. He apologized for fumbling, worrying that he'd hurt him.

Randy kissed him softly and said, "We'll work on that. Through lots and lots of practice." He grinned, and they both laughed lightheartedly, sharing several more deep kisses while Chilton tried and succeeded in sliding into Randy all at once.

Chilton shouted, Randy groaned harshly, and they both held that position, hips flush with one another, Randy's walls encompassing his entire shaft. Chilton lowered himself again to curl his arms under and around Randy and gave him a series of featherlight kisses; Randy linked his hands behind Chilton's head. Then they began moving together.

With slow, shallow thrusts from Chilton and the wave-like motions Randy met him with, what were soft kisses gained pressure and heat. Chilton opened his eyes to find Randy gazing at him in a way he'd only dreamed he would. He was in love. It might be weeks or more before Randy knew it himself, and even more before he would say it out loud, but it was clear that he was already feeling it. Chilton couldn't stop it now, even if he wanted to. He closed his eyes again and softened the kiss, sighing happily, and leisurely making love to him. It was a new experience for him, this gentle, steady climb into heaven itself. He usually preferred it a good deal more rough, and certainly, they wouldn't always be so sweet with one another, but right now, his soul was crying for it.

Every tender sweep of Randy's tongue or skim of his fingertips across his neck as they made love brought him closer to being whole.

Hitting a plateau that could have gone on forever, Chilton increased the pace and intensity only enough to get Randy moaning once more. He repeated the pattern of sweet kisses, then rougher ones, then back to sweet, then kicking up the speed of his thrusts. When Randy began writhing under him, and they were moaning into each other's mouths, Chilton pushed himself up and really let him have it, railing into him again and again. Randy moaned continuously, gripping his hips and grinding against him. The muscles of his ass squeezed him as Randy drew closer to orgasm, but Chilton beat him to it. He gasped, his balls drew up tight, and he yelped as if in pain as lightning struck his spine and shot through his cock. Erratically, he pumped into his lover, groaning loudly as he spilled load after load. He collapsed on top of Randy, sprinkling kisses across his chest and throat. Thank you, he thought with each press of his lips. Harsh breaths blew across his heated skin, and Randy's fingers sifted through his hair. Neither of them spoke, afraid to ruin the moment, but they were far from done, at least as far as Chilton was concerned. He didn't leave lovers hanging, and Randy—though he'd obviously thoroughly enjoyed what they were doing and wasn't complaining—had not climaxed. As soon as Chilton recovered, he discarded the used condom, tore open another, then slipped it on and pushed back into Randy.

The deep purr of satisfaction Randy let out as he filled him hardened him in record time, and soon they were panting again. Chilton sat back and tugged Randy's legs over his shoulders. This change in position let him shove further into his ass and nail his gland more effectively, as was evidenced by the sharp increase in Randy's volume, the loudest he'd heard him yet. Mere seconds later, Randy blew, spattering wetly against his own abs, his body bending and twisting. He was beautiful to watch, and the display catapulted Chilton to the brink. He pulled out carefully, ripped the barrier free and stroked himself off, painting Randy's still twitching abdomen, their essences pooling together. A shower would definitely be needed after this, which was absolutely perfect. Attempting not to smear it further, Chilton dipped to seal their mouths together, kissing him through the end of his groans.

He dropped to his knees on the shower floor to take Randy into his throat. Randy obliged willingly, but after a few thrusts he stopped Chilton.

“I’ve been dreaming about fucking you. Spinning you around in the shower, grabbing your hips, ramming into you, and fucking you hard. Are you interested?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Randy gave him a hand in getting to his feet. “I’ll go easy since it’s our first time. I can’t promise I always will.”

“I hope you won’t.”

“Oh, shit.” He frowned. “I forgot the condom. But I’m clean, I swear.”

“I believe you, but I don’t know if I am or not.” He could be carrying something deadly from the future or have picked it up during a previous mission, an illness innocuous to Chilton but a death sentence for Randy. “I’d rather be safe, Randy, I’m sorry.”

He nodded. “It’s okay, I understand. We could go down and get checked out together to make sure. Since we’re probably going to be doing this a lot.”

“Yes. Absolutely, yes.”

“I’ll still wear one for you. Loosen those hips for me.” He winked and stepped out of the shower, not bothering to grab a towel. “I’ll be right back.”

While Randy went to get protection and hopefully some waterproof lubrication, Chilton put his hands against the wall and scooted out, bending slightly at the waist, feet moving apart. He gyrated his pelvis slowly in each direction, swung from side to side and front to back and around in circles.

“Good boy,” Randy said upon coming into the bathroom and witnessing his blind obedience.

Chilton peeked over his shoulder to see Randy jacking himself slowly and started to turn.

“No,” came Randy’s firm command. “Stay just like that. Keep moving your hips.”

Chilton complied, getting a surge of pleasure from being ordered around by him. He hated when others barked orders, but from Randy it was hot.

Randy slipped in behind him, his hands soaped and gliding over his body. “Grip your dick in your fist and pump it five times, then, no matter how good it feels, let go of it.”

With Randy touching him like that, his hands getting closer and closer to that tight ring Randy had expressed great interest in impaling, only five strokes turned out to be torture. By the fifth, his body was convulsing. Randy's fingers pulled him apart, his thumb popping in then out again several times. The sound of the condom packet being torn open rent the air. The crinkle of it being taken out and rolled over Randy's cock set his heart racing. A few clicks and a squirt later and cold gel coated his opening.

"Please..." Chilton whimpered.

Stretching him gently with his fingers, Randy curled them, pressing right on the pleasure epicenter then pulled out. Chilton barely had a chance to moan before it was over.

"I hope I was worth waiting for," Randy murmured, cock nudging at his ass, his lips dragging across Chilton's shoulder. Kissing the back of his neck, Randy took a deep breath and inched in.

Chilton groaned, "Uhn... Ah, yes, more than worth it," he panted, "So much more than worth it."

Randy was exceedingly better at this than Chilton had been or at least the position gave him an advantage. It wasn't awkward at all when Randy slowly pushed into him. Randy's arms locked about him, hand tilting his head in order to kiss and suck at his lips. Gliding smoothly inside of him, Randy pulled all the way out and shoved back in. Chilton pushed his ass back into Randy, and on the next thrust, their bodies slapping together harder. The moan that came out of him made Randy growl and ferociously slam into him, and he didn't let up after that, jackhammering his ass. His breathing sounded like a speeding freight train against Chilton's ear. As Chilton gripped his hand tightly in his own, Randy's other hand came around and grasped him loosely, soaping up his dick and slipping his hand up and down the length—first slowly then in time to his punishing thrusts. Chilton struggled to breathe. He tipped his head back, and when he finally did breathe, it was to shout Randy's name as he came violently, shooting against the tiles, and his seed mixed with the soap on his skin to make a thick froth. Randy frantically kissed his neck and jawline and held him around the waist to keep Chilton from collapsing into a heap on the shower floor. Suddenly Randy's body stiffened, ramming even harder into Chilton, and his groans became louder. He jittered to a stop, heaving a breath, then drilled him again a few times before pushing in to the hilt, tremors wracking him.

Once Randy's erratic breathing evened out, Chilton slowly stood and let his lover fall from his body. Turning to face him, he gathered Randy into his arms

and swore to himself he would never let him go. How he wished he could have honored that oath

“Stay here tonight,” Randy said some time later, pulling Chilton into his arms. They’d cleaned up in the shower after Randy had that orgasm. Chilton still wasn’t sure how he had started out on his knees, sucking in Randy’s length, and ended up with it buried in his ass. Now, they were back in bed, holding each other in a more intimate manner than they had before. Randy kept nuzzling his neck, and his hand was lying across Chilton’s chest as if trying to keep his heart from flying out. “Don’t get up and leave after I fall asleep. Promise me. I want to make you breakfast.”

“I promise,” he murmured and kissed the hand covering his heart.

“If it isn’t obvious, this means we’re definitely not just messing around.”

“I gathered that from the mounting evidence. I swear to you, I never was.” It was the truth. He’d never pretended with Randy, and this was always more than physical for Chilton, more than the assignment as well.

“Good to know.” Randy pulled him in more snugly. “Ignore him,” he said and adjusted himself so that his dick wasn’t poking Chilton anymore. “He has this insane idea that we’re going to have hot, steamy sex again.”

“Are we?”

Randy yawned. “I would love that, but I don’t think I have any more energy.” Randy nibbled his ear playfully. “I’m getting old. Not a teenager anymore, as they say.”

Chilton knew, if he was looking at him, he’d see his smirk and that mischievous gleam in his eye. “You are most certainly not old. I’m older than you, and you have your whole life ahead of you still. But suit yourself,” he taunted. “Goodnight, Randy.”

He counted down in his head, three... two... one... and Randy flipped him over, their lips crushing together. His lover found that burst of energy he claimed to not have. Chilton had never had a better night’s sleep before or since.

The memories came faster now. Each blissful night and day blurred into the next, lingering during moments that stood out more than others, such as their last moments together.

It was only a handful of weeks after that first time that it all came to a screeching halt. Perhaps it had been closer to four months, five? He'd lost count. All that mattered was how happy they'd both been. Sure, there was the occasional mild scuffle, but it was never for more than a few minutes and always ended in outpourings of affection. That last night Randy had finally said what was in his heart, and the next day Chilton had left him bleeding in the street.

Chilton watched Randy check and recheck the lab notes in front of him, his brow furrowed in concentration, the pencil *tap tap tapping* at the paper.

As if he sensed his eyes on him, Randy looked up and smiled, holding up one finger before turning back to the task.

Lunch could wait. Science couldn't.

Randy often said that. He was right. While Chilton was playing house with Randy, people were suffering back in his own time. When he returned he wouldn't be coming in at the same time he left. There was always a displacement period ranging from a few hours to a few months or, rarely, years, so any time he spent frivolously here in the past was robbing another person of their very life. He'd had to make sure he was really wedged firmly into Randy's world, so that he'd let his guard down, and Chilton could swoop in to take the rest of the files he was sent to retrieve.

After another minute had gone by, Randy unlocked the door to the lab and motioned for Chilton to join him. The moment had come. All he had to do was take that blue, overstuffed folder that was sitting right on the counter, and he'd have everything he came for.

How, though? How could he take that folder without Randy noticing? Randy greeted him with a discreet pat to his arm and picked up the object in question, opening a drawer and placing it inside.

"I brought clothes. Pull up a chair and wait for me here. I'll get changed, and we can head out, alright? I'll let them know I'm taking an extended lunch." He lowered his voice, putting his mouth close to Chilton's ear. "Maybe we can make use of that nice clean bathroom I scoped out at the restaurant." He jerked upright and headed for his locker, leaving Chilton devoid of senses. Then he thought of his directive and sprang into action.

Chilton had to avoid Randy until he could stash the folder somewhere he could pick it up after Randy went back to work. Simple enough in theory, hell

in practice. As soon as they were free of the building, Randy's professional demeanor fell away, and he kept purposely colliding with Chilton, groping him. Luckily, the folder was tucked into the back of his pants, hidden by his shirt, and so far he had been able to dodge any major advances. But they'd been apart for too many hours. Randy backed him into the first alley they passed, and before Chilton could blink, Randy had Chilton's jeans undone and falling off his ass. The files tumbled out onto the dirty pavement.

"What's this?" Randy demanded in scarcely a whisper.

"Randy, I'm so sorry," he said and tugged his pants up.

"That's it? That's all you have to say? I let you into my apartment, my bed, my—We—" His voice choked off. Chilton closed his eyes. "And you were only after my work this whole time?!"

"I'm going to explain everything, Randy, but very soon you won't remember any of it."

"You're crazy if you think I'm just going to forget that you've been stealing from me. Fucking me to get to my research. And here I thought I'd found someone I could..."

"I did too, believe me," he whispered in vain.

"No, I'm sorry. I won't be forgetting that. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to work before they notice there's been a security breach." He shoved past Chilton and crouched down to collect the scattered documents.

"Hate me. That will actually make everything easier," Chilton muttered then bent to help him. "I have to tell you something."

"I don't want to hear it, Chilton. Just go and leave me alone."

"I will. After I tell you. I know you don't want to hear it, and soon it won't matter, but I have to say it anyway."

Randy rolled his eyes and let out an exasperated sigh.

Chilton took the little file-stealing machine from his pocket and showed it to Randy. "I was sent here from the future. My mission was to retrieve these files to save people from my time that are dying from several very common illnesses. The entire contents of your laptop is on here, but I'm also supposed to bring your physical notes back. Something in your research holds the answers to saving them all. I don't know the details. I was given a directive and sent here, to you, to carry it out."

There was a long silence then Randy turned to him. “Help me clean up the files, so you can get home to save them.”

“How can you believe me so easily when I just told you that I’ve been lying to you since the day you met me?”

Randy went on picking up his notes, pursing his lips in thought. Chilton left him to his thoughts, and once they had the folder back into some semblance of order, Randy stood. Confusion and also grief flickered in Randy’s eyes. “I don’t know if I do or not but you see, I don’t have a choice. My boyfriend—who is all kinds of, well, not normal, and who has never seen most movies or shows I can come up with—takes out some weird futuristic-looking device and tells me he isn’t from my time. He’s on an important mission to save his people, and I’m supposed to, what, tell him he’s crazy and blow him off? What if you are telling the truth, and I don’t help? Do people die?”

“Randy, I—”

“Do. People. Die?” he repeated with emphasis.

“Yes, they will die without the information I have collected from you. You are their best chance. If I failed the mission, I would be sent somewhere else in time in an attempt to retrieve it or...” Chilton set his mouth into a grim line. They’d kill Randy for it if they had to, especially if his father or those in his employ had any say in it

“Or what?”

“It will not come to that. I won’t let them hurt you.”

“Death threat or not, I choose to believe. Why would you make up something as ridiculous as that? Take them,” he said and handed his research over to Chilton.

“You are a remarkable man,” Chilton said, pride infusing the words. “I’m honored to have met you.”

“You did much more than meet me.”

Chilton smiled softly and bent to lean the file against the brick wall of the alleyway. “I did, and I’m forever grateful to you for allowing me to be in your life. I’m sorry I had to lie to get there.”

“You didn’t.” He shrugged slightly. “The way I see it, we were both exactly where we wanted to be. You wanted to be in my life, regardless of the reasons, and I wanted you there.”

There wasn't any time to argue with him and anyway, it was pointless. "Randy, there's more. Any moment now, you're going to begin forgetting things like me coming to the lab or how we got here. My team is going to erase everything. It will be as if I was never here."

"But... How can they do that? I don't want to forget."

Chilton shook his head. "It's out of my control."

He frowned. "How much time do we have left?"

"It's hard to say. It could be a few hours or one or it could be seconds. Now that you know, the mission has been jeopardized, and they will be looking to extract me with the files as soon as possible to keep anything else from being disrupted in time and creating a ripple." Chilton continued listing his sins to an increasingly flummoxed Randy. "I was supposed to infiltrate your life and acquire the files. It wasn't by chance that we met or that I wanted to be with you. It was my mission, and now it is complete. I know you will probably lose your job for this, and for that I am deeply sorry."

"No, I know you cared even if you want to play tough, now. And I don't care about the paperwork. I would have given it to you." At Chilton's stricken look, Randy said, "I get it. You couldn't take the risk that I wouldn't understand. If it saves even one life... A job is nothing. Don't even worry about me, I'll get another one."

"You will. You're brilliant, kind, funny, smart..."

"Are you listing qualities or trying to convince yourself to stay?"

"You know I would if I could."

"So do it."

"Randy, I can't. I don't need convincing, though." Chilton smiled and took his face in his hands, tears starting to pool. "I'm all in with you. I'm yours forever."

"But I won't remember?"

Chilton shook his head and croaked out, "No."

"How much time do we have left?"

Déjà vu. Chilton stopped breathing then let it out on a mournful sigh, dropping his hands, and shook his head again. "It's already starting."

"What do you mean?"

“We already had this conversation.”

“No, we... We did?”

“It works backwards, but it isn't a perfect line... Soon you will forget how we got here, then our last night together... I've been told you won't feel it at all.”

Randy laughed a short bark. “Not possible.”

“You won't even know something was taken.”

“I want to remember. Don't let them do this to us.”

“Randy, listen to me. Go back to work, get to your car, get in, close the door, and drive away. You're going to wake up tomorrow a clean slate. You can find someone else, I know you can. Someone who doesn't ever have to lie to you or use you.”

“No goodbyes then? I'm just supposed to take off into the sunset without you?”

“To you, I was never here. None of this,” he gestured between them, “was supposed to happen. I'm not the guy you are meant to be with. You'll meet him someday.”

“Don't give me that ‘we never belonged together’ bullshit, Chilton. That couldn't have all been an act. I mean last night. You thought I didn't hear you, but you said it back. You waited 'til I'd been totally still for a long time, and you whispered it to me.” His eyes widened. “Last night... Oh, God. That was your goodbye? Chilton? You were going to leave and not say anything at all, weren't you?”

“I was, yes. It's what I do best, using people, stealing their secrets. It's why I was sent to do this. I'm good at it. You must think I'm a monster,” he said, hanging his head, unable to meet the other's pained gaze.

Randy stepped close and put his hands on his shoulders, leaning in and pressing their lips together. “Never,” he murmured. “I will never think that of you.” His mouth brushed over Chilton's tempting him to open and accept a more passionate kiss.

It was filled with all of the things left unsaid between them, all that they might have been. Chilton could look for the rest of his life, in any time, on any planet, and never find another man to match Randy

He placed his hand against Randy's chest, feeling the strong beat of his heart, then gave him a little shove to disengage. "You have to go before you open your eyes and are kissing a stranger." He'd look right through him. He'd look at him with distrust and mild disgust. Chilton wouldn't survive that. "You have to go."

"I don't care. Let me have whatever time we have left."

Randy lunged forward with a sweep of his tongue, and Chilton allowed it, taking him into his arms one last time, rubbing his back and dragging his fingers through his hair. "I hope you can forgive me for what I've done."

His forehead wrinkled in concentration. "What are you talking about, Chilton?"

He swallowed the lump in his throat and backed away. "Randy..." This was it, now or never. I love you, he thought as he felt his heart begin to tear in two. No, it was much too late to profess his emotions and would only make the parting harder on them both. "I promise I will never forget you," he said instead, his voice breaking. He retrieved the folder and turned so as not to see the betrayal plain on Randy's face. He might not have any idea why, but he seemed to understand he was being dumped. Chilton broke into a sprint, cringing each time Randy called out to him, hurt and confused. Why hadn't they extracted Chilton yet? Was he being punished?

Randy ran after him, so focused on catching Chilton that he didn't see it coming.

The truck seemed to come from nowhere, even when Chilton viewed the footage later. It struck Randy and sent him flying. Chilton had heard the deafening screech of tires locking up on the pavement, and the thud he'd later found out was the impact of the vehicle to Randy's right hip.

"No," he whispered in utter disbelief, then shouted it, "No!" Dropping the files to the pavement, he dashed to the crumpled form of his lover, tripping over his own feet more than once. He knelt next to him, assessing the damages. "Someone call an ambulance!" he yelled just like he'd seen in the movies he and Randy watched together. The only way he was going to live without him was if Randy had a full and happy life. "Stay with me," he pleaded and touched his face with a shaking hand. If he died here—

"Chilton?"

He was alive! “Shhh, it’s okay, baby, I’m here.” He smiled through tears, so many different emotions running rampant inside him. He darted down and kissed Randy full on the mouth. Alive and he remembered who he was—

“You’re that guy from the Laundromat,” he said, forehead furrowed as he tried to bring up other memories.

—vaguely. There was so much blood, and Chilton was afraid to move Randy to figure out where it was all coming from, but he needed a doctor, immediately.

Randy groaned. “What happened?”

“You got hit, Randy. The truck—I—I couldn’t—I’m sorry. I’m so damn sorry.” Randy’s eyes rolled back, and unlike when they did that while Chilton was pleasuring him, this time it chilled him to his core. What was left of his own heart shattered.

“You can’t fucking die on me!” he shouted and shook his shoulders. When he remained as still as the dead, Chilton choked on a sob and threw himself over his body. “Stay with me, Randy. Please, stay with me.” The distant sounds of sirens was his cue to get out of there, but he couldn’t leave him alone like this. “Randy, please don’t do this to me,” he cried and kissed him again. Under his hand he felt his heart beat faintly a moment before Randy gasped a breath.

“Who...” was all he managed to say before wheezing then moaning in pain.

“I’m no one. They’ll take good care of you,” he said, and smiled sadly. Randy’s breathing wasn’t right. Had his lung been punctured? It looked like his legs were almost definitely broken and had he hit his head? Would he remember his own name? “I know they will. You’re going to be alright,” he lied. He couldn’t resist pressing one more kiss to his soft lips, rejoicing in the thump from his chest and the breath in his lungs. Without another word he stood, pushing his way through the crowd he had not noticed was gathering around them. After collecting the research notes, he disappeared around the corner of a building. Leaning heavily into the brick and clutching the folder to his chest, Chilton closed his eyes. When he opened them again the town had disappeared to be replaced by the cold, hard light of the facility and echoing applause.

Numbly accepting the praise and bows, he handed over the small device loaded with Randy’s computer data and the battered folder, then shook the hands that were extended to him. Now they all had Randy’s blood on their hands. That was almost the price of obtaining this information, Randy’s life,

but his love was much tougher than he looked. Dan and Michelle would see to it that he'd pull through. Would Chilton survive?

One day after watching Randy get jumped for the drugs he was carrying, Chilton was ambushed outside of Atric's station, knocked out cold. When he came to, he was in hell.

"See right here?" his father said, pointing to the view of Randy crumpled on the pavement after the truck hit him. "This is what was supposed to happen to your plaything. Why do you think I sent you back to get his research? Because he never finished it. It died with him." He showed Chilton the hit-and-run as it was meant to happen with Randy dying, the hit-and-run with Chilton calling for help, then the way he was now, worn out and defeated. He scrolled through the images on a constant loop.

"At least he's alive," he said softly through swollen lips.

"You think this is living? You think the target would CHOOSE this over a quick nearly painless death? You're deluding yourself. You did this to him. You destroyed his life and the way everyone that loved him will remember him. He'll die alone. Do you want to see just how well things will turn out for him?"

Randy was alone, dying in an alley, dirty, sunken, drugged out, pants around his knees, gasping for breath, and bleeding from what must be a knife wound. But even without that wound, there was no way he was going to survive long, and he'd clearly been attacked and raped, unless he'd willingly—

He gritted his teeth. "Shut it down."

"Oh, but you enjoy viewing him, don't you?" His father had his worker hold him still while he searched around and found the memory enhancer in Chilton's pocket. "Every time I hear you were looking at these, every time I so much as hear a rumor that you are walking by the data center or looking for a way back, I will drag you down here to watch him die. Again and again." He flipped between the two deaths, truck, alley, truck, alley. In either case, the blood poured out of Randy, and no one came to help him. "You are hereby stripped of your rank and banned from jumping."

"Father, please."

"You are not my son."

"You can't do this! I have to—"

“You’ve done enough. It’s time for my crew to go in and do a much more thorough cleansing.”

“No! Don’t touch him!”

“Be thankful you haven’t been banished.” He motioned to a guard. “Strap him in.” Chilton fought but the guard was stronger and soon had him trapped in a chair facing an enormous screen filled with Randy’s suffering and death.

“I have a new mission for you, Chilton. I order you to go back to your lover and kill him yourself.”

Everything seemed exactly how he’d left it, but Chilton knew better. Somewhere in the city, there was a brilliant mind clouded by dark thoughts and drugs. Somewhere Randy was yearning for something he didn’t know he’d had once, trying to fill the holes in his heart with anything that gave him the slightest bit of pleasure and doing whatever it took to forget the agonizing ache of loss.

It wasn’t only Randy that was affected by the botched retrieval. Several people his lover had interacted with were changed now. His mother, those he had relations with, Michelle and Dan, all of them had been subtly or not so subtly nudged in a direction they were not meant to go.

The problem was Randy. He’d gone from a bringer of joy to a black hole of despair. Instead of lighting up a room with his smile, he now drained it and spit out more darkness. Chilton’s new mission was to eliminate the anomaly, but merely executing him or forcing him into committing suicide wasn’t going to fix it all, so in addition, history would be turned back to before Chilton met him, before they’d interfered. With the damaged Randy dead, and the original innocent one never marred in any way, they could ensure there wasn’t going to be any further ripples. Randy was going to die twice. Once in this depraved future by Chilton’s hand and once in the past where regardless of Chilton’s non-involvement in his life, he would end up in the same place at the same time to get hit by that truck. With Chilton not there with him, to call for help and give him a reason to hang on, he’d perish before help could arrive and take him to the hospital. Exactly how he was supposed to have died, a beloved son and friend, a brilliant up-and-coming scientific mind. How you were remembered was everything to some cultures.

They would help him, his friends. It might take some convincing but ultimately they would because they did know and trust Chilton, they just

couldn't recall why. It would seem irrational, yet they wouldn't be able to help it, especially since they were unaware that he had, in fact, betrayed their friend and left them all.

Michelle answered the door and regarded him suspiciously. Hidden in her subconscious was the memory that they'd met before, he could see that flicker of recognition in her eyes.

"Do I... know you?" she asked, looking him over.

"You did, Michelle. It is a very long story."

"What do you mean, 'you did'?"

"I cannot adequately explain my plight, nor yours, I am afraid."

"Try me."

"All I need from you is for you to tell me where Randy is." She heaved a sigh and averted her eyes but didn't answer him. "You do know, don't you?"

"He's not in a very good place. Last I knew—"

"Last you knew? You two are friends."

"How do you know that? How do we know each other?"

"I told you it's complicated."

She rolled her eyes. "Of course it is. Look... uh..."

"Chilton."

"Chilton. I don't know where he is staying, but I can tell you where he is usually hanging around. Hint: it's not The Ritz."

"I don't understand."

"You're better off looking for him in seedy motels or the dirty back room of a gay bar or a busted-to-shit crack house."

"Has it become that bad?"

"Yeah, well, when you lose your job, and your friends try to have you committed because you think you lost the love of your life, who by the way doesn't exist—"

"I do."

"You do what?"

“I do exist. Randy isn’t crazy. Or at least, he isn’t when it comes to me.” Her eyes narrowed then widened in surprise. “I told you it’s complicated, Michelle, and I don’t have time to fill you in. I have to find him and make him remember me, so I can fix all of this. If I don’t find Randy and contain him, someone else from my team is going to assassinate him.” Never mind the part where he, himself, was supposed to kill him, his father had been clear on that. He wanted Randy dead by Chilton’s own hand or he’d be spending a long time imprisoned then banished.

“No! Why would they do that? He’s misguided and stupid but not dangerous, at least not to anyone but himself.”

“That’s enough for the people I work for.”

“Who do you work for?”

“Who I work for is not something I can divulge, I’m sorry. He’s already negatively affected you and Dan, his mother, and anyone else he’s touched. I’ve been tasked with making sure this spreads no further.”

“You talk about him like he’s got a disease.”

“In a way, he does, and it is only going to get worse for him and everyone else. What he has will consume him and spread just like a disease. Michelle, please, if you know anything, anything at all that can help me... He was never supposed to have a life like this. I ruined him, and I have to make things right. I created this mess, but I can still save him.”

“Michelle?” Dan said from somewhere inside the house. “Don’t make him stand out there, let him in.”

Michelle stepped aside, and Chilton entered their new home. Dan was sitting in a chair in the living room and beckoned for Chilton to come in and do the same.

Dan studied Chilton, not taking his eyes off of him as he spoke to Michelle. “Tell him what you know, what you told me.”

An hour later, he left the home of Randy’s former best friends with far more information than he’d entered with. It was a shame that they wouldn’t remember him dropping by once this was all over. Other than the subject matter discussed, it truly had been great to visit. Then again, if everything played out how his agency anticipated, to the knowledge of everyone else, Chilton wouldn’t meet any of them in the first place.

He scouted for Randy in the worst place Michelle and Dan had told him about, first. If he wasn't there, he could breathe a small sigh of relief, count his blessings, and move on until he found him.

Imagine his disappointment then, when he swung open the busted up door, and there in a chair was Randy, preparing to shove a needle into his arm. His hair was short, spiked, bleached; unwashed like his clothes, a piece of rubber tubing was tied around his arm.

“Please, you have to stop.”

“Name isn't ‘Please.’ Who the fuck are you?” he said, laying the needle on the table in front of him without having administered a dose, “My dad?” He sneered, seemed to consider that thought seriously, then shook himself.

On the table nearby was the abandoned needle and several of its brothers, a mirror with white powder dusted over it, rubber tubing, and empty pill bottles

He's going to kill himself. Chilton swallowed hard. He knew it would be difficult seeing Randy again with him having no memory of Chilton, and he knew it would be tough to see how far he'd fallen from his original path. Still, he was taken aback by the brash manner in which he now spoke and the life he led and that vacant look he was giving him.

“Are you ever not on drugs?”

“What the shit is it to you?” Randy said and leaned forward to pick up the syringe.

“I care about you, Randy,” Chilton said, approaching slowly.

He grunted. “No one gives a flying fuck about me.” He tapped at his arm, no doubt searching for a good vein to puncture.

“I came here to tell you something.” Chilton blurted, lunging closer. Randy gave him a disinterested glare and went back to destroying himself. “You're in danger.”

“No shit. Tell me something I don't know.”

“You are all in danger.”

“You're wasting my time. Unless you've got drugs to share or you're going to fuck me, get out.”

Chilton didn't have to take a second to think of his answer, he removed his shirt and toed off his shoes. Randy didn't have a clue who Chilton was, but his

body would be able to retrieve what his mind was only vaguely aware of: the intimacy they had once shared.

“Now we’re talking,” Randy said, leering at him. He untied the rubber tubing and put down the drug, flexing his fingers with a quiet groan. Randy stood, tore his shirt off, he was barefoot so there weren’t shoes to remove then led him down the hall to an unoccupied room.

Chilton could hear others shouting, bed springs creaking, and some of the doors were cracked or flung wide open, so he saw his fair share as well. Was he living here, in this filth? After Chilton stepped inside the room at the far end of the hall that Randy had walked into, Randy closed the door and locked it. He turned and looked Chilton over then backed him toward the bed, his hands deftly unfastening Chilton’s jeans and shoving them down. He didn’t wait for Chilton to rid him of his own pants and did the honors before pushing Chilton onto the bed. Dust puffed up from the bare mattress as he landed, but Chilton barely noticed the state of the room. The man in front of him was far more decrepit and ruined than the building. Coming around the side of the bed, Randy climbed up there, taking hold of Chilton’s shaft and pumping it in his fist. He’d picked up new techniques somewhere, and they had Chilton on edge in no time at all.

“Stop,” Chilton gasped. “You,” he growled, “get up here and lie on your back, so I can get you ready to take me.”

The order didn’t even faze Randy, who obeyed, lying back and lifting his legs into the air to receive a pounding. Chilton took him in hand and stroked him just how he liked it, with a little twist and squeeze.

Randy gritted his teeth. “Just do it already.”

Chilton ignored him, dropped his cock, and took his time exploring all of that glorious skin, tasting and touching what he thought he would never be allowed to again. His inner thighs were extra sensitive. Chilton kissed and sucked up his thigh to the crease of his leg and worked his way back down, avoiding all obvious areas until he found himself kissing just under his testicles. Randy squirmed and panted, all notions that they should hurry up and fuck were replaced by the hunger and longing in his eyes.

“You know, Randy,” Chilton said, gently. “You don’t have to receive. You can be inside me... if you want to.”

“You don’t seem so sure.”

“Oh, I’m very sure I want you to.” Coming together like they had before could unlock his emotions and eventually his memories of their time together. Could, Chilton reminded himself. Nothing was definite.

Rolling to the side, Chilton brought Randy with him, maneuvering until he was lying on his back with Randy peering down at him skeptically. Then, Randy shrugged and kissed Chilton, his hand moving immediately between his legs, teasing between his ass cheeks. He probed at his ass then sat up and reached into a drawer for one of a few large bottles of lubrication. He probably didn’t remember buying it and the others with Chilton when their sex drives got out of control and they’d burned through the small supply he’d had. Why else would one of them be cinnamon-flavored? Randy hated cinnamon.

With the lube slathered onto his hand, Randy worked his fingers into Chilton, one after another, while Chilton squirmed and groaned. It was wonderful to have someone touching him, pleasing him, again. It wasn’t the same imagining it while you did it to yourself. He’d only tried that one time. When making himself orgasm left him cold inside, he’d given up trying.

Randy grabbed for a condom. He stopped, turning it in his fingers, like he did when he was lost in thought or trying to think of the best way to say something. “It’s been awhile since I got checked,” Randy said, and Chilton flinched.

He hated that Randy would have a reason to worry about it at all. He’d exposed himself to multiple partners and those horrid needles with very little regard for his health and well-being. From what Chilton could gather, he didn’t care if he died, seemed to welcome it even. All of it, and whatever else would befall him, sat squarely on Chilton’s shoulders.

“And, hey, I don’t know you from a hole in the wall,” he continued with a frown, “but my gut tells me you’re one of the good ones. So, listen, we don’t have to do this. I told you it isn’t going to mean anything.” He didn’t seem quite as sure of that as he had when Chilton first approached him. “You seem like the type that needs sex to mean something to your partner.”

“It’s alright,” Chilton replied, sadly. “I think we both need this.”

Randy nodded once and stroked Chilton’s walls for several more moments before pulling out to slip the condom on. “Last chance to back out,” he said as he got in position and laid down on top of him, lips hovering over Chilton’s mouth, waiting for his answer.

Chilton jerked up, making their mouths meet and groaned at the familiar feel of his lover's tongue twisting with his own. He'd thought Randy would impale him, seeing that Chilton wasn't shying away, but he held himself still, brow furrowed in concentration or maybe confusion, kissing Chilton for all he was worth. When more breathless minutes went by, and Randy still hadn't taken the initiative, Chilton reached down and gripped Randy at the base, nudging the tip of his cock at his entrance and making it sink in. Randy gasped and their lips parted. "Do it," Chilton whispered, gruffly.

The quiet insistence made Randy pause and look more closely at the man underneath him. He didn't even know his name, but this stranger knew far more than that about Randy. It was his eyes that gave it away. He was hardly able to look at him at first. The intensity in his gaze burned him, but he'd eased himself into it, making eye contact and then glancing quickly away or down away from his face. It afforded him the chance to appreciate his physique, and he wanted to touch it all. Every muscle. So he did. He propped himself on one elbow and let his free hand travel over the stranger's skin, not teasing or trying to provide pleasure, more like comfort. The muscles under his hands rose and fell and twitched. His eyes traveled upward from abs and chest to the other man's handsome face. Chiseled, one might say. He could see someone wanting to carve his image from stone, to preserve it forever.

"Randy...?"

Randy lifted his gaze further and settled on his rich dark eyes, locking there. His hand still exploring, Randy spoke softly, "I'm about to fuck you, and I don't even know your name. That's actually normal for me, but that's because I usually don't care to know." He frowned. He seemed to be doing a lot of that around this man. "I want to know yours."

"Chilton," he said, and he gave a pained smile. "Other people, they call me C, but to you I was always 'Chilton.'"

"What do you mean, to you?" A dull throbbing started at his temples, like the headaches he got after dreaming. "I've never seen you before. We've never met."

Chilton sighed, and it was a very sad sound. It made Randy's chest ache and had him scrambling to think of a way to apologize for whatever he said or did that made his eyes dim like that.

“Please, forget I said anything,” Chilton said and reached up to stroke a thumb over his cheek, smiling more genuinely now. “Focus on this: You want me, I want you. The details are inconsequential. We’re here, Randy, that’s all that matters.”

He let it go. The man, Chilton, was hiding something, for sure, but he was right. Nothing mattered right now except how badly he wanted to be in the present, touching him, kissing him, pushing inside of him. Randy moaned as his hips did exactly what he wanted them to do, jutting forward to enter Chilton’s body, pressing in, inch by inch. Legs splayed wide, Chilton then hooked them around his waist, his arms warm and embracing as Randy began to slowly thrust in and out of him. It was a giant contrast from all the guys he’d ever fucked or let fuck him. This guy was concerned for his well-being, beyond whether or not they got off. It didn’t even seem to be the point for Chilton. To escape the pity and hunger, the absolutely torturous longing in those dark eyes that were boring into him, he bent to kiss Chilton and doubled his pace.

Fingers tangled in his hair, Chilton’s tongue swept deeper into his mouth, and it was all accompanied by the most erotic moans. He wouldn’t last long at this rate, so he slowed and varied his thrusts, keeping them both guessing. This wasn’t one of his pornos; there was no need to break the land speed record of fucking and getting him to explode immediately, nor to deny himself forever in order to switch positions or partners several times. It took the edge off the pain, the ache, the bitter loneliness like nothing else could, but it didn’t last long.

Bottoming for cash was easy, in that you just had to lay back and take the pounding. Sometimes you didn’t even have to worry about faking the orgasm or sucking the other guy off. Plenty of jobs, you just let the top do all of the work. It filled his wallet and that was all he cared about. Not that he could keep it full with the rent for his shitty apartment and his new drug habit. Multiple habits.

It only took the mere thought of his dreams—his ghost touching him, his breath at his ear—and he was hard and ready. He felt... he felt something. As opposed to nothing. Not whole. No, not ever whole. For a moment, though, he could pretend, long enough to some small physical comfort from another human being. But this was something completely foreign. There was no pretending or drugs or people watching calling out the graphic suggestions from the sidelines. Just him and this man called Chilton. Randy liked that.

Ending the kiss with a last round of torrid tongue wrestling, Randy looked down at him and smiled. A shadow of a smile but at least it was there. He felt

like he hadn't had a reason to smile in years. "Chilton..." he began. He wanted to ask him why he'd come to him and what he'd accidentally done to be rewarded like this, but as soon as he spoke the name, his heart gave a painful squeeze. Randy shouted in alarm, hand flying up to cover it, and the smooth glide of his hips faltered.

Obvious concern flashed in Chilton's eyes, his hand coming to rest on top of Randy's. "Stay with me, baby, it will pass. Don't give in to it. Keep looking at me, Randy. Don't worry about anything else, do you hear me? Nothing else, except you and I and what we are doing. We will talk about this, and all of the questions you have, I will answer, but not right now. Now, what I need, and what you need, is for you to make love to me."

Randy shook and drew in a shaking breath or two. Is that what they were doing, making love? Was he really making love to someone he met only minutes before? It didn't feel like he was with some random guy off the streets, although technically that's what this one was, but he was different, and Randy felt different being with him. More put together. His crazed thoughts weren't whipping up to lash at him, the emptiness and despair not so bleak. You know this voice, Randy, he thought (it was crazy, but he knew he did), let it guide you back to yourself. While he continued to keep his eyes glued to him, as Chilton had asked, and as the words sank in, he felt his barriers dissolving and awareness blooming.

"I'm right here," Chilton said, sweeping his thumb under Randy's eye.

Was he—Why was he crying? Randy blinked back more tears, embarrassed to be shedding them not only in front of a stranger, but mid-sex with said stranger. He closed his eyes as more words flowed from Chilton, and he slowly lifted to disentangle from him. The time for screwing had to be over now that he'd disgraced himself. Chilton stiffened his muscles and kept Randy where he was, pulling him in deeper with the press of his feet. His voice stayed calm, coaxing, even if it cracked with emotion. What the hell was going on?

"Randy, baby, listen. I know nothing makes sense, but you feel it, don't you?"

"It's not possible."

"There's something extremely familiar about me and being with me feels natural, doesn't it? Trust that. Trust your gut feelings. Trust me."

"It's you. From my dreams." He moaned pitifully. "You're not really here. I'm seeing shit again."

“Does this feel like your imagination?” Chilton rolled his hips. Randy moaned and reflexively began moving between his thighs.

Not stopping, he replied. “If it is, I have a pretty fucking vivid one.”

“That’s it,” Chilton groaned, “let it all go. Forget everything else. Be here with me, now.”

Neither of them spoke after that. He doubted he could form words if he tried. He half expected to wake up, humping the nasty mattress under them, but Chilton, or this ghost of him, was right. He needed to let everything go and enjoy it while it lasted. Imagination or not, he hadn’t felt this good since... well, he’d never felt this good, and it wasn’t the drugs talking. Or was it?

Chilton called out his name when he came, his cheeks wet with tears. “Randy, oh, baby, oh, God, Randy!”

Only a breath behind him, his orgasm boiled up and overflowed. He gasped for air. Chilton’s ass pulsed around his spilling cock, and Randy dove down to taste his lips and feast on his moans.

Coming down from the natural high, he did something out of character and cuddled the man. Chilton moved though and made him lie in his arms, holding him almost protectively, his breath ghosting over his ear. It was too familiar.

“You’re from my dreams. How could you be here?”

He didn’t deny it. “I can explain that. I can try to explain everything. The question is, will you believe it?”

“No,” he said and shoved his way out of the stranger’s arms and sat up. “I can answer that on my own, I’m hallucinating! That’s it! Or Dan and Michelle—did they put you up to this?! They want me to go crazy, they want me to think I’m bonkers, but I’m not. He was real!”

“They would never do that. They’re still your friends. Calm down, Randy. Stay with me...”

He kept saying that. The man at the crash site had said the same thing in exactly that way, the illusion of calm but holding grief and sorrow and genuine concern. “How the hell do you know them?” Randy remembered the feel of his lips, the look of longing, love, terror, concern all mixed up in his attentive gaze, and it made him angry for reasons he couldn’t explain to himself. “You were there! And now you, what? Think I owe you?! That’s sick! They had you pretend to be my boyfriend, to come here and fuck with me.”

“Randy, listen, that man—”

“Shut up! Don’t you dare!” he shouted. Then, dropping his voice, he added in a whisper, “He was real.”

“He’s me! I’m real. I’m here.” He sat up and held Randy tightly, his fingers stroking through his hair. “You aren’t going insane. I’m sorry, baby, so sorry. I’m right here.”

Chilton wasn’t the only one. The door crashed open, and what Randy could only think of as ninja assassins poured in holding small gun-like weapons. Randy shouted for them to leave, but he didn’t know if they were even real. The cocktail of awesome he’d taken was completely messing with his head. The intruders ripped the two of them apart.

“Randy... I failed you,” the man called Chilton said from somewhere far away, then they were on him too. It was just like when cops took a dangerous perpetrator down in the movies. They weren’t gentle, pinning his neck to the bed with a knee, clamping down his legs. One of the assassins said something about them both being contaminated, and the pressure at the back of his neck increased until he almost lost consciousness. They didn’t need to put in so much effort; he wasn’t going to resist.

“Hold him down!” Something, a thick-ass needle if he had to guess, jammed into his neck and flooded his veins with fire.

Okay, so maybe he was trying to resist arrest. He’d tell them where all the drugs were, do his time. He’d cooperate now. But they had his lover. No. The stranger, Chilton. The pounding in his head increased until he was groaning louder than when he came.

Across the room Chilton was hysterical, his mouth open wide. Shouting? Screaming? Fucking singing? Randy couldn’t hear anything over the rushing in his ears. They grappled with Chilton as he flailed and tried to break free. One of the men punched him in the gut. Randy growled, “Don’t touch him!” Where did that come from? Chilton broke free and dove for Randy. He heard a shot fire, and Chilton went down next to him. His hand reached out to Randy then went limp as his eyes glazed over. He’s not moving! Randy’s vision blurred with sudden tears, then went black.

“What’s his condition?” Atric asked, coming up and placing a hand on Chilton’s shoulder.

Chilton sighed and uncrossed his arms to touch the healing pod housing Randy, effectively shrugging the technician's hand off. It was Atric's fault he was in there, needing to recover consciousness. They were burning the diseases and filth out of his blood, the same as they had Chilton. "He's stable. They think he's going to pull through, but that dose they gave him to knock him out? It almost killed him."

"Chilton."

He flinched at the use of his name.

"C, we've been over this. He was supposed to die. What's the tally now, three times? Your father almost killed you both, and everyone else Randy met after he met you. Remember that, when you seek revenge. Remember who your true enemies are."

"I know. Your crew was only following your orders. I know it had to look real. I understand that now, but they didn't need to be so rough with him."

"It worked, did it not? We got you out alive. We brought your father to justice for his attempted murders."

"I don't mean to be ungrateful, Atric. When I see those brilliant blue eyes gazing back at me, I know I will thank you properly."

"I can respect that, my friend."

"I told Randy I didn't have any friends," Chilton said, sadly.

"I trust your answer will be different the next time he asks?"

"That depends on whether or not he lives to ask it."

Atric nodded. "In any case, take as much time away as you need and fear not, your position still stands, if you want it."

Chilton kept staring at Randy's blank face. He wasn't going anywhere, not without Randy.

"Think it over," Atric said gently, as he touched his shoulder in another show of sympathy, and then spun on his heel to leave him to his vigil.

The drugs would take longer to leech out of Randy's system but after that, it was anyone's guess what had been done to his mind. Between the memory wipes and various chemicals permeating his organs, Randy might never recover. Chilton had to be prepared for that. If he managed to live and to fight his way out of the dark, he might not remember anything at all. There was also the possibility that his brain had sustained irreversible damage.

The Randy he'd met and fallen in love with was likely gone, but he'd take this version of him and count himself blessed, no matter what kind of shape he was in. If he would only open his eyes!

The thousandth time was the charm.

Randy's eyes struggled to open, but they did, and Chilton moved in to lift the lid of the pod. He focused on Chilton and smiled. Chilton was afraid to speak. He trembled as he waited for Randy to show any sign that he was going to be alright—that he really was in there.

“Chilton,” Randy said and reached for him. “I had the most bizarre dream.”

He kissed him, laughing then crying.

Randy stopped kissing him back. He swept his gaze around the facility and let out a low whistle. “Not a dream after all then?”

“No, baby, I'm afraid it wasn't.” Chilton took his hand and explained the situation to Randy, who stayed quiet through the entire description of their predicament. “You were never supposed to live past that accident, Randy. I found out later that you were destined to die that day. I'm sorry. Me being there, changed it. You living while I disappeared screwed up your whole world. It wasn't supposed to. It was supposed to be a flawless extraction. Part of you held on to what we had so hard that it destroyed you. You've been living on borrowed time, that's another reason why everything unraveled, your sanity included. I didn't want to leave you, I swear. They extracted me from your time, and the scars I left behind didn't close up like they should have. It wasn't all neat like they'd planned, sewn up and perfectly seamless. It was a jagged, poorly stitched wound that festered and rotted you from the inside out and spread to everyone you interacted with. Now you're dead to them. But you're still here. Here with me. That is, if you want to be.”

“What will happen to my family? Dan and Michelle?”

“They'll remember you as you were before that day, but without me. The rest of it—it never happened, Randy, not to them. This is how it was always supposed to go. You are supposed to be dead. But here you are, safe from the ravages of displaced time. You can't do any damage to anyone. Your footprints in the far past won't stay behind, and the ones you make in the distant future, past the limits of the human lifespan, won't stick either.”

“In other words, all we have is now.”

“Not exactly. We can live anywhere, at any time, hundreds of lifetimes together, if that is what you want.”

“But they won't matter.”

“They'll matter to us. We'll have lived them, even if no one else ever knows.”

Randy smiled. “We'll be like time-traveling ghosts.”

“Very much so, yes.”

“You were my ghost. I could feel you, but I couldn't see you or touch you myself. You were always there, hovering on the edge of my vision. I felt that something was haunting me, but all along I was a ghost myself.”

“I was afraid, so afraid you were gone or that you would wake up only to remember nothing or worse...”

“Shhh, even then, when you came to find me, I might have forgotten what you looked like and the things we did, but I never forgot your voice or how much I loved you.”

“I love you too,” Chilton said

“So, where do we go first?”

“Easy there. You have a lot of healing left to do, and you might like to tour this place once you're able before we take our first journey.”

“I'm in no hurry to go anywhere.” He smiled wider and it morphed into a smirk.

“What is it?” Chilton asked, grinning at him. “What are you thinking?”

“I'm thinking this pod thing is big enough for both of us.”

“You need to rest. We have all the time in the world.”

“I don't want to waste another second of it without you.” Randy tugged him down on top of himself and closed the pod around them. “Chilton?” he said after lazily kissing him.

“Hm?”

“Let's test the sound proofing on this thing.”

“I found it,” Atric said to Chilton some hours later as he strode into the medical center.

Chilton was monitoring Randy, making sure that his condition didn't decline while he slept. Randy had begged him to rest, but try as he might he couldn't get his mind to still enough. "Found what?"

"The way to slip in and take Randy before any of this"—he motioned to the pod where Randy was sleeping—"ever happens, and without creating another ripple."

"But that would mean..." He cast a longing gaze at Randy.

"Yes."

"I don't know if I can do that, take one Randy for the other. Atric, I love him."

"And you will love the other."

"It's akin to murder. You stopped my father from doing it, but now you're asking *me* to murder the man I love."

"You can't murder someone who never was."

"No."

"C, you must."

"I said no, Atric. I won't do it!" Randy stirred in his sleep, and Chilton stood, herding Atric away from his healing tank. Lowering his voice, he said, "I can't lose him again. I promised."

"Time will be mended, C. With the blight removed it's only natural that it will heal itself. We've done what we can to help it along, reversed the damage, and we've stopped Randy from being killed under your father's orders. But he was supposed to die. He will die. It's inevitable."

"Atric... isn't there another way?" he said defeatedly, already knowing the answer to his question.

"You know there is not." Atric laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. "We were fools to think we could keep him here and with nothing ill coming of it. This is it. Your one chance. The ripple is closing, my friend. It's not something that we can control. You take advantage of it now or—"

"Or lose them both." Chilton sighed. "I understand." He took one last, long look at his damaged lover and turned away, never to see him again. Taking him before his downward spiral would spare him all of the pain and suffering he'd endured. Nothing good had come from his extended life, except maybe how

close Michelle and Dan had gotten, but if they loved each other, they would find another way. Love always did, and Chilton had to follow where it led. "How can this be done?"

The mission, the most critical of his life, was to get to Randy before the ambulance took him away and before the last bit of his memory of Chilton evaporated. With luck they could restore it fully, but Chilton could only approach after his other self left the scene of the accident. He would only have seconds to secure Randy and bring him back to the healing center. The clean-up crew would take care of the rest, making it look like he died, as he was supposed to before Chilton changed his fate. With Randy removed from his own time line he was as good as dead, and history would return itself to normal.

"What if he doesn't remember?" Chilton had asked Atric

"If there is a way, you and I will find it."

"And if there isn't?"

"Then you'll have to start over."

Chilton nodded. "But he'll be alive." *And he won't have suffered any more than he was meant to.* His mind would be intact, his heart. If, in the end, Randy chose not to be with him, it would crush Chilton, but it was worth that risk.

Atric had asked him what he would do when Randy remembered the betrayal. He'd sighed then said, "I'll tell him before that. He had faith in me when I told him the truth of it, I have to believe he will choose to understand." Trust: it was all he had.

Stepping onto the jumping pad, he nodded to confirm he was ready, and in an instant Chilton was at the scene of the accident, watching his nightmare unfold. Atric had warned him that he'd only get one shot at this, two at most, and that odds were, even after he got Randy back to the facility, he might not recover his memories. It was even a danger that he might die before they could get him to force his body to heal itself. He had to go through with letting Randy get hit. He had to ignore his instinct to keep him safe from harm, couldn't jump in front of the truck or push him out of the way. Randy had to appear to the onlookers to have expired, so that his team could more efficiently fake his death. They were going to break the laws of nature.

Chilton crept closer, waiting for the moment that his past self was well away from the site. He stopped as close as he could get without being seen, his muscles twitching and bunching. *God, will I make it in time?* He wanted to

punch himself for leaving Randy crumpled in the road. How could he have done that? To hell with the laws, he should have stayed with him!

The devastated past version of himself dashed out of sight, and that was his cue to sprint into action. Chilton ran like his life depended on it. It didn't, but Randy's did, and that made him wish he possessed super-human speed. Time crawled, the distance between them seemed insurmountable.

Chilton slid into the throng of people and took Randy in his arms. Randy labored for breath and struggled to speak.

“Ch... il...”

The pain he must be in. “Don't try to talk, baby. Listen, Randy. You have to trust me. You have to hang on. Hold on to us, alright? Hold on to me.” He lifted him and stood, despite the protests of the onlookers and the blare of sirens approaching. Chilton pressed his lips against his forehead just as Randy's eyes rolled back and the hand reaching up toward Chilton's face dropped like a stone. He'd fallen unconscious. They were running out of time! Squeezing his eyes shut Chilton held Randy close and prayed he wasn't too late to save him.

Days blurred into one another and still Randy hadn't woken up. The medical team, Atric, all of them, kept reassuring Chilton that he was stable and mending well, it would simply take a while to bring him around, much like last time. He never left his side. “When he wakes you should be the first face he sees,” Atric told him. Of course he would be. He waved away all of the insistences that he find his rest to make sure he was there when Randy began to regain consciousness.

Randy's arms snaked around him from behind, his lips grazing Chilton's ear. Chilton tilted his head back to accept a demure kiss. Bit by bit the memories were filtering in, coming faster the closer Randy allowed Chilton to get to him. As soon as Randy was coherent, he'd explained how they'd come to be where they were. That he'd infiltrated his life in the name of the greater good of his people, betrayed him, used him, but that he'd take it all back if he could. Randy had been confused but trusted that little spark of feeling he perceived between them and as his remembered emotions surfaced, he started actively feeding the flames.

“Randy, there's still so much I have to tell you.”

“I know, Chilton, I love you too.”

“No. I was—”

“You don’t?” Randy let go of him and stepped away.

“Wait, Randy, I—” Chilton could feel the pain he’d caused in his carelessness. He spun around to take Randy’s face in his hands. “Yes! Of course I do. I love you, Randy.” He smiled, and waited for Randy to return it, then gave him a passionate kiss. “You have no idea how much, but you will. I’m going to tell you everything.”

Randy crushed him closer. “I’ll hold you to that.” His gaze wandered toward the healing tank he’d spent far too long in. “Now what do you say we test the sound-proofing on this thing?”

Déjà vu. Chilton smiled sadly at the memory of being taken by Randy’s other self only a few days earlier. Randy had complained that there wasn’t enough room to give him the pounding he deserved. “I have it on good authority that it’s a little too cramped for what you have in mind. I have a far better idea.” He took his hand and led him into the heart of the agency, where all time travel took place. Randy had been unconscious both times he’d been brought through the facility, now he took it all in, silently and with awe. As they neared the jumping pad Chilton turned to face him.

“Pick a place, Randy, anywhere, anywhen at all, and I’ll take you there.” They’d already had the discussion about Randy not being able to return to his time, but he could tell by the way his eyes misted that “home” was on the tip of his tongue. “I’m sorry. I can’t take you back.”

“I know...” Randy squeezed Chilton’s hand tighter. “Even if I could, even with everything I’d have to leave behind, I wouldn’t go back if it meant losing you.”

“You never will.” Chilton said. As he took Randy into his arms and their lips met, Chilton knew this time he would keep his promise. He would never let him go.

The End

Author Bio

William Tate is the M/M pen name of writer Jennivie Wirries. She claims that William Tate is as much a part of her as her own female self. Jennivie has lived in the same town on the outskirts of Detroit almost her entire life, having been born there, and currently residing only miles from where she grew up. A stay at home mom of a five year old son, in her spare time she writes, reads, draws, watch movies and Anime, knits, crochets, role plays online, or engages in other activities that unleash her creativity. Writing is something that Jennivie has always been passionate about and she's used it to cope with problems she has faced over the course of her life. Her summers as a youth were spent perusing library shelves and reading some of the works that influence her writing today. As a writer and reader, she indulges in mostly gay romances in several different sub-genres, and paranormal romances, but is open to anything. In recent years, her biggest achievements have been finishing the Nanowrimo.org challenge to write a novel in a month (three years in a row), committing to writing something every single day, and getting published in a few anthologies. Jennivie and William both have several novels and novellas in the wings just waiting to be shown some love.

Contact & Media Info

[William Tate on Goodreads](#) | [Jennivie Wirries on Goodreads](#)

[Blog](#) | [Jennivie Wirries on Facebook](#)

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THE RAVEN'S LUCK

By Laylah Hunter

Photo Description

A black-and-white photo of a man dressed in black, crouched as if in the middle of preparing to spring. He has long blond hair and it looks as though his ears are pointed. His left hand is braced forward, balancing him, and in his right hand he holds a katana. He's looking directly at the viewer, his expression fierce and intent.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'd like him to be an assassin of some sort. Bonus points if we get to see him get his hands dirty. Extra bonus points for moral ambiguity. I don't know or care what race (human, elf, fey, etc.) Some sort of storyline outside the romance would be good, and at least some world-building would be nice. I enjoy battles and fighting. There should probably be some sort of fantasy element present, but I leave that completely at your discretion. Setting (historical, fantasy, contemporary) is also up to the author. I just want to see someone tell this guy's story, whatever it may be.

Please no: BDSM, D/s, or unequal relationships. Anything else is fair game! Heat level is up to the author. Bloodshed is encouraged!

Sincerely,

Augusta

Story Info

Genre: urban fantasy

Tags: cyberpunk, assassins, 2 alpha-males, elves, rivals to lovers

Content Warnings: graphic violence

Word Count: 6,497

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THE RAVEN'S LUCK

By Laylah Hunter

The blade slides between vertebrae with the clean ease only a monomolecular edge can provide, a neat and silent severing of the spine. Mister Money doesn't even have time to register surprise before all the signals are cut off and his unresponsive body flops over his desk. Sam exhales quietly, letting the adrenaline of the kill wash through him and subside. The private security guards outside don't have a clue—that's what you get for hiring an all-troll bodyguard force. Nobody tries to break your door down and come in guns blazing, sure. But your odds of not getting a quiet knife in the dark are still pretty shitty.

Someone claps, slowly, from the shadows in the far corner of the office. Sam freezes, calculating distances, considering his options.

His audience steps into the moonlight, uniform shifting colors to camouflage against the new conditions. "I have to admit, you're *almost* as good as you say you are, Saramathlar."

One Week Earlier:

It feels like it's been ages since the last good job came through. That tends to be the way the business runs—drought and flood, your two options. Sam keeps showing up to the office anyway, because he needs a fucking hobby or something.

When the new job does come in, he pulls up the posting as soon as his computer pops up the alert. It's a corporate coup, the kind where you go in quietly and terminate the CEO to put the company on a more productive track. Sam likes the stealth jobs.

I'll take it, he types.

Someone else has already replied by the time his comment shows up.

Sam looks up from his screen, gaze sweeping the office. The twins aren't in, Rach is poison-painting her nails... And then there's Rio, phone cradled in one meaty palm, staring back. "Drop it," Sam says. "This one's made for me." It's

not exactly company policy that only one person can attempt a job, but it's common courtesy to not try to poach each other. Usually competitors back off.

Rio smiles lazily. It's an unsettling expression, between the orcish brutality of his teeth and the human angles of his face. "I got there first."

"You're not a stealth guy," Sam says.

"That's racist," Rio says. "You don't see me insulting your close-quarters skills."

Sam glares. "That's sloppy, assuming I have nothing else to go on. I've seen your kill record. You're into explosions."

"*Sloppy* is the part where you assume this old dog only knows one trick." Rio still sounds maddeningly calm. "I thought elves were supposed to be flexible."

"Now who's racist?" Sam tries to match Rio's tone but he's not sure he manages. "Drop the job."

Rio shakes his head. "Not happening. You do it."

"Not happening." It's stupid, getting so attached to this job; it's going to be a routine sneak-and-stab, nothing challenging. But Rio's sitting there radiating a disgusting amount of smug, predatory charisma and it's like following a will-o'-wisp down a dark alley: a terrible idea that won't be denied. "I'll race you."

"When I win, you owe me dinner," Rio says.

In his head Sam is already going over the research he'll need to do before he hits the corporate tower. "Keep dreaming."

Now:

"I don't know anyone by that name," Sam shoots back, relaxing only a fraction. They don't really know each other; they're just coworkers. And *coworker* is a pretty low standard of loyalty for the kind of person who works out of Morrigan Consulting Services Ltd. "And if I did, I'm pretty sure he wouldn't have anything to say to Rhuk'kat Ekh-tchar."

Rio laughs, quiet and mindful of the door goons, but with that resonance that comes with his broad bull chest. "You can pronounce it!" he says. "Most people just sound like they're choking."

"I'm not most people."

“Don’t have to tell me twice.” Rio cocks his head. “So about that dinner.”

“What dinner?” Sam asks. “It was my kill.”

“Because I was a gentleman and waited for you,” Rio says. “I was already here.”

Obnoxious is one thing. Obnoxious and competent is worse. Obnoxious, competent, and *attractive* is inexcusable. “Fuck dinner,” Sam says. “And fuck you.”

He vaults back up into the ductwork that let him into the office in the first place, and on the way out he kicks the motion sensor he’d been so careful to bypass on the way in. An alarm starts to howl, and Sam smiles grimly. Let that damn show-off play with the trolls, if he has so much to prove.

The Morrigan gives them both hell. “I expect *clean jobs*, gentlemen.” The air crackles around her, little sparks teasing her salt-and-pepper hair up even wilder than usual. “I expect the best from my crews, and I am *not impressed*.”

“If he hadn’t—”

“Shut up,” the Morrigan says, before Sam can finish the sentence. “I don’t care whose fault it is and I don’t care who started it. Flirt by killing people if that’s what does it for you. But do it in a way that makes the company look good, or find someone else to work for.”

They get out of her office and Sam huffs in annoyance. That was a perfect kill and getting reprimanded for it feels unfair, even if the exit was ugly. He shoots Rio a dirty look, hoping the stupid sexy asshole will fall down a flight of stairs or something. Looks *can* kill, but only with concerted effort and specialized training. The best Sam can hope for is minor injuries.

Rio just grins, the scar on his cheek deepening to a heavy crease, the light glinting off his one titanium fang. “Best of three?”

Sam can’t tell if it would be more satisfying to punch the smug look off Rio’s face or to kiss it off him. “You’re on.”

The second time, Rio gets the kill, and Sam is close enough to the blast radius that it looks like he got a bad sunburn.

The third time, Sam gets the kill, and Rio gets a long, heavily sedated nap. They make it best out of five.

“Or seven,” Rio says, adjusting one of the settings on his ogre-stopper and sighting down the barrel. “I’m easy.”

Sam rolls his eyes. “Too bad for you I’m not.”

They’re tied at three and three when the Morrigan calls them both into her office again. Sam’s braced for another undeserved lecture, but instead she has two classified-info crystals sitting on her desk and a terrible, smug look on her face.

“Decided you like the show after all?” Rio asks. Sam quashes an irrational flare of jealousy at the flirty tone in his voice—as far as he’s seen, Rio does that to everybody. Not that he’s been watching closely.

“You don’t get to my position without learning how to use all the tools in your arsenal,” the Morrigan answers. “Either of you have objections to a political job?”

“No.” Politicking on the level that gets contractors like them involved is almost always human business, and it never makes much difference for elves which human faction is on top of the heap at any given time. “Sounds interesting.”

The Morrigan nods. “More of a challenge than the last few kills you’ve made, that’s for sure.” She slides the crystals toward them. “Two targets, who need to go down within seconds of each other, and who are going to be heavily guarded in different ways on opposite sides of town.”

Rio hums, and Sam ignores the way the sound makes the hair on his nape stand up. “Any restrictions on how it gets done?”

That earns them one of the Morrigan’s rare smiles. “It’s a political job. Make a mess.”

It’s a cool, clear night, the wind blowing in off the high desert and tugging at Sam’s hair as he scales the exterior of the Golden Bluffs Hotel. His half of the target is in a room on the twenty-third floor, so far above the streets of Neoangeles that the streetlights blur all the details together. The muscles in his back and arms sing with exertion as he climbs.

At the twenty-second floor he finds a window in shadow, and molds himself carefully to the sill as he tests the seals. The hotel’s standard electrical alarm system is in place inside the window, but there’s an addition, presumably for

the current VIP's safety: a lightning sprite's consciousness has been threaded through the glass.

The thing most people forget about lightning sprites is how close kin they are to fire.

Sam pulls the heat blade out of his belt and flips it on. He splays his other hand across the glass and concentrates on staying calm, on seeming as comfortable and natural as possible. The sprite tingles against his fingertips, through the rough pads of his glove. He belongs here. He's doing something that should be done. Everything is fine.

He slides the blade into the glass, letting it penetrate slowly as the glass softens around it. This is good; this is right; this is welcome energy. The sprite echoes his calm back to him, curious about his presence but not alarmed. Sam pushes harder.

The response he gets makes him dizzy: the sprite isn't just letting him get away with this, it's *encouraging* him, enjoying the concentrated heat. He feels the echoes of its delight tingling down his spine, beating in his blood.

"Easy," he murmurs. It might not be able to hear him, but at the very least talking focuses his response. "Need you to stay calm for me." If there's a good security warlock on the job, too much pleasure from the alarm system will be a giveaway just as much as panic. Sam keeps his breathing even, his movements slow, and tries not to let the reflected sensations distract him.

When the hole in the glass is big enough for him to slip his hand through without burning himself on the edges, he puts the blade away. The mechanical alarm gets thwarted with a simple wire clipped into place, and the window slides up smoothly. The sprite is still enjoying the residual heat as Sam lets himself into the empty room, but he can feel its mood starting to shift.

He splays one hand across the pane. "Ssshh, don't worry. Just give me a little time." He shows the sprite a mental image of him searching for a bigger, better source of fire, going away now only to make things feel more exciting later. Impatience crackles against his fingers for a moment, then subsides; it'll at least give him a little time. So the question is, how much time does he need?

Sam touches the button on his headset. "How are we doing on your end?"

"Just finished loading," Rio says. "About ten minutes from being in position. You?"

"Finally inside, thank fuck."

“Here I thought you’d have liked the view out there. No romance in your blood, Saramathlar?”

Sam rolls his eyes. “Sounds like you have more than enough for both of us. I could cut you open to get it out, if you’d like.”

The noise Rio makes into the headset sounds like a gargoyle purring. “Save it for after the job.”

Fuck. “I’m not going to pretend I’ve never done a job with a hard-on, but it’s not how I prefer to work. So save *that* for after the job, too.”

Rio chuckles. “You started it.” There are sounds of cloth shifting, keys jingling. “Ten minutes going to be enough for you?”

“I’ll make it work.” *And then I’ll make you nail me to the goddamn wall.* “Next time the connection opens, assume I’m ready to go.”

“Sounds good. Raven’s luck,” Rio says, and the connection dies.

Sam stands there for a moment just letting that sink in. *The raven’s luck be with you* is a blessing he hasn’t heard for years, not since he left the preserve for the city and traded four-legged quarry for the two-legged kind. It’s strange to have it come up here, in a sterile hotel room on his way to an assassin’s kill, not a huntsman’s...

He can worry about it later. Rio really *does* have enough romance in his blood for both of them. Right now, Sam has nine and a half minutes to get past the security guarding the Novish ambassador’s second body, and he’d bet the ambassador isn’t relying solely on trolls.

He stops at the door to the room, head cocked, listening. He can’t hear any movement from the other side, and no light spills from beneath the door’s edge, so probably this entire floor has been closed off to provide a buffer zone. If he were in charge, Sam would place a sniper or two in the hallway for extra certainty, and it always pays to assume the other guy is as competent as you are.

Time for a little neutralizing, then. Sam slips a dart gun off his belt and sinks into a crouch as he eases the door open, as slowly and noiselessly as he can. He pauses there, listening, and after a moment hears a tiny shift of cloth from the hallway: someone changing the angle of their trained rifle, someone taking a deeper-than-usual breath.

Sam takes a deep breath himself, then lets it out in a slow, magic-charged exhale that coalesces into a heavy fog as it spreads away from him. It won’t

last, so he ducks out the door in its wake, squeezing off three quick shots from the dart gun. The sniper's rifle pops once, the sound magic-dampened, but Sam is already back in his room, his head spinning with exertion from the fog spell. The sniper moves, hissing curses that Sam hopes have no force. Heavy footsteps on the carpet slow, stagger, give way to a slow-motion collapse that stops just short of the door. The cocktail in those darts almost never fails.

Almost is the reason Sam slits the sniper's throat as he leaves his cover. The sniper's human, and a human probably wouldn't be able to shake the poison enough to shoot him in the back, but why take the chance? Eight minutes. He snags the access card off the sniper's belt and heads for the emergency stairwell.

There are two more guards on the twenty-third floor, standing outside one of the rooms. Sam can see them from inside the emergency stairwell, through the wired-glass safety window: they're tense already but not moving from their posts. One of them speaks into a headset, probably checking in with the rest of the security team, and Sam wishes he'd had a chance to crack their frequency so he could keep track of their communications.

The news isn't good, and the guards trade looks, shifting their grip on their guns. This isn't going to be pleasant. Seven minutes. Sam goes over options in his head. If he could get into one of the other rooms, there'd be ductwork, but he doesn't trust himself to attempt invisibility in bright light with two alert humans looking for threats. If he were an indestructible tank like Rio seems to be, he could risk putting a helm on and trying a frontal assault. He's too lightly armored for that, though. Not without a distraction—and he has a distraction; he just left it downstairs.

Getting back down to the twenty-second-floor window takes him another forty-five seconds. He's going to tip off the security warlock doing this, but having a man down and not responding to calls probably has everyone on edge anyway.

“Change of plans,” he tells the sprite stuck in the glass. “Come here, I'm taking you with me.” His glove provides enough insulation to keep him relatively comfortable as the sprite's energy concentrates in the edge he's holding, but he can still feel the heat through it. He pulls sharply, breaking off a hand-sized shard of glass that sparks and crawls with light around its edges. “Let's go wreck some guys.”

It might be his imagination, but he thinks the sparks flare brighter in response.

Improvised weapon in hand, Sam heads back up the stairs. The guards are still at their posts, getting steadily twitchier as they wait for trouble. Sam braces his free hand against the door latch, breathing deeply, waiting for the right moment to move. Waiting for the raven's luck, the moment when he can feel a kill about to go his way.

Now. Sam shoves open the door and flicks the shard of glass toward the nearest guard, diving and rolling as the first laser blast sizzles through the air. Someone yelps and there's a loud *pop* followed by the sharp smell of ozone. By the time Sam rolls to his feet one of the guards is down and the other has thrown his gun aside. Plasma leaks from its ruptured casing, too bright to look at directly, and the guard draws a knife instead.

He's enough of a pro not to waste his breath on threats; Sam appreciates that. They watch each other silently, measuring. Knife fights don't last long. Sam's favorite knife with its monomol point can get through Kevlar if there isn't magic reinforcing the stuff. Is the guard outfitted that well?

Time to find out. Sam lunges, aiming high. There's nothing like a threat to the eyes to make a target panic.

The guard flinches but recovers faster than most, blocking Sam's arm and lashing out with his own blade. Sam flicks his wrist, just close enough to graze the guard's arm before he has to jump back himself.

The guard's face twists into a horrible rictus, blotches of purple and red forming on his face, and he howls as he throws himself at Sam, almost too fast to follow. It's all Sam can do to brace himself, to duck enough that he doesn't catch a shoulder in the gut. He's still thrown backward, and a line of ripping pain opens across his left arm. The guard doesn't even pause, eyes wide and red with bursting blood vessels, hands scrabbling at Sam's throat. Sam struggles, twists, desperate to get his knife hand free—

His second strike is much better than the first, punching through the guard's body armor and opening a deep gash through the human's gut. The guard thrashes, flecks of foam at the corners of his mouth. Sam stabs him again, nicks a lung, gets bloody spittle in the face for his trouble. He shoves, and the blood loss has worked its magic—he can get free of the dying guard's grip, get enough distance to be out of reach.

He spares a glance for his arm. The guard's knife is stuck, trapped by the unforgiving polymers of Sam's body armor, but it must have bitten through at least some.

The guard has mostly stopped thrashing. Just under two minutes. Sam turns his headset on. “Status check?”

“Ready when you are,” Rio says. There’s a heavy, rhythmic noise in the background. “You close?”

“Almost there.” Sam pulls the knife free of his arm with a hiss; blood wells instead of gushing, so it’s not too bad. A little tape over the tear in his armor and he’ll get through the mission fine.

“Trouble?”

“Just had to wrestle with a berserker-trapped bodyguard for a minute, that’s all.” The berserker virus was engineered to make its host lose control when injured, burying all rational impulses under mindless rage. It’s one of Sam’s least favorite pieces of human technology.

“Sounds like everyone wants to get their hands on you,” Rio says.

Sam rolls his eyes. “I’m sure you’ll be relieved to know my virtue is intact.”

“Sorry, your what?”

“Asshole.” Despite himself, Sam is grinning as he fishes out the room access card. “So you’re giving me the go-ahead in a minute?”

“I’ll give you a signal, yeah. You won’t be able to miss it.” The connection goes dead before Sam can ask him to elaborate.

Obnoxious, *competent*, and attractive, Sam reminds himself. Rio will come through on his end.

The hotel room is dimly lit by one lamp on the dresser. There are two beds; the nearer one is empty, and the farther one is occupied, a young adult human lying prone and silent. No, possibly not so young—the smoothness to the skin is too uniform, too perfect. This must be the reserve body, the insurance in case somebody like Rio happens while the ambassador is out in public.

Sparks dance in the corner of Sam’s eye; he glances up to find the lightning sprite free, manifesting in a little spiral of crackling light. “Almost,” he murmurs to it. “Almost time for me to pay you back. As soon as Rio—”

The floor shakes with the sound of a distant, monstrous boom. Sam sways on his feet, flipping his knife into his hand instinctively. That had to be Rio’s signal. He looks back at the bed.

The ambassador’s eyes snap open, wide with panic and disorientation. They focus on Sam for a fraction of a second, clear engineered blue—and he strikes,

his blade piercing skin, then trachea, then spinal cord with almost no differentiation. The light fades from those manufactured eyes, blood spreading rapidly into the pillow to form a crimson halo. There it is: they've given the ambassador double death. Mission accomplished.

But Rio is clearly in the lead on making a mess, and besides, there's a sprite to pay off. Sam yanks the smoke alarm out of the ceiling and strips the blankets off the room's spare bed, piling them at the foot of the ambassador's. He plunges his heat blade into the mound of cloth and flips it on. The smell of smoke reaches him instantly, and the flames are only a few seconds behind. The whirling spark-cyclone of the sprite dances above the fire as it takes hold, pulsing its excitement as Sam leaves it to its reward.

On most jobs, he'd be headed back out the window once he was done. But on most jobs, he wouldn't have set the target's funeral pyre before leaving, either, and ideally he wouldn't have taken any injuries. Fuck it. He's got an access card for this floor. He takes the elevator.

Sirens scream from the far side of the city as Sam pushes open the hotel's emergency-exit door and steps out onto the pavement. He tugs the shadows around him with the last of his stamina and takes off at a run—his bike is a few blocks away, far enough that it won't be immediately associated with the hotel, and he makes it there through the maze of alleys and poorly lit back streets without incident. He thumbs the button inside the collar of his armor and the photocells shift, trading out the job's black for a high-visibility silver and green.

The growl of the bike between his thighs feels good as he speeds away from the job, toward the rendezvous point. His arm throbs in time with his heartbeat, but it'll heal. He steers the bike into traffic, through the center of Neoangeles, past the neon signs and glittering shop windows of the commercial strip. At one red light he stops, looks up at an oversized screen projecting the news.

Helicopter Crashes Diplomats' Ball, reads the headline under the anchorsylph's talking head. *Dozens Dead in Explosion*.

"That son of a bitch," Sam breathes. He can't argue this one. Without him it wouldn't have been a complete kill, but without Rio it wouldn't have been a political statement.

The light turns green and Sam's bike takes off.

They're meeting up in a cheap apartment in a shitty part of town, where the only reason Sam's willing to leave his bike is that it's enchanted to make

anyone else who touches it violently ill. Even if someone sees him, this is the kind of place where nobody talks to the cops except to throw curses.

He goes up the fire escape instead of coming in the door, because some habits are hard to break. He disarms the traps at the window and slips inside; the apartment is dark. He doesn't turn a light on, just goes still and listens.

Nothing. Not even a breath.

Habit and his growing familiarity with Rio's deviousness keep him from relaxing as he checks the apartment over, but he doesn't find anything out of place. And unless he's quite mistaken, the heavy footsteps in the hall are headed his way. Sam settles into a shadowed corner and waits.

The door makes barely a sound as it unlocks, and Rio slips in like *this* part is the covert operation, his movements smooth and stealthy. The light from the window outlines him faintly as he moves.

"I have to admit, you pull the flashiest jobs I've ever seen, Rhuk'kat."

The instant when Rio freezes is the most rewarding thing that's happened to Sam in ages—and his laughter, an instant later, isn't bad either. "It's Rio, please. Killing together is the sort of thing that puts men on familiar terms, isn't it?"

"Finally," Sam says. "I wasn't looking forward to hearing you cry out *Saramathlar* in a moment of passion."

"Finally, indeed." Rio stalks toward him in the dark; even though he has every intention of being caught, Sam slides out of his corner and they wind up circling each other, slow and deliberate. "Decided you like the explosions after all?"

"Maybe I want to see what you'd do in close quarters, without all the fancy toys." Sam stops, changes direction, moving to intercept instead of stalk.

Rio lunges. Sam's back hits the wall. "I probably have a few toys you wouldn't complain about in close quarters."

"Save some mystery for later," Sam says, half breathless. "I shouldn't have to tell you that. Aren't you the romantic?"

Maybe it's romantic to let him have the last word. Maybe Rio is just out of patience. Instead of answering, he just leans in and bites, scraping his teeth along the column of Sam's throat. Sam shudders, takes a sharp breath—

"You smell like smoke. How close were you to that crash?"

Rio nips at his earlobe. "Close enough for some souvenirs. *You* smell like blood."

"Almost all of it is other people's," Sam purrs, and that gets him bitten harder. His hands scrabble for purchase on the slickness of Rio's body armor and he rocks his hips for friction. He never did entirely lose that hard-on from the earlier flirting, but it certainly wasn't urgent until now. He fumbles his gloves off behind Rio's back, and that gives him the dexterity he needs to follow Rio's armor seams, looking for the catch that'll make the whole thing unseal.

Rio catches his hand. "Don't," he says, and when Sam stiffens at that he adds, "The suit's armed. It'll poison anyone who tries to take it off me."

"Paranoid son of a beast," Sam says approvingly. "Where'd you get something like that done?"

"Built it in myself," Rio says. "Told you—you really should let me show you all the toys."

Make one for me, Sam doesn't say. It's too soon for demands like that. "Take it off," he says instead. "Give me something to get my teeth into."

Rio steps back and Sam misses being pinned immediately, but it's worth it to have Rio stripping for him. In the dim light he's an almost abstract series of planes and shadows, the shapes of heavily muscled shoulders and arms. Light glitters for an instant on a nipple piercing and Sam's mouth waters.

He should be following suit, shouldn't he? He detaches the left sleeve of his jacket so he can leave it where it is to keep his injury contained, then unseals the rest of his armor to slide out of it. His skin tingles, alert and sensitized by the cool air.

"Nice," Rio says, drawing the word out appreciatively, as the light catches the tattoos down Sam's front, the ones he had done in a fit of spite when he first came down from the forest and threw himself into human culture. They form a traditional seal of protection, the sort used for places of sanctuary back home, but the power source at the lowest point, instead of being the root of a great tree, is the root of his cock.

"You can touch them if you want," Sam says. "They don't bite if you play nicely."

Rio doesn't take the conversational bait, but he does get his bare hands on Sam's torso, broad and warm. Sam arches into the touch and Rio backs him into the wall again. Perfect. Sam slides a hand up Rio's side, reaches for that

nipple ring and twists it, hard. Rio surges into him with a growl, thick cock grinding hard against Sam's hip. Sam pushes back, tugs on the piercing just to feel Rio's fingers dig into his side.

"Trying to make sure I don't go easy on you?" Rio asks. His free hand snarls in Sam's hair and pulls.

"That's been, nnnh, the name of the game the whole time," Sam retorts. "Fuck *easy*." He rakes his nails down Rio's back, catching them on scars and scratching harder there, making Rio grunt and rut up against him. His cock aches.

When Rio shifts to pin their cocks together, to catch them both in one big hand, Sam shoves him back. "Now what?" Rio asks.

"Now you fuck me through the wall," Sam says. "I didn't fight my way through a team of security meatheads fantasizing about a handjob."

"You're telling me you think about sex while you're killing?"

"You're telling me you *don't*?"

Rio grins, and nods like he's conceding the point. "You're prepared, then?"

As it happens, the pocket where Sam stashes the condoms is in the sleeve he's still wearing. He tosses one to Rio. "Suit up and let's go."

He can just see the raised eyebrow, but Rio follows orders, and that's the important part. "Lube?"

"What's on there is fine. Elves are flexible, remember?"

"Your funeral," Rio says, but that's it for the warnings, thank gods. He gets his hands under Sam's thighs, picks him up, and pins him to the wall. The head of his cock slides against Sam's ass, and Sam reaches down to guide it. This isn't going to go easily, flexible or not; Rio's a monster.

"Push," Sam demands, and Rio does, slowly enough for him to really feel the burn of being opened up. It hurts, in a way he's always enjoyed, hot and immediate and intimate. He digs his fingers hard into Rio's shoulders and groans, shuddering through the pain and his body's surrender to it.

"You're not even sorry," Rio says when he's deep enough for his hipbones to press against Sam's ass.

"You don't even have the decency to phrase that as a question," Sam answers. He flexes, squeezing tight as best he can around the obscene thickness of Rio's cock.

Rio grins. "I'm right."

Sam squirms, pinned between Rio and the wall. "Don't just gloat at me. *Do* something about it."

"Cocky little shit," Rio says, which really ought to be Sam's line, but then he follows it up with a hard enough snap of his hips that Sam can't complain. And yeah, it still hurts, in a way that deserves jackhammer comparisons, a way that makes Sam feel alive. He relaxes deliberately, exerting his will on his flesh, as Rio sounds him out enough to find a rhythm. His breath comes in short huffs, in time with Rio's thrusts, and his cock thrums a steady pulse of need.

When he drops a hand between them to do something about that, Rio stops him. "My turn first. I'll take care of you after."

The spike of heat down Sam's spine is a sloppy mix of anger and desire. "Make it worth my while."

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Rio asks, putting on a completely unconvincing hurt tone. "I'm the best in the business."

"Didn't realize this *was* your business," Sam says. "That stuff with the helicopter, ahh, just a sideline?"

"Hey, you do what you have to do to make ends meet," Rio says, and he could be teasing but suddenly Sam wonders what it would be like if he weren't, if he actually does mercenary fucking along with mercenary killing—and just how many specialized demands he'd be willing to meet, if he does.

It's hard to hold onto the thought right now, as Rio pounds into him increasingly fast and urgent. The job must have left him wired, too, keyed up with adrenaline after an up-close-and-personal disaster that he put together, hungry now to take it out on someone. Sam holds on tight and rides him like a storm, sinking his teeth into the meat of Rio's shoulder to muffle his groans.

Rio's breathing has gone ragged and harsh, half-voiced growls in Sam's ear. His hands are going to leave bruises. Sam writhes in his grip, struggling just to feel his resistance. And Rio reacts to it just the way a predator with the raven's luck ought to, pressing the advantage harder, giving no ground, until he reaches what he was striving for and comes with a perfect, brutish growl.

Sam bucks against him when he slows. "You're not done yet."

"Can't even give a guy time to catch his breath?" Rio asks.

"Not when he claims to be the best in the business." Sam clenches around him, a deliberate, demanding flex. "Come on, hotshot."

Rio pulls out, and Sam takes a breath to swear as his legs slip from around Rio's waist—but by the time he's finished inhaling, Rio is sinking to his knees. Well. *That's* an acceptable development.

He goes after Sam's cock with the same ruthless focus he uses on jobs, taking it without hesitation. His mouth is hot and lush, and when his teeth graze skin Sam is sure he's doing it on purpose. "*Bastard*," Sam says, with feeling, bucking into Rio's mouth to get more of that heat and mock carelessness. Rio laughs around him. "Smug, impossible—fuck, do it," and that last is thanks to Rio's hand sliding up between his thighs, thick fingers pushing back behind his balls.

Rio shoves his fingers up Sam's ass, swallowing when Sam thrusts deeper into his mouth in response. Someday Sam wants to take him apart, wreck that maddening, delicious composure, make him choke and struggle. But for now he can roll with this, fucking himself on Rio's fingers as he thrusts into Rio's mouth. An adrenaline-fueled post-fight fuck never lasts long anyway.

His breath hitches and he tangles his fingers in Rio's short braids, rocking his hips in short, staccato thrusts. The world narrows down to heat and pressure and friction, this moment and these sensations, the growing tension—

Climax hits him as a meltdown, thrumming liquid and scorching through his veins as he shoots down Rio's throat. Long habit keeps him quiet as he comes, the sensation itself his only release.

Like the bastard he is, Rio doesn't let up until Sam actually pulls him away, when it's too much to stand. Sam lets his head fall back against the wall, breathing deeply, listening to the hammer of his pulse in his ears. He's a wreck. Getting fucked that hard is going to leave him limping, and he can feel the throb of his injured arm increasing now that he's not distracted.

"Well?" Rio asks.

"Tch." Sam tugs on his braids with the fondness that comes from a good come. "Worth it."

Rio snorts. "High praise."

"You should be honored," Sam agrees. Fuck his life but he thinks he's learning to like this asshole.

He's saved from any further displays of affection by a sudden flicker of light at the window. Rio pulls away quickly, no doubt going for a weapon, and after a split second Sam has to laugh. "Seriously, are you following me home?"

The lightning sprite crackles and whirls, giving off an unfocused wave of delight and... expectation? Hope?

“Okay, I have to know. How did you get that thing’s attention?”

Sam shakes his head. “I gave the alarm system a handjob,” he says. “If you want the long version, let’s head back to the Morrigan’s. I don’t want to have to explain twice.”

“As if there’s any way I’d miss that.” Rio picks up his armor off the floor. “Suit up, partner.”

Partner, hmm?

That... might not be so bad. Sam puts himself back together, watching Rio out of the corner of his eye. He wonders if the sprite could be convinced to play nice with some of Rio’s toys. Either the on-duty *or* off-duty ones. They just might have the makings of a team, here.

He carries that thought with him as they leave, and somehow, he can’t stop smiling.

The End

Author Bio

Laylah Hunter is a third-gendered butch queer who writes true stories about imaginary people in worlds that never were. Most of Hunter's work deals with queer characters, erotic themes, and the search for happy endings in unfavorable circumstances. Hunter's mild-mannered alter ego lives in Seattle, at the mercy of the requisite cats and cultivating the requisite caffeine habit, and dreams of a day when telling stories will pay all the bills.

Contact & Media Info

[Website](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Twitter](#)

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THE SCENT OF HOPE

By Summer Devon

Photo Description

A man in his early twenties looks scruffy in a bloodstained shirt covered by a dusty leather coat. His handsome face wears a slight smirk, which is odd, considering the very large noose around his neck.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am getting really tired of the waiting. No one told me that waiting to die would be quite this boring. So to pass the time, I wrote a letter to my sister, but somehow my letter got to the wrong person. Who do I end up writing? Did I really commit the murder I will hang for? Can whoever my mysterious pen pal is get me out of the mess?

Fantasy or pseudo-regency preferred, where same sex relationships are normal, no PWP,

HEA or HFN ending please.

Sincerely,

Xelly

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: condemned man, Victorian era, prison, rescue, businessman, prisoner, HFN

Word Count: 11,241

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THE SCENT OF HOPE

By Summer Devon

“And do you regret your actions that have brought you so low?” The elderly gent wore a fixed smile as he examined Dez. “I do not speak of the crimes of which you are accused. I mean all the sad conditions of your life.”

Dez sat at the edge of the metal platform that functioned as a bed and wiggled his perpetually cold toes. *Hell, yes. I regret getting so drunk that I was caught almost at once.* “Yes, Father.”

The vicar leaned far back on the wooden chair he'd brought into the cell. Poor man probably wished he hadn't settled so close to the prisoner. Dez got a bucket of water every couple of days, and he didn't waste more than a few drops on cleaning his stinking self and he hadn't had a change of clothing for... too long.

But Dez had underestimated the old man who'd been shifting about on his chair for another purpose: to pull some crumpled blank pages and a pencil from inside his fusty black jacket. “Do you have someone to whom you can write, and beg forgiveness?” the vicar asked. “Can you write?”

Writing? Dez considered the notion.

Messing about with pencil and paper seemed more interesting than sitting and watching the rats chew on his dinner. His first week in prison, he'd tried to tame a rat—that seemed a standard way a convict might entertain himself. The creature bit him. After that, Dez decided to ignore his fellow “inmates”.

“Yes, Father. I'll write a letter. Good idea.”

If the vicar gave him paper, he'd figure out what to do with it later on. But then his plans to make salacious drawings were destroyed with the vicar's next words. “I shall carry these pages from this place and send them. No official eyes will see what you've written.”

A generous offer, although perhaps the man of God was lying like the devil. Dez considered writing to Bill and ask he bring some tobacco and the ten shillings he owed Dez, but he supposed his friend would ignore any pleas.

No one he knew had tried to come to his rescue... and wasn't that a lowering thought.

The vicar said, "Do you have a mother? Father? No? A sister? No one?"

"A sister," Dez said. "But she wouldn't want to hear from me."

"Write to her. Do you have anything better to do with your time?"

Dez laughed for the first time in days. He liked this old crow of a man. "I'll cancel my luncheon appointment with Her Majesty immediately." He took the papers and pencil and got to work.

He even wrote something as close to the heart as he could manage.

Carl gave up trying to read and handed the pages-long letter to his secretary. "Go on, take a look. It's from a man named Dez Moore. I understood enough to be interested."

Crimson gave a ladylike snort. "From a stranger—then it'll be another plea for funds, sir. That's why it was placed in the pile of correspondence to ignore."

"No need to protect me."

"I disagree. You were nearly hoodwinked by that scoundrel claiming to be an Austrian prince."

"No such thing. I wrote back to the pretender because I was fascinated by his scheme."

"You are always interested in evil idiots."

"Such as you?"

"Exactly." She paused. "Is this your hobby again?"

He shrugged. Carl occasionally allowed himself to be diverted from the course he'd set while a child beggar in London. His goals were simple: he wanted wealth and power. Yet every now and again, with no warning, his discipline slipped and he found himself expending effort on people or projects that didn't increase his wealth.

When he thought of himself haring off on one of those projects, he recalled a rat terrier he'd once seen scrambling up and out of a hole where it had been hard at work eliminating rats. It sped away into the sunshine without looking back. Its handler screamed after it and the dog didn't so much as look back. An animal bred for one purpose, a creature dedicated to its task, suddenly veered away from its path—and just as single-minded as always as it raced off.

Scowling down at the six pages, Crimson sank into the chair next to the desk. Like everyone who worked in Carl's office, she knew better than to use the chair facing the desk because it was built low and uncomfortable. Carl saved that chair for competitors or employees who required a stern lecture.

He watched her read the pages covered with a scrawling hand, hardly better than Carl's own attempts, and Carl pondered the few lines he'd figured out—and had memorised.

I know you and Mum tried to change me and tried with love. And some days (a fortnight ago, when I was dragged into this cosy little home) I almost wish you had succeeded. Most of the time I can't say that. Truth is, and truth is all I have left, I'd do what I did again, and more slow even. If you'd seen it, you would have done the same, Lucy, or wanted to. Don't bother praying for that change in me. If you get this, I hope you come, if not to help, at least to say I told you so. I sorely miss your face.

Carl was intrigued. Too intrigued. This letter seemed to call straight to that reckless part of himself. In the past, his interest had been triggered by an article in a paper of an injustice or the sight of a careworn face. As Crimson said, businessmen had their hobbies, and perhaps this was no stranger than golf, say, or a collection of some sort. Besides, last time he'd gained a valuable assistant.

“Want me to read the rest of the letter to you?” Crimson asked in a low voice. She knew how much he hated people to discover his weakness. He hardly cared that he had trouble with reading, and she didn't either, but if anyone else should find out. No.

Fellow businessmen made snide remarks because he had a female assistant—but he ignored them. He needed Crimson far more than she needed him. She could keep secrets.

Carl sat on the edge of his desk. “I understand this was to go to someone named Mrs Carl Rees, not Carl Reis. It appears that this town's postmistress is as bad at reading as I am. The man, Dez, is in prison, and he's writing to his sister. I got that as well.” He didn't admit that it had taken him nearly ten minutes to figure out that much.

“This material strikes one as unoriginal.” Crimson wrinkled her aristocratic nose. “One suspects he gets his basic plot from one of those melodramas in a music hall. Perhaps he sent out identical letters to any number of people with

similar names, hoping someone will send funds?" She read a page then said, "I'm not so far off. He apparently does want rescuing, the idiot."

"Rescuing from Her Majesty's care."

"Yes, although no matter. I expect it's a sham. Shall we get to the rest of this morning's post, sir?"

Before he could protest, she tucked the pages under his blotter and picked up a letter from a lawyer. Ah well, he should work.

She read that dull plea for money out loud. He walked around to his big leather desk chair and settled in, not listening to Crimson, instead thinking about the note from prison that had fallen into his hands.

Crimson finished reading then said, "Should I tell the solicitor we'd agree to take over that estate?"

He forced his mind back to work. "No, far too risky."

"You don't mind risk, sir," Crimson said.

"Never without reward. The costs to repair the building would outrun profits from the farmland."

"What shall I write to him?"

"Whatever you like." He tapped a finger on the desk.

If you get this, I hope you come.

"Crimson, never mind the other letters. Find out about Dez Moore. Huh, and what sort of a name is that? Desmond, I suppose."

She heaved the sigh of a long-suffering employee about to launch into a complaint.

"Now," he added. With anyone else, he might say please. Not Crimson. She had no respect for politeness.

She was also frighteningly competent.

Less than a day later, she came back with information. "Assuming the letter came from him, it is not a hoax, though it was sent more than a month ago. He's a murderer, as he admits himself. Something of a scandal in the lesser London papers. He claims he was protecting a female but she vanished into nothing."

"I recall that was in the letter." He'd read it through the night before, but he wouldn't admit that.

“Well this Moore is not long for the world. His trial’s over and done with. He’s guilty. He’s to hang in ten days.”

The fact, so casually stated, made Carl blink. He wiped a hand over his mouth to hide his dismay.

Crimson tucked the newspaper under her arm and gathered up Dez’s letter that Carl had battled his way through. She flipped through the pages. “There are some rather overdone bits in the letter about how he only wants a chance to see his sister one last time. If I hadn’t found those clippings, I would think it came straight from some penny dreadful or music hall production.”

He felt annoyed that a man’s pending death provided the source of Crimson’s mockery. Usually her sarcastic manner didn’t bother him—in fact, he found it refreshing.

He picked up the envelope that had contained the letter. “And he hangs in less than a fortnight. I’d better arrange to visit as soon as possible.”

Time to scramble from his usual hole and dash off—and ignore his sterner self that would run after him shouting. Carl Reis, rat terrier. Perhaps he’d put it on a set of calling cards.

“What? A visit?” She didn’t hide her dismay.

“I’ll take a train, if possible, and perhaps a carriage from an inn. Even if there is such a thing as a train, I’m sure it won’t run more than once or twice a day.”

“Sir, what are you planning? What happened to never taking risk without reward? You said that only yesterday.”

“This is hardly a risk. I lose a day’s work, perhaps.”

“It’s lunatic.”

“Probably,” he agreed. “Find me a train in the Bradshaw’s.” He paused. The plans built in his mind, the way they usually did, although these thoughts made his heart speed the way business hadn’t in a long time. “Wait. Wendell should track down his sister. She’s in this town, I should imagine. We should arrange for her to visit him. We’ll write a note to Moore, send it to the prison. I’ll dictate that one in a minute. And perhaps... Yes, also we’ll need lawyers. I have some questions about this case.”

Crimson must have sensed his determination, because she stopped protesting. Stubborn as a wall, Wendell called him, and no one wanted to be crushed against rock.

With her usual efficiency, Crimson located the sister that day and arranged for her to come to the local and temporary offices of Reis and Company.

It wouldn't do for a man of Reis's stature to chase after some unknown widow, Crimson and Wendell argued.

Mrs Rees was thin and mousy in a black gown with grey ribbons. She refused the offer of refreshment and balanced on one of Carl's more comfortable armchairs. "Please, I haven't much time. I must return to my employer," she said in a shaking voice. "I understand this has to do with my brother?"

That fact seemed to be the source of her fear. Maybe she wasn't always such a timid creature.

"I believe this was intended for you." Carl handed the letter to her.

She took it with reluctance, and, as she read, she began to weep silently, hiccupping occasionally. When she was done, Reis offered her his handkerchief and watched her destroy the fabric with twisting and tears.

"I'm sorry to give you such bad news," he said.

"No. No. I knew. I've had other letters months ago. But I don't answer. Oh, you see, the dreadful situation hurts too much. I'm years older than Desmond, and I thought him such a sweet boy. I prefer to think of him that way still... He had a good job as a clerk and threw it away to drive a carriage and to drink and gamble." She wiped her streaming eyes. "Where did we go wrong?"

"If you're speaking of the crime, he claims he killed the man in the defence of a woman."

"I have read as much." She didn't seem convinced.

"I haven't had time to read all I can about the case—" or have Crimson read it to him "—but a solicitor has already assured me that his defence apparently didn't do a very good job. They didn't make enough of an effort to find the innocent he protected."

Mrs Rees pressed the handkerchief to her lips. "Innocent? From the descriptions I've read, she wasn't an innocent. She was... It was a lady with no shame."

Interesting to know she followed the case after all. Carl said, "A prostitute?"

She flinched as he said the words, but managed a nod.

“So you think it’s all right to murder one of them?”

She seemed confused by the question, and more tears came.

He cursed himself for the sarcasm he should leave to Crimson, who had a lighter hand.

“If you would allow me, I’d help you to visit your brother. Before...” He stopped himself before he said something blunt about hanging. No doubt about it, he was not used to dealing with genteel females with sensibilities.

“No. I am sorry, but I can’t. I am a widow now, a companion to Lady Mannering, and she needs me. I can’t risk losing my place.”

He didn’t point out that if she were so essential, she probably wouldn’t lose her employment for an occasion such as this. Carl knew avoidance when he heard it.

She rose to her feet, so of course he had to as well.

Mrs Rees reached into a leather-and-needlepoint bag she carried, and pulled out two tin-backed daguerreotypes. “I hope you might know how to send these to him?” More avoidance. She had the prison’s address.

She placed one picture on the desk. It was a portrait of an extremely pale, thin lady holding a lily—dear God, an extremely pale, thin, extremely *dead* lady. “A memento mori?” he asked.

“Yes.” She nodded. “Our mama. Soon after she passed.”

“Perhaps mother and son shall meet again soon,” said Crimson, who was obviously unimpressed by their visitor.

Mrs Rees shook her head. “No. My mother was a good woman, and my brother...” The tears trickled again. “He shan’t reside in heaven. I want him to have this. And another, a reminder of what he once was—what he’s lost.”

She managed to hand over the other picture. A young man in a tight-fitting, dark suit stood, hands resting on a chair, not quite smiling—those full lips were pulled into a smirk.

But there was something, perhaps the way his brown eyes looked past the photographer? Carl decided this man was mocking himself.

“Dez,” he said, and allowed himself a few seconds to examine the face, the slashing brows, the strong nose, the chin that might be petulant. This picture, that almost-smile, put the seal on his interest. Carl Reis was hooked.

He looked up at Mrs Rees, who actually met his gaze.

Her eyes, red-rimmed, were rather pretty—like Dez's? She said, "If you'd be so kind as to make sure he gets these, please do mention that I forgive him. It would not have been possible to forgive if our mama had suffered because of him. If he'd given her sorrow... but she was sick for many years, and I managed to keep the truth from her before she died."

She closed her bag and squeezed the leather handles. "In the last two years, I have lost my dear mother, my husband, and now this. I can't. I simply cannot see him again." She made excuses for her weakness, of course. Over her shoulder, Crimson rolled her eyes.

Carl might well be ruthless, but he had no need to make this guilt-ridden woman feel any worse. He picked up the pictures, and smiled at her. "I'll tell him you've forgiven him, and I'll see that he gets these pictures."

Her brow furrowed. "You'll write to him for me?"

"I'm going to go see him." He had to now. He'd already sent a letter saying he'd bring along the sister, and that wasn't going to happen.

His heart beat a little faster at the thought of seeing that cocky boy in person and witness how he'd grown into a man.

Absurd. Carl knew where his thoughts now strayed. He had little time or patience for such matters. He'd had sexual encounters before, once in a train station on a trip to York, another time in a private room in a pub. His hand and imagination suited him well enough.

To connect attraction to his... hobby. He wasn't sure he approved. The parts of his life were tidied away in separate boxes.

But that smile. The letter. He gazed down at the picture again, at the near-smile, and startled when Mrs Rees grabbed his hand.

"You are a saint." Mrs Rees gasped and began to cry. Behind her, Crimson broke into silent laughter. At his glare, she mouthed the word *saint*.

"Ever hear of this bloke? Carl Reis?" One of the few guards who passed the time of day with the prisoners shoved an envelope at Dez.

"Carl Rees was my sister's husband. This must be from her." Dez caught a whiff of glorious tobacco and fresh air. It came from the papers in his hand.

“Naw, this isn’t anyone’s sister.”

The envelope had been opened and the contents read, of course. The letter was from someone whose name was almost exactly the same as his dead brother-in-law’s. For a long moment, he puzzled over why this man would write to him. And then Dez realised his letter to Lucy had fallen into the wrong hands.

A bitter disappointment filled him. He’d hoped to see her one more time.

“Well. Go on and read,” the gaoler ordered. “Only, listen, if it’s the head of Reis and Company, he’s got fingers in all sorts of pies. If you knew him, why, you should have written him sooner.”

“I don’t know him,” Dez said and pulled the single sheet out. “God almighty,” he said and gave a snort of laughter.

“Well?” the gaoler demanded.

“He’s going to bring my sister here.” *Try to bring her*, the letter said, but he grabbed hold as if it was a fact. He wanted a few facts to go his way.

The guard laughed too. “He better hurry, then.”

So bleeding funny—the hanging was scheduled in two days, and the gaolers did love to remind him of that.

While he had light enough to see, Dez read the note again and again, particularly a line about *we hope to help in any way we can*. What could that mean? We? Help? Any way?

Dez wasn’t sure he liked this little squirm of hope, not at all. And what sort of a maniac would help a man he knew nothing about—well, nothing other than the fact that Dez, the man in question, was an admitted murderer.

He was looking a magical gift horse in the mouth. And since there was no such thing as magic, that was fine. But that night he lay awake, staring into darkness and listening to the scurry of the rodents. “Carl Reis,” he said. “Carl. Carl Reis.” Funny to hear his brother-in-law’s name with so much interest and possibility attached to it. Poor old, dead Carl had the same interest in men as Dez—he’d tried to sneak into Dez’s bed one night soon after the wedding. Dez had kneed him in the bollocks, and then promised never to speak of the matter to Lucy.

Dead Carl Rees was too conventional to ever admit such an attraction to the wide world.

“Carl Reis,” Dez said. If his sister married this man, she wouldn’t have to change her name much at all. And what a step up for her—from a clerk in a shipbuilding firm to some kind of wealthy pie-fingerer who used lovely paper. Dez held the letter to his nose again, and managed to fall asleep breathing its scent.

He dreamed about fucking his brother-in-law, who slipped a noose around his neck. He woke as he climaxed. He hadn’t had such a dream in years. His stupid body wasn’t giving up on life yet.

We hope to help any way we can.

The day of his execution, Dez begged for a change of clothes and a barber.

He got the barber and the clothes they’d caught him in, still unwashed. He eyed the splotches of blood from the man he’d slammed into a wall. Perhaps it was some kind of justice to die wearing the bastard’s blood. And maybe some of the blood belonged to the girl the man had been slashing about the face—the girl who’d vanished into the night and hadn’t reappeared even when Dez wheedled a newspaper reporter into begging for her to come forward.

The barber’s hand trembled—probably he didn’t shave many murderers—so he sliced Dez’s neck. Still, he made Dez look and feel more like a human than he had in weeks. He thanked the man.

“Will you sign this?” the barber asked. He placed a blank piece of paper on the platform of a bed and fished a pencil from his tunic.

Dez picked up the pencil. “Will the prison need it to pay you? Can’t the turnkey see my shiny face and short hair as proof enough?”

“No, no. It’s just that some folk pay a penny for a hanged man’s signature. Specially a man who’s attracted the attention that you have of late.”

“Ah.” Dez nearly threw the pencil at the barber, but why not? He signed the paper three times. “There’s three pence for you.”

After the barber left, Dez sat on the bed alone and waited in the chilly, damp cell. By some miracle, he’d managed to avoid contracting lice, but the fleas bit, and he had their welts on his skin to occupy himself. If only he had more paper—he might write another letter. This time he might tell Bill he was sorry he hadn’t tried harder to make their time together something more than a simple lark.

Carl Reis hadn't managed any miracle after all. Dez felt a moment's rage at the man. But he hadn't promised anything—and maybe Dez's sister waited for him outside.

Unlikely, but Dez didn't have much more time, and he wouldn't spend it in anger or in regretting a moment of his life. Too much drink might have led him to that dark street at the wrong time, but he'd already moved along from dwelling on that time.

Funny, it wasn't the drink he'd missed in prison—once the shivers and headaches had passed. He'd had plenty of hours to consider the other days and nights of his life. The list of what he missed was simple. The wind on his face as he drove, huddled in his greatcoat, the half-wild creatures hooked to the carriage, the bugle and call of the yards as he steered the animals in, knowing a good meal waited. Those were the parts of life he'd mourned losing. Oxtail soup. Hot tea. Waking in a bed with someone else and using that person's bulk as a shield against the world and cold. Warm beds. Oh yes, warm beds. The touch of another person, smiles, a good laugh.

It seemed a crime that he would leave this life without feeling warmth again. Although perhaps Hell would be warm enough.

“Nearly time.” The turnkey was at the bars. “We generally do this work at dawn. Sorry for the delay.” He grinned.

God, these people and their awful jokes. He forced himself to grin back, because screaming or ranting would be worse.

They'd offered him a portion of rum, but he'd turned it down. His new sobriety, the only gift prison gave him that he appreciated, wouldn't last long—though he would be sober the rest of his life, *oh ha ha*, and wasn't that a joke worthy of the gaolers.

He picked up the letter again. In the two days he'd had it, the paper had turned grimy and lost all pleasant scents. But as talismans went, it wasn't half bad. He tucked it into the side of his trousers. Someone had made an effort for him, even if it was to write a passel of lies. Someone had given him hope and a sense that he wasn't entirely alone

“Come on then, Moore. Hands forward, time for the shackles.”

Dez rose to his feet slowly, hoping his knees wouldn't give way in fear. He remembered an execution he'd witnessed—the man had fallen and wailed on the walk to the gallows. The crowd jeered and laughed.

He hadn't joined the mocking crowd, but that didn't lend him much comfort at the moment.

They manacled his hands in the front with heavy cold irons. Then the leg irons that made him shuffle.

Two men walked with him, one tall and stout, and the other taller and stouter. Every second seemed to take far too long, even as time moved too quickly. At the door to the yard, they were met by the clergyman who'd visited him. The old man looked anxious and pale, which didn't go well with his pure white hair.

"Hello, Father," Dez said, glad of a friendly face.

He tried to ignore the noisy crowd—so many people gathered to watch—and concentrated on the feel of sunlight on his face.

Good morning, Sun.

Good-bye, Sun.

"Fine morning for it," said one of the guards. Oh, they did love their stupid japes. Dez wanted to ram his foot down on the man's instep. Instead, he smiled too. Because he would not allow these people to recall him and think *coward*.

And why did he care at all what they thought? Why was he wasting his last precious moments on this absurdity?

"Are you making your peace with God, my son?"

Hardly. The rotter hadn't come through for Dez. "I'm still working on making peace with myself."

The men laughed. Even the vicar smiled.

"What'd he say?" voices shouted.

"Take down his last words. They'll sell well," one of the guards said to the vicar. "I'll sign off that they were true, too."

"That's not why I'm here. The newspapermen are here for that," snapped the old man. Wasn't he supposed to be concerned with Dez's soul and not his own dignity?

They climbed the wooden stairs to the platform slowly because of the irons on Dez's ankles. At the top, Dez looked around at the upturned faces.

"Has anyone seen my sister?" he asked.

Someone laughed, but then the cry went up, and all around, people turned and gazed at each other, and the mutters rippled through the crowd. *Sister? Where is the near-dead man's sister? He has a right to see his sister.* He watched the heads twist side to side.

Rather nice that they searched for her too. The final kindness in his life.

He hadn't really expected Lucy to come. She hadn't even sent word of their mother's death—he learned about that from a reporter.

But he would have liked to say farewell to her or Bill, or anyone he knew before That Night—the night he'd murdered a man.

Only now, he was being pulled into place in the middle of the trapdoor.

“Hood?” asked a man. Dez stared at him, unable to form words.

“No, then?” the man said.

Dez nodded, not sure if that meant he wanted a hood or not. He hardly cared. He was concentrating on the thump of his heart. His heartbeats could be counted out now, so few left, and he wondered if he'd reach fifty before the beating stopped. Counting. That was a reasonable occupation for his last moments. Better than weeping or begging.

“Any final words?”

He thought of the barber and the guard, thinking to profit from his death.

“I might have a few, but they're for me alone,” he said, but politely. “Thanks all the same.” No reason to anger the man who'd be responsible for his death coming fast or painfully slow.

Apparently, he'd declined the hood, because instead of darkness, he gazed out over the crowd that stared back even as the noose, thick and heavy, was laid with surprising gentleness around his neck. The breeze ruffled his newly shortened hair.

He wanted to close his eyes—and fought that childish urge to hide behind his lids. They'd be closed forever soon enough. *Fifteen... sixteen... seventeen...* heartbeats.

The warden, a man with silver hair, stood close by. He used an upper-crust accent Dez suspected he hadn't been born to. “Not so swaggering now, are you? Not so brash, nor full of yourself.”

Nor so drunk, Dez thought, and that might have been a mistake after all.

The warden tilted his head back, as if trying to find a scent in the breeze or look down his nose at the condemned man. “What are your final words, Moore? We are all waiting—in fact, we’re curious beyond all measure.”

Dez stared back and thought, but didn’t bother to say, *I’ll just wager you are, you shite-for-brains*. There, that was enough time spent on that waste of breath called a warden. Too many of his remaining seconds. He turned away and stared over the crowd.

Twenty... twenty-one... The beats came fast with his fear. He might count to fifty after all. He might also puke.

A sharp whistle rang out, especially loud because the crowd had grown silent listening for Dez’s final words.

Everyone looked in that direction, but not Dez, because he desperately needed to count those heartbeats.

Another shriek of a whistle cut the air, and enough stirring in the crowd made him twist on his heel with a drag and jingle of his shackles to watch. Three men and two women shoved their way through the crowd. Actually, only one man shoved—a large man in the front used his bulk and elbows to push people aside. The rest followed like ducklings after their mother.

He stared at one of the women in the middle. His sister, Lucy, at last? No, this person’s hair was brown, but pulled into some kind of braids-and-loops arrangement. The woman—lady, really—was far too elegant and tall to be Lucy. The other woman seemed vaguely familiar. As they drew closer, she lifted her face, and he saw red lines crisscrossed her cheeks. He thought of marks made by a knife in a dark alley. *Her*.

He stopped counting.

The bulky chap waved something white, holding it high and directed it at the group on the platform.

That looked like paper, but Dez was muddled, although he did notice that whatever the man waved or shouted made the warden curse.

Dez concentrated, but was too dazed and couldn’t hear or think well enough to drown the buzz in his head. Perhaps they had already dropped him through the door and this was a last dream of the world he’d just departed.

He might as well take part in the absurdity. “Halloo,” he called out to the girl. “You’re a bit late.”

He took a step forward, intent on catching her before she escaped into the thin air from which she appeared—perhaps if he went over the edge, he'd fly away or tumble to the next life. But the manacles on his hands jangled and the ones on his legs caught at him. He looked down, stumbled, and fell forward. He was still on the platform.

It was real.

He wasn't dead.

The world went black.

If Carl heard the words “this is highly irregular” one more time, he might resort to violence—and he'd left his brawling days behind more than a decade ago.

No, no, of course he wouldn't row here. He'd learned patience during his thirty years on this earth, and the main way he found to exercise it was to smile and say nothing. That response drove people mad.

The warden, three barristers, a judge, a solicitor, Wendell, Crimson, and Carl all jammed into the warden's painfully neat office. Carl allowed his lawyers to explain it all one more time, while he examined the pictures of Penance and Guilt that hung next to commendations. Every wall in the office was covered with that nonsense.

Only a little of the stench of prison reached this room, but apparently the atmosphere was enough to make Crimson go far too still and quiet, retreating back to the broken woman he'd met at the Old Bailey.

He should have remembered her past and insisted she stay at the inn.

The fallen woman known as Meggie had given her sworn statement and had returned to the inn in the company of a lady and a gentleman Carl had hired for the occasion. The pair, a married couple, was mainly on hand to make sure Meggie didn't try to scarp off again. She was as fearful as a rabbit, although Carl wasn't inclined to blame the poor scarred creature for that.

He stifled a yawn and wondered if Dez had woken up yet. *Dez*. Carl couldn't think of the man as anything other than that, not Desmond, not Mr Moore. Dez, who'd almost died wearing a stained shirt and a dusty driving coat. He might end up in prison again, but Carl wouldn't allow him to be killed.

Another *highly irregular* came from the judge, and Carl had had enough. He excused himself and asked the judge to join him in the antechamber.

“How many guineas will it take?” he asked the judge, and finally they got down to the real business.

After some negotiations, they pushed back into the crowded office filled with arguing lawyers and the warden, who was pounding his desk with his fist. Carl gave Crimson a small nod, and her eye flickered, a sign of disgust.

Silence fell in the room as the judge explained that Mr Moore was clearly in a weakened state and Mr Reis had taken over his care until the case could be reexamined.

“You’ll be held responsible should he escape.”

“Of course.”

A few more *highly irregulars*, and Carl and his party were quietly driven out the back of the prison to take a circuitous route to the inn. That party included Dez, who was now awake and staring about him as if he’d landed on the moon. He wore irons and jangled almost continuously as he shifted and stared, shifted and stared.

Outside they heard shouts of laughter and some singing.

The crowds around the prison had dispersed, but a holiday air had come over the town. The last-minute reprieve had turned the bloodthirsty mob into one ready to celebrate the rescue of a man who’d almost hanged.

Dez’s story had changed—the facts hadn’t, of course, but official documents could transform any situation. Well, as long as they were accompanied by gold. Many purses of gold, large and small, had been discreetly delivered to powerful men from London to this town in Lincolnshire.

Five of them rode in the coach with darkened windows: Dez, Carl, Crimson, Wendell, and one of the lawyers. The two guards from the prison—paid for by Carl—sat up with the driver.

Carl sat next to Dez and tried not to notice the man reeked of fear-sweat and the rancid air of the prison.

Dez was breathing fast like a man at the end of a race.

“You’ll pass out again if you don’t slow your breathing.” The first words he’d ever spoken to Dez—and an admonition.

“Yes. I know. I can’t seem to stop.” His voice was pitched low. For some reason, Carl had thought he would have a tenor. Perhaps because of that photo that he’d held and memorised.

Carl gave an impatient grunt, directed at himself. Carl was not a sentimental bloke, and this idiocy directed at a murderer based on a letter and a photograph was costing him time and money and perhaps more sanity than usual.

And then his own breath went odd when Dez's brown eyes opened wide and he gave a huge grin. "Carl Reis. You are Carl Reis. I can *smell* it."

Smell it? Yes, definitely sanity was no longer in his makeup or Dez's. Carl returned that smile.

Dez had forgotten the scent of freedom, but he knew the tobacco-and-leather fresh-air smell of the letter. It sang out even over the smell of horses and dust and... oh, he had trouble concentrating, because every sense he possessed seemed to be magnified beyond anything he recalled. Even the metallic tang of blood in his mouth tasted delicious. The cut inside his lip—probably from his fall—a wonderful, amazing pain.

His heightened senses had to be the result of nearly dying, but he wanted to take it all in and keep every jot inside him. Life. He was alive. He wasn't dead. He wanted to sing. He would have burst into some rousing song, but he still felt dizzy, and this crew he'd landed in seemed a grim lot. Also he couldn't carry a tune to save his life.

Save his life. His life had been saved.

When he was first shoved into the carriage, the man next to him had reminded him of a bully, with that pale hair that was cut too short, a plain face with ice-blue eyes, and a blocky figure. The sort of person who might be a particularly unpleasant guard at the prison.

But then he saw the clothes were well-made, and the big hands wore a large gold ring. And the man smelled like familiar hope.

He blurted out that idiotic comment about knowing how Carl Reis smelled and then...

And then...

The man smiled.

Good glory. Every aspect of his face transformed with that smile. His eyes warmed. The heaviness of the blunt features lifted, and damnation. He was a goddamn angel.

“You have the best smile I have ever seen. The most bloody gorgeous smile.” Dez had said it out loud, and someone guffawed. Someone else made a clucking sound. The elegant lady across from him heaved a sigh.

“Pardon,” Dez said. “My brain seems to have been scrambled today.” He directed what he hoped was a cheery grin at the rest of the occupants. None of them smiled back. A soft rumble came from Carl Reis—a chuckle.

Good. If he was amused, Dez could relax. He closed his eyes.

“Has he fainted again?” the woman asked. She had a well-cultured accent, a real lady—and wasn’t that a mystery. Why would she be present at a hanging? She was Reis’s wife, perhaps?

“Mr Moore?” someone said.

“Don’t mind me. I haven’t slept or eaten well for a bit,” he said from behind lids that refused to open. “Relief is hitting me like a stuffed eel skin on the back of the head...”

He passed out again, only this time, he slipped gently into sleep. He slammed awake when the world jolted. *I’m falling through that trapdoor. Now I’m dead.* He screamed, and his eyes snapped open.

“Sorry,” he said when he realised they all stared at him. The scream must have been real.

The door swung open. The day had grown overcast, and a fine misty rain coated everything.

Dez smiled at the rain. He loved the wet. Two familiar men hauled him out of the carriage, catching him when he started to fall.

“Take those irons off, for pity’s sake,” said the woman. “We don’t need to make a spectacle of ourselves entering the inn.”

She had the crisp manner of a person used to obedience—which probably meant she was obeyed.

“Yes’m,” said one guard.

“Yes, Miss Crimson,” said the other at the same time.

For the first time in months, Dez stood in the open, unshackled and free. He drew in yet another long breath, filling his lungs with the smell of hay and horse, rain, cooking scents. And there it was, the lovely lingering odour of freedom, the smell of Carl Reis.

He shambled along between his two guards, rubbing at his wrists.

They led him to a bedchamber, as fine a room as he'd ever seen in any inn. And he nearly blubbered at the beautiful sight of a tin tub filled with hot water. He wolfed down the plate of cheese and bread fast so he could get at that tub.

Don't forget the glory of this moment, he told himself as he lowered his body into the hot water. Do not take any heartbeats of time for granted ever again.

After he bathed, he couldn't bear to put on those clothes—they felt like death—so he wrapped himself in a sheet.

Someone knocked on the door. Carl Reis and another man entered the room. The other man carried folded clothing, and Mr Reis carried a bottle and two glasses.

He held the bottle up in mute offer.

Dez shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir, but I made a bargain not to drink anymore."

"A bargain with God, eh?"

"More like God and myself—and I know at least one of us was listening."

A subdued version of that glorious smile appeared. "And what did you get in exchange? A chance at life?"

Dez sniffed and rubbed a drop of water trickling down his nose. "I made stupid decisions when I drank." He eyed the man who was laying the clothes out on the bed. Dez dropped his voice. "That night in the alley, I should have called for help, or not hit that fool over and over."

Mr Reis also spoke softly. "You forget I read that letter you wrote. You said you'd do it again, and more slowly."

Dez snorted. "Eh, well, my sister. I'd say as much to her." He scratched at a fleabite, then stopped himself when he noticed Mr Reis frowning at him. "If I hadn't been so drunk, I could have stopped him without going so far. Good riddance to a man who'd slash up girls or anyone else, yes, I'd say that. But it wasn't my job to do."

A table and two chairs sat by the window of the room. Mr Reis walked over, pulled out a chair, sat, and poured himself a glass. Was he going to sit and watch Dez dress?

The other man stood, hands folded, a blank look on his face. Christ, was the servant planning to help Dez?

Dez asked, "Here, now, should I just drop this sheet and get dressed?"

"Yes," Reis said simply. And damned if he didn't lounge back, sipping a glass of wine while he waited for the show that Dez would put on. *Probably wanted to see what he'd bought and paid for.* The thought made Dez indignant, but it also excited him. Oh no. He'd best get to work, because the longer he considered the strange moment here with Mr Reis, the more interesting it became, and he would rather not flash them with an erection.

Dez waved off the servant and scrambled into the smalls as fast as he could. The trousers were wool cloth, far finer woven than the homespun he usually wore.

"You guessed my size," he said as he drew the shirt over his head.

"I believe my man Wendell consulted with the prison." Reis didn't seem disappointed that Dez had raced into his clothes as fast as he could move. But then... "You may go," he said to the servant.

Flea-free, freshly bathed, and in clothes finer than any he'd ever worn, Dez felt ready to take on the world—or possibly do what it took to make his guardian angel happy. He eyed Reis with interest. He hadn't been attracted to a man so big before, nor with such a pugnacious face. Perhaps if he smiled again? But Reis was frowning, and that made him look even more oppressive.

Dez had some experience with bullies on the road. He knew better than to truckle or whimper with them. As long as they weren't holding a knife or a club, he preferred to go straight at them rather than wait for them to move against him.

"You got me cleaned up and fed. Why'd you go through such trouble? What do you want with me?"

The frown deepened. Those lines would stay on Reis's face and make him a frightening sort of man. Dez wasn't going to be intimidated, even by the gent who looked used to power and who clearly had enormous sway in the world—and who'd given Dez hope. He walked over and sat across from Reis at the table by the window.

The rich scent of alcohol hit him, and oh Lord. Just the smell could intoxicate a person. The bottle and empty glass crooned to him. He stared at the wine.

But then a big hand grabbed the bottle and whisked it away. Mr Reis put the wine on the floor next to him with a decided clunk. “If you’re thirsty, would you like some tea?”

Dez laughed with relief. He was wrong to be frightened of the man’s intentions. Hadn’t he saved him from the noose and now would save him from his own impulses? Mr Reis had actually listened and paid attention to what he’d said about drinking.

He stretched out in the chair, still luxuriating in the feel of soft cloth brushing his raw skin, sending quivers of pleasure through him. “Thank you for that and for all you’ve done. But now I need to know how to pay you back. Spell it out in plain, easy-to-understand terms, please. I hadn’t known looking death in the face would make me so simple-minded, but that’s a truth.”

“You’re not simple-minded.”

Dez clamped the urge to babble at the man some more, talk and talk about life and baths and food. He’d never before noticed the sharp, complicated flavour of cheese, or the way it gave against the teeth.

Not simple-minded? He was the very essence of simple—he’d been stripped down to it.

But no, he must concentrate on the next step. Dez managed to hold his tongue as he waited to learn of his fate—and he waited with some semblance of patience. After all, he had all the time in the world, more than fifty heartbeats.

He looked into Mr Reis’s face, and then noticed with a sharp amusement that the man’s cheeks had turned pink.

Mr Reis was blushing. Mr Reis’s gaze woke an old sensation Dez had almost forgotten. Those blue eyes reflected longing. Dez wondered if Mr Reis had any notion how transparent he was.

Carl had no experience with uncontrolled lust, mostly because he had no interest in anything out of his control. He should have heeded the signs that he was not himself days ago, when Crimson had pointed out his excessive use of time and money to go haring off after the condemned murderer—extravagant, even for his hobby.

Carl had spent more capital and effort on this venture than he had on renovations to the mill, his last project. The fight to stop the hanging of Dez

had engaged him more and more. Now Dez was saved, and Carl ought to return to his regular existence. But his thoughts were still wrapped up with Dez, and his body, too.

He should have realised when he'd memorised a letter written to a stranger from another stranger that his life had become... unbalanced. The neat boxes of his mind were a shambles.

So now, he was in a room, alone with the man he'd basically bought, and he was blundering into new territory.

He didn't enjoy the experience.

He did, however, enjoy watching Dez. The man was too thin, and the circles under his eyes weren't in that picture—oh yes, that picture that lay in Carl's pocket. He was reluctant to give up the picture he'd carried for days. Yet he had no idea what to say to Dez, how to talk to the man he'd been single-mindedly focused on for days.

Now they were alone together... Perhaps he could release them both from further obligation with a bout of sexual contact; *you owe me your body. Let me use it as I wish for today, and then tomorrow I will return to my life and help you return to yours—from a distance.* That would be easy and clean. An excellent bargain for Dez, too. His life and a possibility of a future bought by well-paid lawyers, all for a fuck or two... or three.

But Carl suddenly knew he didn't want to see how Dez would respond to that kind of straightforward offer; whether with relief, distaste, or eagerness. None of those options appealed. That left waiting. He crossed his arms and sniffed and felt embarrassed. He *never* felt embarrassed.

Another experience he didn't appreciate. But his curiosity about Dez overcame the lust and discomfort.

He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out the picture and placed it on the table between them. "This is from your sister."

"You saw her? Is she well?"

"Well enough. She, uh, seems happy in her employment."

Dez's full mouth went tight. "I should have liked to support her, but I doubt she'd take my money. Not now."

Since that was Carl's guess, he didn't say anything.

Dez leaned over the daguerreotype then flopped back against the chair back. “For pity’s sake, why would Lucy send a picture of *me*? I’d rather have had one of her.”

Carl took the picture back. He’d keep it, then, and hope no one noticed. He pulled the other picture from his jacket. “She sent this one of your mother.”

Dez picked that one up gingerly, as if lifting a dead animal from the table. He frowned at the picture. “She looks terrible.”

“It was taken after... uh.”

Dez’s eyes widened. “A death picture? God Almighty.” He dropped the picture then began to laugh and babble. “My mother. My sister, oh Lucy.” He laughed, rocking back and forth on the chair. Carl realised he had begun to cry.

Carl froze. A gentleman would pretend not to notice the weeping; he knew that much. Crimson explained that rule. Perhaps he should quietly withdraw from the room. But he wasn’t a gentleman.

He rose from his chair, went to Dez, and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Here, now. It’s been a hellish day for you.”

Dez looked up at him, his nose and eyes streaming with tears and snot. “No. It would have been, literally, a trip to hell. But you came along.” He stumbled to his feet and wrapped his arms tight around Carl.

It was an embrace of need—for comfort, not passion. Carl awkwardly patted Dez’s back as Dez plastered himself to his body.

“Thank you,” Dez said into his shoulder. “I need to do something for you. I need to make it better.”

“Make what better?” Carl, impatient now, added. “If you’re talking about your dealings with me, you don’t owe me anything.”

“Don’t lie, Mr Reis.”

The arms around him loosened. Carl could feel as the hands touching him transitioned from a frenzied hold to something more deliberate. Warm breath touched his neck, and Carl shivered, growing aroused painfully fast. Dez must have felt the growth of his erection, because he gave a small moan that sounded like approval.

Carl allowed himself to press his face to the side of Dez’s head, still damp from the bath. The soft bristle of short hair touched Carl’s cheek. Then Carl

took the hands from about his waist, and with some reluctance pulled himself free. "I am used to deals and negotiating. I am used to buying human labour. But I won't pay for *that*."

Dez wiped his face with his sleeve, erasing the evidence of his tears. "That?" he said with a touch of amusement.

"Companionship."

"How about any sort of sexual contact? Do you pay for that?" He stopped. "Is Miss Crimson your—?"

"No and no." Carl refused to be embarrassed again. "She is a valuable assistant, and I pay for her help, but not her body. See here, Mr Moore. I am not entirely certain why I took such an interest in your situation, but I did, and that's the end of it. We do not need to speak of what you owe again."

"I felt your interest, you know." Dez touched his hip, where Carl's erection had swelled against him. "You like men." He sounded as if he'd been given a wonderful gift.

Carl glared. Strong men had quailed at that look, but Dez beamed back. "Are you in love with anyone?"

"That is a personal question."

"I know. Are you offended?"

"No." Carl wanted to tell this man he was sending him into strange new territory, but he wasn't brave enough to admit even that. He had enjoyed men, but he'd never felt a pull beyond the sexual during those encounters. His partners certainly never annoyed, embarrassed, or preoccupied him the way this man he knew only from a photo and a letter did.

"*Are* you in love with anyone?"

"No, this will not do." Carl had already been teased by this man's existence. He wouldn't allow himself to be tormented any further. "I have no interest in such a thing."

"Have you ever been in love before?"

"*No*." He practically shouted the word, but Dez wouldn't be repressed.

"Neither have I, until two days ago. Then I got this note." Dez went to his clothes and pulled out a grimy grey sheet of paper. "I grew to love whoever sent this note to me. I understand that now. I fell in love with your scent, by the by. A strange way to start."

“You don’t know me.” This was ridiculous.

“No, but I knew I loved you—you were the only thing left I had to love. You were hope. Now that I have my life back, I’m going to learn what I fell in love with.”

Carl tried not to smile, but he lost the battle. “You are absurd.”

“That’s been true for years. I’d hoped the end of drinking would bring the end of absurdity, but I don’t think it will. No need to worry, Mr Reis. I don’t require you to love me. And if you walk away and tell me to leave you be, if you send me back to prison or revile me as a lunatic, perhaps my love would fade, a little but not entirely. You saved my life. You’re burdened with me—if not with my presence, then with my soul.”

Carl opened his mouth to tell him he was a fool and he used the word “love” far too casually. Instead, he said, “That photo of you. I couldn’t stop looking at it. I wanted to see your face in person.” He clamped his lips shut before he went on about the brave and touching and amusing letter that had arrived at his office by mistake.

“I am going to kiss you,” Dez said. “I need to.” It was something of an order. Carl took orders from no one.

He had a premonition that he was doomed. But Carl Reis didn’t fight fate. He held himself still and allowed Dez to kiss him.

The kiss was soft but not tentative. Carl understood from that first bone-melting touch of mouths that Dez was far more knowledgeable than he.

Dez gripped Carl’s biceps, stepped back, and gazed at him, a look as stern as one of Crimson’s. “This isn’t to repay you. This is my celebration. I’m taking advantage of you again, Mr Reis. I’m alive, and I need to prove it. Will you let me use you?”

Carl swallowed, and then nodded. “All right.”

He had very little experience ceding power, not as a man, nor in any part of his life, but suddenly he was eager and interested.

Dez had a cockstand that would have driven nails into a coffin. But not his coffin—not today. He yanked his large saviour impatiently to the bed. He pushed Mr Reis down onto his back, and then slid up and onto Reis, who was warm and groaning and, God, he was huge all over. Dez kissed and licked and

nuzzled skin, hair, and even ran his tongue over cloth. He was too impatient to wait.

He fumbled at buttons and braces. He went up onto his knees, and climbed off Reis. "Strip off those clothes," he ordered Reis. "I'll help you."

Together they revealed a body with surprisingly graceful lines in the throat, back, and shoulders. Reis had almost no hair on his pale body, and his skin was too soft for a man composed of granite, though the pads on his hands and fingers were rough. No surprise that he worked in manual labour or had in the past, this roughneck gentleman.

Those hands impatiently tugged at Dez's clothes—or rather, the clothes he was wearing. For a brief second, Dez recalled Reis had claim on all he possessed, body, soul, and trousers. Such a man might try to engulf and overwhelm him if he wasn't careful.

But then Reis lunged forward for another kiss, so desperate and wonderful, Dez lost interest in thinking and retreated to blissful sensation. They were naked and warm. The best of his dreams coming true, only so much better, because he discovered a new craving for large-bodied gents with pale skin.

Again, he pushed Reis down, and again he slid along his body but now, oh, skin and cock met, nothing but skin and cock.

"Please," Reis growled, and thrust up at him.

"Shall I lick you? I've missed the taste of men," Dez mused.

"Oh God," Reis whimpered. "Oh... *God*."

Just the mention of Dez's mouth on his cock seemed to arouse Reis so much, and it dawned on Dez that his large gent didn't have a great deal of experience. Dez took a peculiar savage pleasure in that thought as he lowered his head to the musky nest of hair around the thick erection. Reis tasted of heat, life, and salt. He panted as Dez licked him from balls to tip.

With a restless groan, he pushed that almost too-large blunt head past Dez's lips. Dez used his hands and his tongue and mouth and teeth, and enjoyed each jaw-aching moment of sucking Reis.

So delicious and so... alive.

He reached over and grabbed Reis's hand, directing it to his own cock.

"Oh pardon, yes, yes." Reis's apology sounded like eagerness, and his fingers were almost too tight around Dez—but no, not too tight after all,

because Dez pumped into the fist that nearly engulfed him. His climax came first and so hard, he forgot everything until he noticed the needy, damp cock sliding along his cheek, still iron.

Reis whimpered quietly, a wordless pleading that told Dez he was still in charge.

“Back to work,” Dez said cheerfully. He considered the pat of butter that lay among the crumbs on the plate that had held his meal—that might smooth their way. Soon. Next time, he’d take that cock into his body. Now he wanted the flavour of Reis in his mouth. He’d promised himself that joy.

He returned to his task with gusto, and it didn’t take long before the cock in his hands and mouth seemed to grow even larger and harder, and the thrum of semen filled his throat, each burst of life.

His hands and mouth glazed with Reis’s spending, and he kissed and caressed his way back up to Reis’s mouth.

Reis had pulled a pillow under his head and looked relaxed, though his blue eyes were solemn and a little sad. “I wasn’t going to do that,” Reis said.

“I didn’t give you much choice,” Dez said happily.

“It’s *not* the reason I came to find you.”

“Came to find me? Ha, a polite way to say you came to snatch me from the hangman’s noose. Be honest. Do you know why you did that?”

Reis moved his head side to side, his hair sliding against the soft pillow. “Your letter. I thought it would be too bad if that voice was silenced and I didn’t even try to save it.”

Dez considered the deep significance of the two letters they’d exchanged—the letters that saved his life. “I can’t recall what I wrote to Lucy. Nothing too mean, I hope. I had felt nothing but despair for so long.”

“No, though Crimson thought you a bit dramatic, but she’s a stern critic.”

Dez laughed. “A formidable lady. I hope I get to know her before this is over.”

Reis went very still. And Dez realised he’d been living moment to moment since he woke and wasn’t dead. “Is there a plan?”

“You mustn’t leave until a retrial takes place. You will stay and…” Reis’s voice trailed off. And Dez wondered if he’d made a plan for anything past the moment Dez had been saved.

Reis asked, "Do you like this inn?"

Dez contemplated a world he'd fallen back into. "A chicken coop, a barn, any place with a roof will suffice. Will I be able to work? If I can't leave this town, then my driving days are done. I was a clerk—not a particularly good one, but maybe now my mind will be less prone to wandering."

"No need," said Reis brusquely. "I've arranged to keep these rooms for a month or more."

So Reis's hesitancy was not due to a lack of plan.

"I don't have another option, do I?" Dez rolled onto his back. "I'm not ungrateful, but I shall have to take and take and take from you, and I wish it was otherwise." He looked at Reis, who watched him with a scowl.

"I am well able to support you and a dozen more besides."

"You'll go about the place rescuing condemned people?"

"Nonsense, though you aren't the first. One of my best friends was accused of a crime she hadn't committed. I helped her."

Dez suspected he was talking about Miss Crimson.

"It still makes me uncomfortable," Dez said. "You've done more than enough for me. More than anyone could ask for."

"No need to ask, dammit. It's the plan. You have the choice of my help or prison again. Don't be an idiot."

With each passing moment, Reis grew more stern and chilly. He would be a grim bully.

Dez smiled. "You, of course. I'm not so selfless that I'd go willingly back to prison."

Reis seemed to relax, but only a little.

Dez turned onto his side. He ran his fingers along the rough pale hair at Reis's temple. "You're used to getting your way, are you, Mr Reis?"

"No." He paused. "Well, to be honest, yes."

Dez laughed. "I'm not afraid of you, or at least not very, so we should get along swimmingly."

That lovely smile blossomed, and Dez had to touch the lines it created. "You'll go back to your life soon," Dez said softly. "A life of deals and money and pies."

“I don’t know so much about pies. The rest...” The smile vanished. “Yes.”

“But you’ll visit when you can.”

Reis dragged in an audible breath and let it out before speaking. “Will you want me to? Because you must understand, I offer this help, any future help, without restrictions.”

“What are you talking about?”

Reis rubbed his palms over his face, another long pause. “I don’t want to force my presence upon you. I wish you’d believe me when I tell you that you owe me nothing. The challenge of getting here in time—and succeeding in my goal—that was ample compensation. I do this sort of thing from time to time for my own pleasure. I don’t usually encounter the person again. But you. You might be different.”

Dez hoisted himself up onto an elbow and stared down at Reis, who looked back, grim as a hangman. “You haunted me,” Reis whispered.

He finally believed Reis’s claim that he wasn’t going to try to possess Dez. “Gods above, here I’ve thought you something of a ruffian, a ruthless pirate.”

Reis pursed his lips. “That seems about right. Yes.”

“No, it’s all a lie. You are a gentleman through and through. How lowering to learn I’m in debt to a man who’s not only generous, but also kind. I’d hoped for a rascal.”

“Huh. I suspect you’re rascal enough for us both.”

“You shall have to find out. Do tell me when you know,” Dez said.

Reis’s smile—the one Dez had put on his face—glowed bright enough to touch Dez’s core. After months of cold, he was entirely warm at last.

The End

Author Bio

Summer Devon is the alter ego of Kate Rothwell who also writes under her own name. Summer writes romances of all sorts, including historical m/m books with Bonnie Dee. She is published with Kensington, Loose Id, Samhain, Simon and Schuster, Ellora's Cave and others. This is her third Don't Read in the Closet story. She loves these things, a whole lot.

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SCIENCE AND FICTION

By Ray Van Fox and Jordan S. Brock

Photo Description

A nude young man lies in a pile of gold leaves in a wooded park. His black hair is streaked with silver. A black tribal tattoo covers his right arm; stars are tattooed along his right side and back.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He loved walking in this secluded area of the park, for some odd reason people tended to stay away from it. Nearing the usual path he took into the woods, his eye was caught by a pile of golden leaves ruffling in the crisp, spring breeze. Where would autumn leaves come from at this time of year? As he crept closer to the pile Jake let out a muffled laugh, his curiosity was going to get him in trouble someday, he was sure of it. He came to an abrupt halt and his eyes widened in surprise at the attractive, naked, young man, dark hair streaked with white, shivering amongst the leaves. Tattoos covered his arm and torso, tattoos that seemed to...

Shaking his head Jake looked around; maybe he was intruding in the middle of a photo shoot or movie, but saw no one. Edging closer Jake saw the young man was awake, his expression one of shock.

“Are you all right? Do you need help?” The young man’s hazel-green eyes searched Jake’s face trying to focus. Not getting an answer Jake asked, “What’s your name?”

Opening and closing his mouth a couple times, the young man finally answered in an odd accent, “I... don’t know.”

Frowning, Jake reached into his jacket pocket and removed his phone, then draped the jacket over the young man. He should really call the police, but his instincts told him that somehow they wouldn’t be able to help and he always trusted his gut feelings. “Come on, let’s get you to my place and figure out what to do.”

No, need to use the name Jake unless you want. I just needed a name for the scenario and no need to use the scene I wrote out word for word. Something similar is okay.

I was thinking that the young man hasn't come into his complete powers yet and he can only do that when he finds his 'other'. Not mate so much, as 'key'. They are a partnership, functioning at their best together, but diminished if separate. I like the idea of him being sent to our world by a mentor or family member in order to save him from what was happening in his world or on his planet. Please don't kill off all the young man's family. I really dislike stories that base the plot on having both parents or all of the family killed off, it's so cliché. However, going on the run, into hiding, taken prisoners are all okay. I like the man who finds him to be intelligent but sceptical and always curious. He's a bit too careful at times but his curiosity often gets the better of him. He's a dichotomy. At the same time he has always had an ability that resonates or is tied with whatever ability you give to the young man. Of course you don't have to use all these ideas, but amnesia and the elements and/or magic /or powers/or something unique are definitely wanted.

I'd like this to be a Fantasy or Paranormal, Sci-Fi is okay too. A parallel or hidden world within ours or from another planet works. No Faes or Elves, I don't care for them all that much and no Vampires or Zombies. Shifters are okay and almost any other paranormal type. No horror. Third person and HEA required. Angst and UST are very okay. Explicit sex is also very good. Switching POVs is okay, but please not every other paragraph. I really dislike quickly changing POVs. I love older/younger men relationships and would prefer the 'human' to be around seven to ten years older. No instant love, but immediate attraction and desire is okay. I also love character development. I'd like difficult complications (not simple misunderstandings) and angst that needs to be overcome and then leads to the HEA. If you plan on writing a continuing story after the event, I'd be satisfied with a HFN as long as the sequel was HEA. And finally, I love long stories, so that's a definite plus.

Thank you!

Penumbra

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: other world, military man, scientist, cabin romance, mated/bonded, multidimensional travel, contemporary setting

Word Count: 40,734

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SCIENCE AND FICTION

By Ray Van Fox and Jordan S. Brock

Chapter 1

The thin brown ribbon of earth was more a deer path than anything, winding its way along a low gully from the far end of the backyard into West Hills County Park proper, and Craig was trying to make a habit of following it deep into the woods where he'd never run into anyone else. He'd been back home for less than two weeks, and he was determined to stay in shape now that he was almost a civilian. Nineteen and a half years in the Army had taught him to value self-discipline. He wasn't about to let himself go to hell.

The park was quiet, without even wind to stir the new spring leaves that hid the midmorning sky from his sight. Most equestrians stayed down by the public stable, and the joggers and Scout groups stuck to the trails up by Jayne's Hill—a name that never failed to evoke a sad smile in memory of *Firefly*.

Wary of poison ivy, he climbed up out of the gully when the trail petered out. His boot skidded on earth still muddy from last night's rain, and he had to grab hold of a slender trunk to keep his balance. He swung up onto higher ground near a clearing...

And there he stopped, senses coming alert at the anomaly before him.

Autumn gold leaves, shaped like fat teardrops the size of his palm, had fallen in a mound in a patch of sunlight. All around the clearing, the trees were maple, or so Craig thought. Whatever they were, they had rough-toothed leaves shaped exactly like that Canadian hockey team's logo. These leaves were... aspen? He dredged through his memory. Aspen had teardrop-shaped leaves, but there weren't any aspen trees nearby that he knew of.

He looked away from the leaves to the ground around them. He saw no wires, no sign of disturbance in the mossy earth, dotted with clumps of grass and dandelions. No hint that the pile of out-of-place leaves covered a trap. Stepping closer meant getting a better sense of how they got there, but his time overseas had him wary of triggering an explosive.

But his gut told him there was no danger, and he'd gotten very good at listening to his intuition. It had saved more lives than he cared to count, including his own many times. So, he walked slowly over to the golden pile, searching around the clearing for any sign of movement.

This was the perfect trap: a mystery cloaked in the harmless memory of jumping into piles of leaves his dad had raked off the lawn. Nothing to trigger

unpleasant associations or danger. He *knew* it could be dangerous, but that didn't stop his slow, measured footsteps until he was at the very edge of the pile.

A pile that, he now saw, was moving, shifting with no wind, rustling so softly that the sound was swallowed by the low hum of the distant parkway and the still forest air. What kind of animal burrowed into a pile of leaves in the middle of a clearing to take a nap? Or maybe it was a litter of animals, since he could see movement over a four-foot span, and the odds there was a bear in this suburban park full of nature trails were slim to none. Fox kits? Raccoon babies? Groundhog pups?

Serial killer's dumping ground? This was a scene right off network TV, after all. *Hannibal* couldn't have scripted it better: out-of-season leaves, fresh and crisp, piled over a body...

But that instinct in the back of his brain was still quiet and content, not shrieking warnings. So, he nudged the leaves with one boot. When nothing snapped out at him or blew up, he crouched down, brushing his hand over the leaves.

The sunlight picked out gold highlights over pale tan. It took him a regrettably long time to recognize it as skin rather than faded leaves or bark. That must mean a living human, if it moved, because a scavenging animal would have uncovered the body instead of digging under and leaving the pile intact. What was a person doing under a leaf pile in a park? Unless they were hurt and hiding from a threat of some sort?

That thought kicked him into gear. Having been a combat medic in the Army for so long, he was automatically thinking through ways of evacuating the injured party before he had brushed away enough of the leaves to assess the damage. The terrain would be problematic; if he had to call for rescue, they'd have to come in on foot with a stretcher.

Or maybe not. He cleared off one arm with a thick black tribal sleeve tattoo, and the fingers twitched in reaction. Skin temperature seemed cool but not dangerously so. Breathing was steady and unlabored.

He brushed off more leaves and found his patient was lying facedown. More tattoos covered the patient's back, from below the shoulder blade to above the hip in a pattern of five-pointed stars. Craig shifted around the leaf-pile and cleared away the leaves over his patient's head, revealing soft, clean hair, black streaked with silvery-gray. In profile, his patient's face was delicately boned

but most likely masculine, with a pointed jaw that was lightly stubbled with dark hair.

In fact, that stubble was the only sign of neglect. Every inch of skin was clean and free of dirt, other than fragments of gold leaves caught in those soft strands of hair. No blood, no bruising, no sign of any injury at all.

No sign of clothing, either. Just tattoos and leaves that now did little to cover his patient's slender body.

Craig froze when his patient made a quiet sound, a low groan that sounded more sleepy than pained. He figured he should stop being creepy and forego further examination, and instead simply ask the patient what was wrong, if anything. Unless, of course, they were high on something or suffering from a psychological condition, in which case getting a straight answer might be difficult.

He split the difference and reached for the patient's wrist as he asked, "You okay? In any pain?"

Another soft groan was his only answer. Long fingers twitched, rustling the leaves. Craig could feel the beat of a steady pulse, strong but not too quick. His breathing still seemed normal. Maybe this was a... *thing* this person did? One of those crazy, back-to-nature holistic-healing type rituals? Just Craig's luck, if so. Hopefully they hadn't tried to live off foraged mushrooms and berries. It would be a while before he could get them to a hospital to pump their stomach.

"Hey, friend. Can you hear me? Are you all right?"

This time, the groan was drawn out, accompanied by a flutter of the longest, darkest eyelashes Craig had seen in years. His patient gave a little shake of his head, scattering leaves, then rolled onto his side. More leaves fell—and, yes, Craig saw that his patient was both naked and definitely male, though he didn't see any more tattoos.

He pulled free of Craig's slack grasp to swipe weakly at the hair caught in his eyelashes as he blinked his eyes open. Hazel with emerald and gold flecks fixed on Craig's face. His patient's pupils shrank normally in reaction to the patchy sunlight filling the clearing.

After another groan, the young man asked, a bit plaintively, "Tea?"

Seriously? Who was this character? "First things first, kid. Are you hurt?"

"Of course I'm not," his patient insisted in what sounded almost like a British accent—maybe a fake one, since it wasn't quite right. "My devices

work perfectly. I'm... *Leaves?*" he asked, blinking around himself as he struggled to sit up.

Devices? There wasn't anything of the kind on or around the young man's body. Maybe he was on something or just really confused as to where he was. Craig moved back and half-turned away, to give him some room and at least a modicum of privacy. If he wasn't hurt, all Craig would need to do was point him in the right direction and send him on his way. Possibly lend him something in the way of clothing, too. Early spring was too chilly to be walking around naked, risking arrest.

"Do you know where you are?" Craig asked.

"Of *course* I do," the young man said, though he was frowning. When he lifted his hand to push his hair back out of his eyes again, the ripple of muscles gave the illusion that his tattoos moved. "I'm... well, right *here*..." He trailed off, looking around. Then he eyed Craig and asked, "Who are you?"

He almost replied with his full name and rank, then decided against it, in case the formality—or the armed forces affiliation—freaked the young man out. "I live nearby. My name's Craig. And you are...?" He held out his hand in introduction.

"I'm—" The young man froze in mid-speech, blinking a couple of times before his dark brows drew down. "That's vexing. I'm not entirely certain," he muttered. "And I'm not wearing anything. Did an intimate moment just turn awkward for both of us or just me?"

Craig held up his hands in surrender. "I found you like this. Just now. Did you sustain a head injury?" Pupil dilation wasn't a completely reliable indicator of concussion, and memory loss should be taken seriously.

"That's unfortunate. I'd prefer to have a *good* reason for waking up naked in the Shadowlands," the young man scolded.

"I... Shadowlands?" The more this kid spoke, the less he made sense. Head injury was a definite possibility, because there was no way that was a pickup line.

"Here. This appalling lack of technology." He pushed off the ground as if to stand, then fell back, grabbing hold of Craig's arm. "And gravity. Gravity is *definitely* malfunctioning at the moment."

Okay, right. Totally high. "Uh-huh. Let's get you someplace safe where you can sleep it off. And put some clothes on." Craig reached with his other hand to

help the young man up and keep him steady on his feet. “My house is this way.”

“I’m fine. I just need tea.” He had all the coordination of a baby deer taking its first steps, and he ended up clinging by a double-handful to Craig’s windbreaker. Standing, the young man was just a few inches shorter, and with his silvered hair, Craig considered upping his estimated age by five or so years. “You’re *certain* this isn’t something more intimate?” he asked, body swaying distractingly against Craig’s.

Biting down on his knee-jerk response—“not as of yet”—Craig did his best to help keep his charge upright without touching him too much. Or looking too long. “I’m certain. No ‘intimacy’ has occurred.” Just awkwardness, it seemed.

That got him a frustrated-sounding exhale. “I must be ill, then. That would explain the dizziness and the”—he waved his free hand at his own head, though this did nothing to help him keep his balance—“fuzzy memory issues. It’s *almost* like retrograde amnesia, post-teleport, but it shouldn’t be lasting this... long...” He looked up suspiciously, meeting Craig’s eyes from just inches away. “Just how far into the Shadowlands are we?”

“If I knew what the hell you were talking about, I’d—”

“Hell.” The young man poked Craig in the sternum with one finger. “You said ‘Hell.’ This is shift-zero, isn’t it? Earth?”

Shift-what? Post-teleport? Whatever this kid was on, Craig wanted to know, so he could avoid it. It made you crazy, clearly. He rolled his eyes and sighed loudly. “Yeah, Earth. As if there was another option. How high are you?”

The young man considered for a couple of seconds before saying, “*Ollav*? Yes, that... that sounds right. Though I don’t teach. No time for that sort of thing. And Earth...” Still clinging to Craig’s windbreaker, he turned to look around the clearing. “Very green. A bit bland, though, isn’t it?”

This was starting to sound like a problem. This guy had started out so coherent, if mildly baffled, but now he was making less than zero sense, and his babbling was worrying Craig. “Sure, kiddo. All right. Let’s just get home. Then we can argue the merits of spring versus fall.”

“Where’s your—” Another suspicious look. “You don’t *have* a teleporter, do you? Grav-cancellation field? Not that another teleport this soon after a cross-dimensional ’port would be wise, but that’s never stopped me. I could have probably fixed the... What is it again? The harmonic backlash. Yes, I

could probably have fixed that, if I'd *known*... I don't suppose you know *why* I'm here, do you?"

"Search me. 'Why' seems the least of your troubles. And *nobody* has a 'teleporter,' in case you've forgotten." Craig decided to steer them toward a wide, shallow-grade trail. It would be a lot easier than the deer path, if a bit longer of a walk. He started that way, keeping his arm around his charge's waist. He would've handed over the windbreaker, but the young man was still clinging to the nylon.

"Well, no. Nobody *here*. You still have those battery-operated carriages, don't you? Autos?" The young man laughed, leaning against Craig. "Not very efficient, but at least—"

"*Here*? Where the fuck do you think you're from, buddy?"

"The *Cathair*... You're *not* a portal guardian, are you?"

"What is that supposed to even mean?" This was starting to get too weird for Craig to want to continue his rescue mission. He had just gone out for a walk, anyway. Maybe he should just take this kid to the ranger station up by Jayne's Hill.

The kid dug in his heels, refusing to take another step, though he didn't let go of Craig's jacket. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I'm just... making things up. For a... thing. A reading thing. A thing you read—"

"A book?"

"That's it. I'm writing a book, and I'm making things up because it's a book of... fictional, made-up things."

The wide-eyed panic with which he spoke made it clear to Craig that the kid was lying. And that made everything more confusing, somehow. Because if this young man actually thought everything he'd said up until this point was *real*, then Craig was in over his head, because this fell into the realm of delusion.

And yet, a little warning was pricking in the back of Craig's mind that handing him over to the authorities in that state was unwise, possibly dangerous. And he had long since learned to listen to those warnings. He pried the kid's fingers off his jacket and held onto a shoulder as he shrugged out of his windbreaker, then handed it over. "Here. Put this on. And talk about your book all you like. Just... Let's get you home."

"I shouldn't—Oh," he said, pausing in the act of putting the windbreaker on like a jacket, rather than wrapping it around his waist. "Nithael."

“What does that mean in your fictional world?” Craig figured playing into the delusion for a bit wouldn't hurt, if it got the kid to move faster.

“Nithael,” he said again, pronouncing it slowly. He put the other sleeve on, then tugged the jacket down. His frame was small enough that it hung to his hips, though it didn't actually *cover* anything. “My name. I'm...” He tipped his head, eyes falling closed as his hand slipped into the jacket pocket where Craig usually kept his cell phone. His brand new, very expensive, just-signed-a-two-year-contract cell phone.

Craig reached out to stop the young man, only to freeze when *darkness* slithered over the bare strip of skin between the jacket's cuff and the pocket. When Nithael pulled the cell phone out, his hand was almost completely black, as if ink had spilled down his arm, under the surface of his skin, to flow over his hand and circle around his fingers.

What the fuck was that? Craig pulled his hand back, worried the ink might spread to his skin if he touched it. “You... That... *can't* be good. What *is* it?”

“Nanoaetheric sensors. This is *nice*,” Nithael said, eyes closed almost completely. “Very compact. You've made strides in miniaturization, haven't you? Of course, your battery's rubbish, but you won't make real progress until you increase your field detection capability.” Then he blinked a couple of times, and the blackness receded from his hand, disappearing under the jacket's sleeve again. “You're Craig or Ellis?”

Craig started to wonder if the drug Nithael was on was topically applied, and if it had rubbed off on *him*. He shook his head to clear it. “Craig Standish. My grandfather's name is Ellis.”

“Standish?” Nithael frowned at him. “That's your account name. Why would you name yourself for that?”

Craig frowned back, wishing one damned thing would make sense when it came to this kid. “Account name? It's my last name. My family name. Any account I have was based off of it, not the other way around.”

“Family name. Oh. Yes, you do that sort of thing.” Nithael offered him the phone. It seemed to be unharmed, except the screen was illuminated. And unlocked. Craig hadn't seen Nithael's fingers touch the screen at all.

“If you know my account, where did you get Ellis from?” Craig was almost certain he'd never used his grandfather's first name as an account-verifying answer. And something in the back of his mind was telling him Grampa Ellis might be helpful right about now.

“Your”—Nithael made an elegant gesture, wiggling his fingers at the phone—“tower-based communications matrix reader-speaker-thing.”

“Phone?”

“Phone! That’s the word. Only it’s not transparent, like the ones in *Iron Man*. Older design?” he asked with a curious sort of dignity, considering he was wearing a too-large nylon windbreaker and no pants.

“*Iron Man* is fiction. Science fiction. This is what reality looks like.” Craig held up his phone and shook it slightly for emphasis.

“That’s disappointing. His repulsor technology looks almost like crude gravitic reversal field generators. I suppose that’s not ‘reality’ either?”

The apparent seriousness of the question made Craig snort out a laugh that he tried to disguise as a cough. “Ah, no. Sorry. Is gravity still a problem for you or can we move this along?” He wanted to get home and... for some reason he felt like he should call Grampa Ellis. That was usually a sign.

“No, it’s actually identical to what I’m accustomed to. All the basics are. Well, gravity and air composition are. Light, radiation, and mineral composition, not so much. And let’s not even get started on our lack of biological animals, right down to insects. As I understand it, the only thing that kept us from dying out because of a lack of intestinal bacteria was the fact that we had to import all our food. Of course, that was before we had biostabilization systems—And why am I even telling you this? Stop listening to me. Fiction, remember? Writing a book,” Nithael scolded, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets.

Craig closed his mouth, which had dropped open at the speed with which nonsense was pouring out of Nithael, and started walking in the direction of his house, assuming his guest would follow. “Right. Who’s ‘us’ then, in this fictional world that isn’t Earth?” Playing along seemed the best way to keep the kid occupied while Craig figured out what to do with him.

“Never mind. Not important. I’ll just... I’ll be fine. I just need a lab.” Nithael caught up, though he stumbled, shoulder bumping into Craig’s arm. “And a power source.”

Craig was pretty sure he didn’t want this kid doing any experimenting, especially with electricity, before he’d sobered up at least somewhat, but he’d deal with that later. “Let’s start with tea.”

Nithael caught hold of Craig’s arm, presumably for balance. He *was* barefoot, after all, and the hiking trail was paved but not finished, leaving the

surface rough. “That would work. Or coffee. Do you have coffee? You *have* heard of it, haven’t you? That’s not from some... other region?”

Smiling despite himself, Craig nodded as he fell into step with Nithael. “That, I’ve heard of. But I just make regular drip, one cup at a time, strong and black. For a frou-frou drink, you’ll have to drive to the shop down the road.”

“Froofroo?”

Craig looked over at the frankly adorable confused face Nithael was making and cracked another rare smile. “Coffee with *stuff* in it. Milk, foam, caramel, whipped cream, I dunno. Stuff that distracts from the taste of the actual coffee.”

Nithael frowned. “That hardly makes sense. And milk—from cows and goats?” He shook his head, then clutched Craig’s arm as the motion played havoc with his balance. “As I understand it, I can’t digest anything like that.”

No wonder he was so thin. Craig figured he was probably a vegetarian too. Maybe a full-on vegan. Craig’s house was not at all set up for a picky eater like that, but he could probably find something for the kid to eat before sending him on his way. “Great. Black coffee it is, then.”

Thankfully, they met no one on the way home, though Craig had trusted his “instincts” to warn him in time to duck off the trail and find a hiding spot. It helped that Nithael didn’t protest when Craig left the walking trail and led him into the brush, then over the long-dead hedge into the backyard. All the fast-talking in the world probably couldn’t explain his pantsless, confused “guest.”

The house was a sprawling, split-level building, with a brick façade on the main floor and gray siding with white trim everywhere else. Craig could still remember when his dad had replaced the old wood siding with aluminum. It lasted longer but lacked the charm of wood—not that Craig was arguing now. The last thing he wanted to do was scrape, sand, and repaint every few years now that he was in charge of the old place.

Spring meant every rainstorm sent the backyard into a frenzy of growth. Craig had mowed the lawn a couple of days ago, but it was already ragged, with a healthy growth of dandelions and daisies. Only the horse pen in the corner was stripped down to bare earth thanks to the ill-tempered pony that had lived there for at least twenty years. Flower, the barn’s sole resident, kicked at the fence in hopes of intimidating Craig into providing a second breakfast.

Refraining from kicking back at Flower, Craig motioned to Nithael to follow him into the house. “Don’t mind grumpus over there.”

“What’s a grampus?”

“Oh, he’s just got a nasty disposition. Except when it comes to little kids. Then he acts like a normal pony and lets them ride him. My nieces adore him.”

Nithael looked at the pony as they crossed the weedy yard. “It’s a programmed youth companion-synth?”

“Synth?”

“Synth. Synthetic animal—” Nithael stopped in his tracks and looked back. In a fit of horsey pique, Flower had turned his back and was swishing his tail. Craig suspected that was Flower’s way of flipping them off.

Synthetic, programmable ponies. The inside of this kid’s brain was a fascinating place. So was whatever world he was building in there. “Ignore him. I’d be pissed off too if my name was Flower. Come on.”

“Mmm, possibly. It takes considerable reprogramming to alter a name after it’s been given.” Nithael followed him up the stairs to the back door.

Craig shook his head as he fished the house keys out of the pocket of his jeans. He unlocked and opened the door, immediately kicked his boots off at the mat just inside, and waved toward the kitchen table. “Make yourself at home. I’ll start coffee, then find you pants.”

“Pants.” Nithael looked Craig over, then shrugged. “I suppose it’s customary?”

Craig cocked one eyebrow up at the insinuation, but decided it would be best not to take the bait. “To... wear clothes? When a guest in a stranger’s house, yes.” He flipped the switch on the single-use coffee machine that had gotten him through life on bases all over the world.

“It doesn’t seem very dangerous in here—not like my lab,” Nithael said, going right to the nearest cupboard. He poked at the door, then waved his hand in front of it, before he finally pulled on the knob to open it. “Not very temperature-controlled, though. My biostabilization system is at capacity to maintain thermal regulation.”

Having run that whole statement through his science-speak translator, Craig rolled his eyes as he replied. “I’m pretty sure that’s why people *wear clothes*. To stay warm. I’ll be right back. Mugs are in the cabinet to your right.”

“Not very efficient,” Nithael said thoughtfully as he moved to the next cupboard. Craig had no idea if he was talking about clothes or coffee mugs. Either seemed likely.

He headed to the bedroom that had always been his, even when on leave. It took him a moment to find a pair of sweatpants—something with a drawstring so they wouldn't fall off those narrow hips—because he still hadn't put his mound of clothes away after washing them all when he unpacked. This was only day nine of civilian life, back in the family house that his parents had vacated for their condo in Florida. He was still getting used to having the place to himself.

One of his gray army T-shirts would have to do, though Nithael would end up swimming in it. Craig considered underwear and socks, but the thought of giving a stranger his underwear was a little weird.

He headed to the kitchen to toss the clothes at Nithael and tell him to go change, but found he'd stripped off the jacket and was standing there, completely naked. "Here, try—"

The clothes fell from Craig's grasp as his gaze fixed on Nithael's right arm, where the tattoo was *visibly* sliding down his arm, undulating and curling at the edges. His hand, pressed to the iPod in its docking station, was pitch-black.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?" Panic at the impossible sight made his voice military-sharp.

"Interfacing. Does this *only* exist for sound storage and playback?" Nithael asked, sounding disappointed.

"Yes. Stop touching it. Jesus."

Nithael's fingers twitched. He looked back and blinked a couple of times—and Craig did *not* allow himself to dwell on the way Nithael's eyes had gone black, pupils dilated to completely overtake his hazel irises. Instead, he looked at Nithael's hand and watched the darkness bleed from his fingertips up his arm, curling and coiling around slender muscles before settling into the tattoo Craig had first seen.

Once it stopped moving, Nithael turned to face Craig, looking genuinely contrite. "I apologize. Is it a religious icon?"

"What?" Craig blinked and found himself distracted by the green now visible in Nithael's eyes. "No, I just... That's fucking creepy."

"Creepy? What's *creepy*? Are those for me?" Nithael asked, pointing at the fallen clothes.

Craig leaned down to swipe them off the floor and stepped forward to hand them to Nithael, only to shudder at the idea of being touched by his no-longer-

black hand. “Creepy. Like the feeling of something creeping up behind you. How the fuck does your tattoo *move*?”

“It’s not a tattoo.” Nithael sorted out the shirt from the pants, then pulled the shirt over his head. “It’s a swarm of nanoaetheric sensors. It’s a basic diagnostic interface. Well, not *basic*. I made some improvements.” He shook his head, making a wreck of his silver-streaked hair, and grinned at Craig. “It’s my specialty, you could say.”

Managing to keep his gaze above Nithael’s hips, Craig nodded. Then shook his head. “No, hang on. You specialize in swarms of tiny sensors that move all over your skin and tell you shit about the technology you’re touching? *Where the fuck* did you come from?”

Nithael opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked down and put on the pants, biting his lower lip. “Fiction. Right. I never even pretended to want to be an emissary or portal guardian, you know. There’s a reason I don’t do *people*. Ignore everything. I’ve made it all up. I have a very vivid imagination.”

Craig huffed in exasperation. “Well, I don’t. So explain to me what the fuck is going on, because I just saw the ink on your arm *move*, and I’m stone cold sober.”

“I’m... It’s...” Nithael looked at his arm, where half of the tattoo—or *whatever*—was visible below the sleeve that hung down to his elbow. “I have no idea. It’s an embedded layer of sensors built using nanomancy, powered by my body’s generated aetheric currents, allowing me to have a direct neural interface with any electronic device or system. I’d do much better at this if I had caffeine, you know,” he added, giving Craig a credible lost-puppy look, complete with a slight pout to his lower lip.

The sight was actually gorgeous, Craig would admit, but he was pretty sure Nithael knew it just as well as he did, and he wasn’t going to let this go. His level of panic had died down to a minimum, especially since his gut feeling about this strange kid had never once pricked towards danger, but none of this made any actual sense. He stalked over to the coffee maker, took a mug down from the cabinet, poured the entire contents of the carafe into the mug, and set it down a little too sharply on the counter next to Nithael’s hip.

“You’re upset,” Nithael said uncertainly. “Is this something I need to fix, or is it you?”

Craig took a deep breath and considered the answer to Nithael’s question. It seemed like a fair one to ask, given Craig was starting to feel like the crazy

person in this situation. “I need you to speak plain English, without a lot of made-up words, and tell me where you came from and how I can help get you back there.”

Nithael frowned and picked up the coffee cup. He sniffed at it, then took an experimental sip before he winced. “English isn’t my native language. I’m supplementing with words for which you have no analogues, at least in the linguistic references I’ve studied. Mostly BBC programming and movies.”

Sighing sharply and waving his hand in a circle in the general direction of Nithael’s head and chest, Craig said, “All of that you just said? Not what I asked for. Try again.” He turned away to refill and reset the coffee machine. He clearly needed more caffeine for this interaction as well.

“I’m from the *Cathair*. It would translate to ‘city’ in English, though that may not be accurate, since there are seemingly arbitrary distinctions between ‘town,’ ‘village,’ ‘city,’ and ‘metropolis,’ based on population, infrastructure, and political or economic status.”

Craig heard Nithael’s mug *click* against the counter. When he looked over, he saw Nithael had hopped up to sit beside it, disdaining the perfectly good table and chairs not five feet away.

He turned to face Nithael, resting his hip against the counter. “I don’t care about the size of it—just where it is and how to get you back there.” He realized he probably sounded like a bad host, but he wasn’t really prepared to have a guest in this house. He still felt like one himself.

“It’s plus-three shifts away, which is the core problem. I must have teleported here”—Nithael looked down at himself, and he scrunched his nose—“but I didn’t come through with a destination receipt to counter the amnesia, which means it was a private teleport. Probably from my own lab. And that means I *meant* to come here—well, there,” he corrected, pointing out towards the backyard. “I don’t make mistakes, ever.”

“Well, someone did, if you don’t remember, right? Why come if you don’t know what you’re doing here?” Craig realized Nithael had left off talking about fiction, and he himself had stopped assuming he was talking to someone who was high or crazy. What surprised him most about that was how *not-weird* that felt.

“Obviously that wasn’t my intention. I *did* know what I was doing. It’s the normal, expected effect of a teleport. Which doesn’t precisely explain what happened to my clothes, though a minus-three shift to drop here, to shift-zero...

Did I *actually* do the jump in a direct teleport, rather than in stages? That would explain it. My biostabilization system would protect me..." Nithael dropped down off the counter, looking around. "I need a tablet."

Of course he would ask for something so high tech. "I've just got my laptop." Craig glanced over at the level of coffee in the carafe and was tempted to just grab it to drink out of, even though that was a horrible idea. Instead, he left the coffee pot to run for just a minute longer while he retrieved his three-year-old computer from the dining room and brought it to the kitchen table. "You can use this, if it will help."

Nithael turned the laptop, then wrapped his hand around the side, right over the USB port. As he sat down, folding one leg under himself, the tattoo on his arm started to writhe and flow down over the back of his hand. Craig was sure he'd never get used to that sight. It made him shiver and turn away to finally pour his coffee.

He'd barely filled the mug, though, before Nithael said, "This... doesn't *do* anything. What is this thing?"

Craig kept himself from leaning over and resting his forehead on the counter, but it was a close thing. Instead he just sighed, brought his coffee to the table and leaned over Nithael's shoulder to look at the computer screen. "It's a computer. What do you think it does? It connects to the Internet and all that, even if it's not new and fast and pretty."

Nithael frowned. "The Internet. With the non-synth cats."

What? Craig was really starting to feel like *he* was the one on drugs. He looked over at Nithael, who somehow wasn't joking, and deadpanned, "There's more than cats on the internet."

"Well, yes. But how will pornography help me with my calculations? I need something that can record equations, not sex."

An inch away from face-palming, Craig managed to keep his voice at a normal level. "It's a *computer*; it computes. What the fuck equations are you doing that you can't record them on this? Watch out, or you'll get nothing more than a fucking pen and paper."

Abruptly, Nithael's frown melted into a pleased smile. The darkness bled back from his fingernails, and he pulled his hand away from the laptop. "That would be fine. It'll probably be more efficient."

Thankfully, Craig had to walk all the way to the office to find a working pen and a notepad, because he was starting to want to break things. And that

boy was too pretty to hurt. Or be made to watch Craig break his hand on the wall or something. Part of him—the part that understood reality—was having an incredibly hard time functioning right now, but another part of him was starting to hum like a well-oiled machine, and the contrast was giving him vertigo.

He returned to the kitchen and handed the pad and pen over, then retreated to the doorway to watch as Nithael pounced. He turned the page sideways and started scrawling down the lines in columns of numbers that looked *almost* recognizable. As Craig sipped his coffee, Nithael filled three-quarters of the page, ripped it from the pad, and then started on a second sheet, this one with more symbols, none of which looked like algebra or the Greek letters used in more advanced math.

Halfway through the second page, Nithael stuck the pen in his mouth and gestured over at his abandoned coffee cup. “Caffeine,” he said around the pen, never taking his eyes from his work.

Craig rolled his eyes but picked up the mug. The coffee was cool enough to be bitter, so he dumped it out in the sink. He refilled and reset the coffee maker, and he put Nithael’s mug in the carafe’s place for efficiency’s sake. Then he left the wiz kid to his work and went into the living room to sprawl out on the couch.

Before he’d really registered what he was doing, his phone was out of his pocket and he was scrolling through his recent dials for Grampa Ellis’s number. He knew what that meant, though, and it didn’t bother him. Something in him felt it was necessary to make contact, so he did.

It took a few rings for Grampa to pick up—at ninety-three it took him a while to get to the phone—but when he did, he sounded unsurprised. “Well, hello there.”

“Hey, Gramps. How’s things?”

“Fine on my end, why? What’s up, Doc?”

Craig smiled at the “joke” his grandfather never failed to tell. He always tried to sound like Bugs Bunny when he said it, but he usually failed miserably. And yet, it was a sweet nod to Craig’s chosen profession that he appreciated. “Disturbance in the Force, possibly? You had anything go wonky for you in the last, say, twenty-four hours?”

Gramps went quiet for a moment, then said, “Hmm... Saw something last night—well, early this morning, really. Felt like a birth. Looked like an explosion, but not combustion. More like an energy field.”

Could that be what a “three-shift teleport” did to the universal energy Gramps had taught him about? Possibly. “Was I anywhere near it?”

“Not you, no. My pops. He was the one that set it off.”

Well, that didn't sound good. Why was Grampa Ellis seeing something so far back in the past when something so odd was happening in the present? “But everything's okay out by you? And you weren't affected?”

“Yep, peachy. I checked. And you know, the normal things—a headache, a deep thirst, falling asleep on your feet—but no drastic shifts in perception or accidental breakages. All in all, it was a pretty benign vision.”

He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. It was always good to hear the all-clear from Grampa Ellis, even if Craig hadn't been getting any warning signals himself. “Okay. Well, thanks.”

“You plan on telling me why you asked?”

“Maybe when I know more. My world feels a little too large and full of holes, but not in a bad way. Nothing building too fast or any odd surges. I just didn't get a heads-up.”

“Well, if you see anything, let me know.”

“Will do. Thanks, Gramps. Love you.”

“You too, kiddo. Take care, you hear?”

“Loud and clear.”

Craig took the phone from his ear and went to thumb the *End Call* button, but a glaring white starburst obscured the screen. He looked up and back towards the front window, thinking the neighbor across the street was pulling out of his driveway and the sun glare off his hood had caught his phone, but all he saw was sunshine and trees.

Inside, though, the light was so bright, it made the sunlight seem dim. The whole living room looked flat and overexposed, colors washed out in a haze of painfully bright light. He blinked and lifted his phone to shade his eyes from the end table lamps that glowed like halogens, not the soft incandescent bulbs his mom preferred. The overhead light was on, too—as was the old TV, screen glowing with static, though there was no sound.

He stood, blinking away tears, and reached to turn off the lamp, but a visible blue spark jumped to his fingers, stinging him. Swearing under his breath, he

jerked his hand back and went for the hallway. The brilliant whitewash was there, too. The sconces cast such bright light on the ceiling that the cobwebs in the corners threw deep shadows over the off-white paint.

This wasn't right. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes, and only then became aware of how his heart was racing, pounding against his ribs. Adrenaline surged through his veins, but there was no outlet—no firefight below his chopper, no wounded to rescue, no bleeding to stop. So he stood there, breathing, remembering Grampa Ellis's calm, matter-of-fact reassurances that Craig was perfectly normal.

That whatever happened to him, whatever strange things he experienced, he was *okay*.

Slowly, his eyes stopped burning. And when he opened them, he saw the hallway lights were off. He turned to the living room, where only one lamp was still on, glowing at a gentle twenty watts.

He could distinctly hear the scratch of Nithael's pen coming from the kitchen, and he remembered Nithael's half-assed insistence that everything was fictional. He couldn't help but wonder for a second if he had ever been a good candidate to be the one to know where the line was between reality and fiction.

Chapter 2

The “whiteout” must have lasted longer than Craig thought. That or Nithael was a lightning-fast worker, which... was a possibility, Craig decided, watching Nithael fill his seventh page. The other six were arranged on the table, with lines drawn across careful overlaps to show how they connected. He didn't look up as Craig walked into the kitchen. He also hadn't fetched his mug from the coffee pot.

As he set the mug next to the papers, Craig thought about asking Nithael if he'd noticed anything weird with the lights. Given his incredibly deep level of concentration, though, the odds he'd even answer were slim. Craig was almost certain that if he stripped naked directly in front of Nithael right then, he wouldn't even look up from his work.

“How's it coming?”

Nithael switched the pen to his left hand and went back to writing. He picked up the coffee mug with his right. “I definitely did a direct shift here. It could be—” He glanced at Craig and took a quick sip of the coffee. “Diurnal clock? Hours, minutes, days, in arbitrary quantities? Or is that fiction?”

“Fact. Twenty-four hours, sixty minutes, seven days. It's not that arbitrary, 'cause it follows the sun. And seconds are heartbeats. Kinda.” Craig moved to the counter to refill and reset the coffee maker once again. One or the other of them was always going to need more caffeine at the rate they were going. For the first time in years he wished he had a larger coffee pot.

“Hmm.” After a few more left-handed scribbles and another sip of coffee, Nithael said, “It could be up to forty more hours, estimating that I've been here for between one and three, plus or minus an error factor of four. Or five. I don't suppose you witnessed my arrival, did you?”

Craig shook his head. “Nope. Found you under those autumn leaves a minute before you woke up.”

The pen stopped. Nithael looked up, giving a little shake of his head to get his hair out of his eyes. It didn't work. “*Autumn* leaves? Spring, summer, autumn, winter.”

Craig frowned. That didn't sound like a question of semantics. “The bright yellow aspen leaf pile you were in. That doesn't happen in the spring. The leaves turn colors in the fall. Autumn.”

“Autumn,” Nithael repeated thoughtfully. He dropped the pen and shoved the chair back so he could get to his feet. Still holding the mug, he went right for the back door and tapped his free hand on the window. “It’s not autumn, though. Look. That’s *new* growth.”

Craig sighed. “That’s what I’m saying. It’s spring. April. The fourth month. That’s why I came poking around your hiding place. Because dead leaves like that in spring stood out.”

Nithael turned, and a slow smile lit up his hazel eyes. “That means it was a *temporal* shift! And they said it couldn’t happen.” He burst into laughter and put his mug down so he could rush at Craig and grab hold of his arms. “A temporal shift! I *knew* it wasn’t just theoretical!”

“If you’re talking about time travel, I give up.” Even if this kid *was* from another planet—or something stranger—and was surprisingly compelling in his oddity, Craig had to draw the line at some point. This felt like it. Despite all the strange things he’d seen in his lifetime, time travel was just too much like science fiction.

“Not time *travel*. A temporal shift. Dimensions are always moving—shifting like waves. It’s—” He broke off and went for the kitchen table, beckoning for Craig to follow. He did, still trying to wrap his head around the difference between the two phrases. Nithael ripped off a half-full sheet of calculations, then snatched up the pen. He drew two squiggles—like the sine waves Craig remembered from math class. They overlapped in some places but were opposite in others. “This is a single shift from one to the other. Imagine more shifts. More correspondences or differences. *Greater* differences.”

Craig squinted, trying to imagine more sine waves on the page, and trying to make that match up with autumn leaves in spring. “Okay, so?”

Nithael stared at him expectantly for a few more seconds. Then he said, “Time is a *field*. I brought *time* with me. The leaves were shift-remnants, probably from a plus-one or plus-two dimension.”

“So... what season was it when—or should I say *where*—you left home?”

Nithael opened his mouth to answer—and then blinked, his smile disappearing. “I’ve no idea,” he answered, sounding mildly distressed.

Right. Amnesia. Okay. “Well, *somewhere*—or *somewhen*—it was fall, so... well done.” Craig tried to smile encouragingly at Nithael, but that had never been his strong suit, except when trying to ease a wounded soldier’s fears. “You hungry? I can scrounge up some lunch...”

“Actually, yes.” Nithael frowned as if unhappy about that. “I suppose it’s redundant to say I can’t recall when I last ate. No meat or animal”—he twitched his hand, frowning even more—“parts? Products?”

Craig had called it. Totally vegan. “I’ll see what I can do. Might be PB and J, though...”

Nithael blinked at him. “Is that food?”

“Peanut butter and jelly.”

“Isn’t butter from cows?”

“This butter is from peanuts. They grow in the ground.”

“Not animals, then. That’d be fine,” Nithael said, and sat back down. He got rid of the page with the sine-like waves, then picked up his pen. “Caffeine, too.”

“Yep. On it.” Craig wondered if he couldn’t cobble together some sort of French press or large pour-over setup to make more coffee at one time, as he checked the bread box. He caught sight of Nithael’s mug when he turned to head to the fridge and returned it to the kitchen table, just within reach of Nithael’s right hand. It was like keeping track of a six-year-old’s teddy bear. “Found it.”

“Hmm?” Nithael picked up the mug, this time left-handed, and continued writing.

Craig chuckled at the combination of absentmindedness and focus in his guest, and he murmured, more to himself than anything, “Never mind.” He went back to assembling sandwich ingredients and let the little genius work undisturbed.

“I think I know what happened,” Nithael said when Craig brought two plates to the kitchen table. The spread of paper had grown to encompass the entire surface, burying the laptop. Around the edges, the writing changed from neat columns to longer scrawls, some circled or underlined. Nothing, Craig noticed, was actually crossed out.

“Great. What?” Craig had no hope of being able to understand any sort of explanation, but he could probably just look interested and nod his head, and it would make Nithael happy.

“When we come here, we do it in steps. One shift at a time.” Nithael picked up the sandwich, then peeled the top slice of bread away to examine the peanut butter and jelly layers. “If you go through too many shifts in one step, you take... Well, here. This is almost perfect.” He spread the sandwich open on his plate, then put his finger down on the slice with the jelly. When he dragged his fingertip across it to the other slice, he left streaks of jelly through the peanut butter. When he lifted his finger, it was a mess. “Remnants,” he explained, before he stuck his finger in his mouth and licked it clean. “Not bad.”

Not at all...

Craig shook his head to banish the image of Nithael's cheeks hollowing out with his lips around his finger, so he could focus on the first explanation that had actually made sense to him. “So did the leaves come from your ‘shift’?”

Nithael smiled at him. “Yes. Exactly. They're a remnant from plus-one or plus-two. Probably plus-two, if home's position on the ‘wave’”—he pointed at where he'd left the sine-waves almost completely buried under other pages—“is seasonally shifted from Earth. I don't know anyone else who's studying temporal correspondence, so it's not as if there's a horologist I can consult. Not until I refine the science, at least.”

Something in Nithael's face made Craig ask the question, “Is that what you do at home? Study this sort of thing? Or was this teleportation for some other purpose than an experiment? Vacation, maybe?” How was this his life that he was having this conversation? Less than a month ago he'd been in the desert doing helicopter evacs of wounded soldiers. Retirement wasn't supposed to look like this—at least, not in any of the brochures.

“I don't take vacations. There's too much work to be done,” Nithael said airily, swiping up more peanut butter and jelly on his finger. “And I *wouldn't* just spontaneously decide to teleport to Earth. If nothing else, the difficulty of returning without a machine-assist makes a fixed time schedule problematic. I can't just abandon my work on a whim, so whatever I'm doing here, it must be critical. *More* important than my work...” He frowned, eyes distant, and scraped his teeth over his finger.

Looking down at his plate was the only way Craig could keep his face from heating up. Nithael's mouth was exasperating when stuff came out of it, but sinful when things went in. He took a bite of his sandwich to give himself time to sound normal when he spoke. “How does one return without a machine-assist, then?”

“First, find a portal—a naturally thin spot. Second, calculate the time for a convergence. A three-step convergence is the most efficient, though not without its side effects,” Nithael said, gesturing at himself. “Then it’s just a matter of realigning the energy between the dimensions and physically transitioning through.” He frowned, head tipping to one side as he studied Craig curiously. “Magic? That could be what you’d call it. Nonphysical manipulation of energy fields?”

Craig raised his eyebrows and turned the corners of his mouth down as he nodded and shrugged, his mouth too busy chewing a bite of sandwich to agree with Nithael’s assessment. He swallowed, then added, “Yeah, except most people nowadays are assholes and would call it woo-woo...”

He didn’t know how to *manipulate* energy, but he was able to feel when there was a change in the air. After one too many incidents of having “bad feelings,” enough people had accused him of being so new-age-y that he’d stopped giving open warnings. That sort of thing felt to people like the modern equivalent of magic.

Nithael stared at Craig for a few seconds of silence. “Woo woo?” he asked, pronouncing it carefully. With his quasi-British accent, it came out delightfully precise.

Craig tried not to smile. “Um, it’s a term people use as a dismissive catchall for events outside of the logical or everyday. Stuff that’s difficult to have any hard evidence for. So, any sort of energy work or paranormal activity, from Reiki to telekinesis. My...” He shook his head. No need to mention his special brand of weirdness. “Nobody believes in magic anymore.”

“Just as well. It’s an inaccurate description. I’m afraid I don’t have an *accurate* one, though. Teleportation equipment simply replicates the effects of, well, magic.” He waved a hand in the direction of the docked iPod. “Just like that equipment replicates the effects of speech.”

“That does music more than speech, but yeah. Okay.” Craig thought about turning it on for background noise, but figured Nithael needed to concentrate. “So, how do you find a portal to bend to your magical will? Or is there one just hanging out in West Hills County Park?”

Nithael blinked a couple of times. “I’ve no idea, actually,” he admitted. Then he shrugged and went back to eating his sandwich, one finger-swipe at a time. “I’ll build a detection algorithm after I’m done calculating the time-shift.”

“How close are you to finishing that?” Craig was sure that he should be more excited about meeting a visitor from another... something, but he was stumbling on the idea of sharing his home with a stranger for any length of time past an afternoon. He wasn't really set up to host someone. Not in the way of having enough places to sleep and having food to cook, but more in his temperament. It wasn't part of his skill set. He was used to being around others, but not the one in charge. Not until there was an emergency. And the thing he'd been looking forward to most about living in his family's empty house was the solitude. Having to revise his expectations for a bit was going to make him itch.

“Mmm, no idea.” Nithael frowned at his papers. “A few days? More, perhaps? This is the first *actual* evidence of a time-shift, you know. I'm the only one qualified to analyze this sort of thing. The fact that I *experienced* it is a fortunate coincidence, though not necessary for the calculation—at least not until I recall the specifics.”

Right. Shit. “I take it you'll need a place to stay? No relatives on Earth? No friends from the last time you visited?” A guy could hope...

“Not in my direct bloodline—” Nithael shot Craig a curious look. “What makes you think I've ever been here? This sort of trip takes far too much time to arrange, you know. And *why*?”

Craig gaped at Nithael for a moment and tried not to take his tone of voice personally. Besides, he had no idea what Nithael's home city was like. It could be a thousand times better than living on Earth. “I... You said something about ‘when we come here,’ like it's done all the time. I don't know. And why *not*?”

Nithael gestured at the papers all over the table. “I'm busy. I don't even like leaving the lab—certainly not for a pleasure jaunt. I leave that to the others. They occasionally bring back holos. And we pick up your television broadcasts.”

Hollows? Craig shook his head. He was sick of being one step behind everything that was said and didn't even want to ask. “You still don't know that this *was* a pleasure jaunt. Just 'cause you can't remember why you did so much shifting to get here doesn't mean there wasn't a very good reason.” He *hoped* there was a reason that he was being turned into the proprietor of a bed and breakfast without his consent. Though he had to admit the view had improved with the addition of such a pretty boy.

“True... I *never* do anything without a good reason,” Nithael said without even cracking a smile. “It would've been more efficient if I'd done single-

shifts, though, so I could at least have brought a proper tablet with me, explaining *why* I'd teleported all this way."

"Maybe that part was an acc—unplanned? I mean, maybe you don't use teleporters just to go to the store, but..." Craig decided at the last moment not to imply incompetence on Nithael's part, so as not to offend.

"I don't teleport at all. It's an admirably efficient mode of transport, but I don't—" He paused, head tipping to the side. Again, he tried to brush his hair out of his eyes, and again, he failed. "I *do* have one in my lab, though. Strictly for research purposes and deliveries. I've used it on occasion for onsite consultations or conferences. I must have teleported *from* my lab, which guarantees that it was intentional. And planned."

"Yes, but if you'd planned to come all this way, you would have been prepared. With a tablet, like you said. So maybe... Never mind." Craig shut up. Why did he think he could argue with someone from another world about how their technology worked? He dumped his plate in the sink and walked over to the doorway to the living room. "I'll leave you to your work."

"I'll need more—"

"Caffeine. Yeah. Wait your turn. Or make do with tea." Craig had started the most recent pot of coffee brewing before he'd sat down to eat, and it was meant to be his.

Over a lifetime in the army, Craig thought he'd seen just about everything, until now. Once Nithael ran out of table space, his papers migrated to the chairs, then the floor. He was down to the last few sheets on the pad and showed no sign of stopping.

After grabbing a ream of printer paper from the office and dropping it on the counter, Craig filled his coffee mug and took it out to the backyard to join the cat in a patch of sun. He needed space. And air. And something to look at which wasn't a too-intelligent, too-beautiful face that didn't make a lick of sense. He sprawled on his back to watch the clouds pass by, but Cat had clearly missed having his attention and sat on his chest to sniff at his mouth in a where-have-you-been-and-what-have-you-been-eating sort of way.

She was a slender orange tabby with white paws that sort of just showed up at the house, and Craig had assumed she was his parents' new adopted stray, but they swore she only came around about once a week to whine for food and

rub at their legs. Yet when Craig moved in, she had practically done so as well, claiming the house as her territory and wanting all the attention he could give her. He'd tried to respect her independent nature and didn't let her in the house for fear of trapping her there, but that had only worked for about a day. In less than a week, she had managed to wrap him around her little paw such that she slept at the foot of his bed and had become his alarm clock.

For an indoor-outdoor cat, she was surprisingly clean and smelled only faintly of horse. She actually spent a lot of her time in Flower's pen, or even sleeping on the pony's back. At first, Craig had been terrified that she'd get kicked or crushed under a hoof, but the pony tolerated the cat far more than he tolerated anyone else, human or not.

Now, though, as Craig closed his eyes and relaxed under her warm weight, he smelled an acrid, familiar odor under the faint tinge of horse, as if Cat had been near a barbecue or fireplace. But no, it wasn't wood smoke or charcoal briquettes or even propane. It was *electric*—the smell of shorted wires and burning insulation and melting copper.

Red and orange swept through his vision, a flash of insight that spiked right through his brain. He could hear the crackle of flames licking up over the kitchen cabinets. He could smell the bubbling paint and peeling wallpaper as the glue melted and spread flames across the walls.

He barely managed to grab hold of Cat to keep her from falling as he jolted up onto his feet. He let her jump down indignantly then ran to the back door. He paused for a second with the knob in his hand as it came clear to him that what he'd seen and felt hadn't happened yet. Knowing from experience that didn't mean he had time to lose, he held his breath and threw the door open.

"Buggering fuck!" Nithael shouted in surprise. He was on all fours on top of the carpet of papers, now a mix of yellow and white, spread across the floor. It looked like his equations had started crossing multiple sheets. He sat back on his heels, staring up at Craig with wide, startled eyes. "What?"

Craig looked from Nithael to the kitchen counter where the appliances—and therefore potential electrical fires—lived. Nothing was disassembled or even on. The microwave hadn't even merited a second glance from Nithael, so Craig turned back and said, "Don't touch the coffee maker."

"But..." Nithael looked at the coffee maker, then up at Craig, a sad, almost needy expression on his face. "Why? I asked for more, but you never answered."

The plaintive voice and puppy-dog eyes were a heady combination of adorable and guilt-trippy, and Craig almost gave in, but the stench of burning plastic still seared his nostrils. "I'll teach you how to use it, but don't do anything else with or to it."

Nithael got to his feet and walked on his toes to keep from disturbing the papers too much. "I can determine the function of any electronic device, remember?" he asked, holding up his tattooed right arm. "And it's a caffeine extractor. The only thing it actually *does* is heat water and somehow force it against gravity so it falls through the brown bits."

"Fine, yeah. Here. Watch me do it. Just don't mess with the functionality of it, or anything. I don't want a kitchen fire." Craig moved to the coffee maker and pulled out the basket.

Nithael followed him closely enough that he bumped into Craig at the sink. "But I could improve the efficiency. And the capacity—" He cut off. "That's not a synth."

"Don't you dare..." Craig looked up to follow Nithael's gaze to the countertop next to the back door. "No, that's Cat."

"It's a *living* cat." Fascinated, Nithael walked over to the cat, who sat down, tail curled primly over her toes. "Look at that. It's *real*."

"Of course it is. What on Earth do you have where you live, if not living animals?" Craig stopped in the middle of his now-automatic refilling of the coffee maker to watch Nithael's hand reach tentatively towards Cat.

"That's the problem. We *only* have synths..." Nithael said softly. He trailed off with a quiet gasp as his fingertips brushed Cat's head. Cat responded, not by taking Nithael's hand off at the wrist but by head-butting. Startled, Nithael jerked back, asking, "What? Is it hurt?"

Craig frowned, confused. He was pretty sure Cat didn't care about humans besides him for more than food distribution. "No, she likes you. She's asking for you to pet her." He moved behind Nithael and reached past him, offering his fingers for Cat to sniff. She didn't deign to stretch out her neck, so he had to step even closer, leaving a bare inch of space between his body and Nithael's. "Like this. Let her sniff your hand, then scratch her under the chin."

Tentatively holding out his hand again, Nithael asked, "Have you programmed her at all? Taught? Trained? What do you do with *living* creatures?"

“Cats train humans, not the other way around. She just showed up and claimed me as hers. I have no idea why, since she couldn't care less about my parents.”

“It's most likely your energy field,” Nithael said, watching as Cat rubbed her head on both their hands, moving seamlessly from one to the other. “If this cat is genetically related to the ones in our history, then she can sense your energy manipulation abilities.” He turned and looked up over his shoulder at Craig. “Your ‘magic’?”

Craig stopped and pulled away slightly from both Cat and Nithael. “I don't...” He hadn't talked about his ability yet. In fact, he'd made it a point not to, with anyone. But even with Nithael bringing it up on his own, Craig certainly didn't think of it as “energy manipulation.” “I'm not magic. I just... see things sometimes.”

Nithael didn't even blink. He went back to examining the cat, touching her with tentative little pokes, and asked, “In what shift? Spatial? Temporal?”

How to even answer that? Craig hadn't ever thought about his gift—as Gramps called it—in scientific terms. “Ah... I guess temporal? Yeah. I see stuff in my immediate vicinity, but in the near future. Like potential kitchen fires.” He went back to refilling and resetting the coffee maker, to have something to do with his hands, since Cat was busy with Nithael. And vice versa.

“You were checking on me?” Nithael asked, sounding hurt.

“What? No! The vision just came to me while Cat was sitting on my chest. I don't know. I can't really control it. Not unless I concentrate very hard for a long time.” He'd made a habit of meditating before a mission in the desert to see if any warnings cropped up before heading out, but he'd never felt he had any true grasp of it.

“Really?” Nithael turned and leaned against the counter. Cat stood up to bash her head into his arm. “Why is that? Is it a choice, lack of practice, or a true inability? Energy manipulation *should* be effortless. In cases when it isn't, there's often an underlying cause. I've made a study of such things. I'm something—”

“Of an expert? Of course you are.” Craig raised one eyebrow and smirked at his resident genius. “I dunno what it is. My grandfather tried to teach me the basics when the visions first started, but I've never gotten used to them like he did.”

“Did you have a bad experience in your formative years?”

Craig looked away from the coffee pot again, just in time to see Nithael hesitantly trying to fit his hands around Cat's body as if to lift her. He finally settled on one hand on her belly, the other under her tail, and all Craig could imagine was her shredding that tattooed skin.

“Here, um... Can I help? What are you trying to do?” Craig reached out and took Cat from Nithael's hands. Cat seemed strangely tolerant of them both, and she curled up contently against Craig's chest instead of trying to bleed him out in one swipe.

“You said”—Nithael sat down on the floor, then stretched out on his back—“she was on your chest. Here, pass her over. Perhaps she'll open up to me then.”

Somehow that made sense, though Craig wasn't sure if Nithael wanted Cat to like him or to give him a vision. If it was the latter, that was oddly exciting. To have someone else besides Grampa Ellis who knew how this whole thing worked—that would be, well... something Craig had wanted for as long as he could remember.

He crouched down next to Nithael and gentled Cat from where she'd curled up in the crook of his arm to Nithael's chest and stroked down her back a couple times, from between her ears to the tip of her tail. She sat, then settled in a sphinx-like position. Nithael folded his arms behind his head so he could watch her comfortably.

“Is that your path, then? Foresight?” Nithael asked, never looking away from Cat.

“There are paths?” The question slipped out before Craig could censor himself. He was pretty sure he just managed to sound completely ignorant of his own ability.

Nithael looked up at Craig, brows raised in surprise. Without his hair falling in his face, he looked years older, with sculpted cheekbones and elegantly arched brows. “Certainly. I don't have even a touch of *any* sight. What I do is closer to psychometry, though less forensically diagnostic and more *functionally* useful. A shame, really. I could use aetheric or electromagnetic sight. If I want to pick up fields, I have to use touch,” he said, lifting his right hand and wiggling his fingers.

Before he could stop himself, Craig had reached out to touch Nithael's hand. Which was idiotic, because he was sure it didn't work that way. His nano-whatever tattoo ink was for machines, not people. “You can't...”

He fell silent, watching as Nithael's hand turned black, and he nearly jerked his hand back, but there was no instinct—no silent warning scratching at the back of his head. No *foresight*. All he felt was an electric tingling wherever Nithael's skin touched his own.

“You...” Nithael blinked a couple of times, and his fingers slipped over Craig's skin, tracing the hollows between his knuckles. “You don't even have a biostabilization system?”

“Ah...” Craig had to clear his throat to respond. “I don't really know what that entails. What else can you feel?” His fingers twitched to hold on to Nithael's hand, but he let it roam freely over his skin.

“Temperature, elasticity, a hint of strength, heart rate—a hint of electrical feedback from an entirely natural nervous system,” he added wonderingly as he smiled up at Craig. “You're completely biological, aren't you?”

“Yeah, is that weird? Most earthlings are...” That whole response felt strange to say, but the word earthling almost made Craig chuckle. Except now he was self-conscious and wondering what non-biological modifications Nithael had, besides the nanosensor tattoo thing.

“Oh. Yes, of course,” Nithael said thoughtfully. He let his head fall back, though he didn't stop stroking his fingertips over Craig's arm. It felt good, but was disconcerting to watch, with his fingers so deeply black that Craig couldn't distinguish his fingernails from his skin. “I hadn't thought... But then... *Oh*,” he breathed, hazel eyes lighting up. “You *actually* do things like surgical procedures, don't you?”

Craig frowned. “As opposed to...?”

“Nanomedicine, of course.”

Craig's confusion—and the furrow in his brow—deepened. “What the hell is that?”

“You don't even have nanos?” Nithael lifted his hand, and the tattoo slipped back up into decorative whorls over his forearm and up under his sleeve. “Microscopic constructs that operate as a swarm to perform preprogrammed functions under a variety of conditions. As a technomancer, naturally mine facilitate machine and circuit interface for operation, diagnostics, and general comprehension. It's how I was able to examine your music reproducer and other devices.”

“And my body.” Craig rubbed his palm over the places Nithael had touched, mostly so he didn’t miss those fingers on his skin so badly. “But how is that medicine?”

“Not *my* nanos. I don’t do biological work. Too... squishy.” Nithael shuddered. “But other specialized nanos can be used to close wounds and remove irregularities. And biostabilization systems regulate standard functions, keeping them within acceptable parameters. That part is all very tidy,” he said approvingly.

Craig had a moment of wondering if Nithael wished he weren’t a biological entity at all. Which was so foreign to his entire way of being, he couldn’t even imagine why. Craig had been immersed in the physical, performing biological surgeries, and dealing with biological functions for his whole adult life. To want people to be more like computers in order to make them “tidy” was beyond his understanding. “Your world seems to like things tidy. Even the animals aren’t allowed to be animals.” He reached out to scratch Cat’s chin briefly, since she was still content to sit absolutely still on Nithael’s chest.

“Well, if we *had* them, they would be.” Slowly, Nithael lifted his hand to touch the fur between Cat’s ears. “Though you have to admit, certain modifications ensuring better health are just logical. What if a condition or incident caused you to suffer an arrhythmic heartbeat or a chemical imbalance?”

“That happens all the time. And we deal with it.” Craig shifted from a crouch to seated position, seeing as how they seemed to be stuck down on the floor as long as Cat didn’t move. “Our medicine treats the symptom when it occurs. It doesn’t preemptively eradicate a condition at the source.”

“It seems terribly inefficient. How do you have time to do anything useful? Or fun?”

“I guess many people don’t. And many other people spend their lives doing the useful work of treating diseases. I don’t even want to think of how my job would have been different if nanomedicine or whatever existed here.” Craig stopped himself from reaching out to pet Cat again, since he recognized it as actually being the desire to reach out towards Nithael for no good reason.

“Your job?” Nithael asked, taking over chin-scratching duties. Still, Cat made no move to slash open his hand. If anything, her purring went from an almost inaudible hum to a deep rumble.

Craig winced at having to explain something that probably sounded Neanderthal to Nithael. “Flight medic. In a war zone. Evacuation and treatment. Stabilization until the wounded arrived at a hospital. It was tough, gritty work. Definitely the opposite of tidy.” He shook his head, whether at himself or Nithael, he didn’t know.

“Did you use your foresight for that?”

“Only when there was time to check and see if we were flying into disaster. Or when something just *felt* wrong, and it took me over.” Craig grinned, humorlessly. “I had a better-than-average record of bringing my crews home safe, so people stopped bristling at my strange warnings. They trusted me in the field, but tended to keep their distance at camp.”

“It would be more useful if you learned how to control it.” Nithael’s eyes narrowed slightly, and he went from watching the cat to staring at Craig. “Would you be willing to try?”

Letting out a frustrated huff, Craig muttered, “I’ve been trying to control it my whole adult life. No one wants a psychic around. But it doesn’t really listen to me.”

Nithael frowned. “What?” he asked, sitting up—or starting to. Cat snapped into action, claws extending and digging into Nithael’s chest, making him flinch and flatten himself on the floor again.

“What? It’s not convenient to be struck with the image of your neighbor dying in a fiery car wreck while at the grocery store. You rush home to tell them not to go out, and they get mad and look at you funny. It’s a no-win situation.” Craig couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his voice. It made him angry with himself, which didn’t help calm him down.

“That’s awful,” Nithael said, and it actually sounded sincere. “Foreseers... No, they *wouldn’t* be known here, would they?” he asked softly.

The idea of the larger society acknowledging his gift—he had promised Gramps to think of it that way, though it wasn’t easy—was so foreign it almost made Craig scoff. Until he thought about what it would be like. No hiding, and no strange, mistrustful looks when he didn’t. It made him take a ragged breath. “No. We’ve always thought it was better that way.” Now he wasn’t so sure.

“It’s denying a part of yourself. Like... like deciding you can’t walk or control electricity or create energy fields.” Nithael shook his head and again went from petting the cat to petting Craig, a seemingly unconscious, casual brush of his fingers against Craig’s hand. “It’s not natural.”

“Most people here would say that part of me is what’s not natural.” Craig’s fingers itched again to hold on, but even though the hand hadn’t gone black this time, he didn’t think it was fair to call attention to the touch.

“Yes, well, most people are idiots.” Nithael shrugged, looking back at the cat. “What I don’t understand is how you’ve controlled yourself this long without a burnout.”

Craig watched Nithael’s face as he watched Cat. “Burnout? Like, when it’s strong enough that I blackout and wake up in a different location with a migraine and a bone-deep thirst?”

Nithael’s eyes went wide, and he sat up, dumping Cat into his lap. She yowled in protest and dug in her claws, but Nithael just held her at bay with one hand as he said, “Yes. Exactly. You *have* felt it, then?”

“Felt it surge so hot through me, I felt hollowed out after? Yeah. They were all like that at the start. Mom thought I was epileptic. Grampa Ellis helped me learn to sort of ride them out, but they still come strong like that once in a while, if I’ve been ignoring them.”

“To start with, you *shouldn’t* ignore them,” Nithael scolded, grasping Craig’s hand. “If you could learn to *invoke* them when necessary... There’s a constant buildup of energy simply because you *are* a foreseer. If you don’t bleed it off, the pressure becomes too great. That visualization may help you, in fact. It’s helped others.”

Craig thought about how the “burnouts” hadn’t been as frequent in the desert, when he’d been trying to use the gift to keep his crews safe. What Nithael said made sense. He had to admit anything was worth a shot if it meant not losing control like that. “Well, maybe I’ll have a chance to sort of figure that out a bit while you’re here. I’ve already had two events since you showed up.”

“Just two? That’s—” Nithael let go of Craig’s hand and made a shooing motion at Cat. When she didn’t take the hint, Craig lifted her off Nithael’s legs. Nithael scrambled up to his feet and crossed the sea of papers, scattering his carefully placed sheets without pause. “That’s far too infrequent. Do you feel any... I don’t have the words. Is anything physically abnormal?”

Craig wasn’t sure if he should mention the tingling sensation that he’d felt when Nithael’s black tattoo had touched him, but figured that was probably a normal nanosensor reaction, so he didn’t. “Not really? I mean, my vision went

wonky with the first one—or maybe all the lights went too bright. I'm not sure. And as long as you don't fuck with the electronics, I won't have electric fires taking over my senses."

"Still, best to be safe. I should be able to extrapolate your strength—Where's the pen?" Nithael asked, looking around at the table as if he'd completely forgotten he'd moved to the floor earlier.

"You're practically standing on it." Craig didn't think it was safe to walk across the sea of papers, so he pointed at Nithael's feet where the pen had rolled along the paper as it crumpled underfoot.

Nithael blinked at it. "Oh." Genuinely puzzled, he bent down, picked up the pen, then went for the dwindling stack of paper on the table. "Two incidents aren't statistically significant in terms of future predictions, but I should be able to determine *something*. I'll need details. And you probably have no way to quantify the incidents in any useful terminology, do you?"

It was Craig's turn to blink. "Like a scale from one to ten? No." He skirted the papers to face Nithael more fully. "But the first one wasn't even really a vision. Just a... I don't know. A weird anomaly. I don't usually affect my surroundings."

"An anomaly?" Nithael asked, his carefully casual tone at odds with the way his eyes had lit up.

Why did Craig feel like maybe he should back away slowly? "Well, something new, at least. Might happen again, for all we know. When random portals open and spit out pretty young men from other worlds, who knows what shifts will happen?"

That got him another baffled look. "When random pretty what?"

Oops. That was a dumb move. Craig didn't mean to hit on the stranger with no social skills who was stuck under his roof for who knew how long. That was a surefire way to make everyone uncomfortable. "Nothing. I just haven't had two in a day since I was going through puberty."

"It's—We should—Perhaps residual energy from the teleport," Nithael said in a rush of words, turning his attention back to the papers scattered over the table, though Craig suspected he wasn't actually reading any of the equations. "I can—I can figure something out," he finished weakly.

Shit. Time to make an exit.

“I’ll leave you to it, then.” Craig nodded respectfully and went back outside to be reunited with his coffee cup that he’d abandoned on the grass in the sun.

Hopefully he could find his balance with Nithael. Having another person in the house was enough to get used to; adding an awkward attraction element was only going to make this whole process a lot more difficult. Granted he wasn’t the one who’d been naked for their first twenty minutes of knowing each other, without a hint of wanting to change that predicament, but who knew what social mores Nithael had grown up with around nudity and intimacy? Maybe there wasn’t as much of a taboo on nakedness in the *Cathair*, or whatever he’d said his home was called. Nithael had seemed okay with it, so Craig wasn’t going to make a big deal about it.

It had just been a while since he was so intimately acquainted with another man’s body. Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell had wreaked havoc with his sex life until its repeal. Or, well, it had just skewed the results toward the female end of the gender spectrum, which hadn’t been his focus before going into the military. And then, when everyone started to realize how spooky-accurate he was with his disaster predictions, he became somewhat of a *persona non grata* when it came to any sort of relationship beyond a working one.

He’d gone without in the presence of attractive folks for so long now, he could easily continue to do so for a bit longer. It just seemed unfair that he had to in his own home.

Let it go, Craig. Think about something else.

Chapter 3

Craig had thought returning to his childhood home would help him to relax, but he was still too close to his military life. Too accustomed to sleeping in the dirt or on cots or thin mattresses, bunking down for two hours at a shot between crises. Coming home had just heightened his disconnect with the civilian world. The old house was too quiet, his old bed was too soft, and everything was too... *safe*.

So when he heard a *hiss* and felt a spray of cold water rain down on him, he found himself reaching for a sidearm that wasn't there and rolling to a crouching position before his eyes were all the way open.

He stopped still when he registered where he was—in a grassy patch of afternoon sunlight in the backyard, getting soaked by the sprinkler system. He'd forgotten his parents had installed one of those. And he definitely didn't know how to turn it off. As far as he'd noticed, the sprinkler's timer was set for just before morning. He stayed motionless for a little longer to assess his physical and mental states—heart rate and breathing fast and hard but stable as the sear of adrenaline ebbed, vision sharp and foresight quiet, mind still a mile a minute trying to figure out how this happened and what it meant.

He rolled his shoulders and let his soldier readiness fall away, then finally got himself out of the spray radius and headed back to the house. If Nithael had been messing with the sprinkler controls, Craig might be in for some other unpleasant surprises.

But Nithael looked like he hadn't moved from his calculations, except to start flipping pages over, having apparently run out of fresh sheets. The more recent scribbles seemed messier; some of the pages had nothing but giant circles or arrows pointing from one sheet to another.

Absorbed in his work, he didn't even look up or react to Craig's entry at all. Only Cat noticed, cracking her eyes open to regard Craig from where she was perched on the back of Nithael's chair, balanced partially against his hunched shoulders.

Well, maybe the next few days were going to be more like living alone than Craig had expected. He went through to the bathroom to grab a towel before trying to break such focus. He stood in the doorway, rubbing his hair dry, and caught himself staring at Nithael's eyes as they flicked from page to page. They

were a gorgeous color and held such intelligence and the thick lashes in profile were devastatingly lush. When Craig finally spoke, he had to clear his throat before asking, “You didn’t, by chance, decide to turn on the sprinkler system?”

“Sprinkler system?” Nithael asked absently, without looking up. “Caffeine, though.”

“You know how to make it; I showed you.” He stepped closer to the table, keeping his wet feet off the pages strewn across the floor, and leaned down to try to get into Nithael’s line of sight. “Sprinkler. It waters the lawn.”

Nithael gave Craig his baffled-but-adorable frown. “Lawn. Grass?”

Craig sighed, but kept his focus, hoping to hold on to Nithael’s. “Yes. Outside.”

“Sprinklers. Clever,” Nithael said, frown melting into a smile. “Did you design the system?”

“No, I just got drenched by it. Turned on randomly, Nithael.” Craig raised his eyebrows meaningfully, since it was clear Nithael hadn’t touched anything but paper and pen since he left. That meant only one thing.

“You should fix that.” Nithael shot a meaningful look at the coffee pot, then turned his big, hopeful hazel eyes back on Craig. “Caffeine might help.”

Wiping his hand down his face, Craig huffed dramatically, then gave up and moved toward the coffee maker. “It’s not broken. I did it in my sleep.”

“You *fixed*—Oh.”

Craig heard a click, and when he looked back, he saw Nithael had put down the pen. That was a minor victory.

“I dozed off in the sun and woke up getting wet.” Craig glanced out the window to confirm his suspicion. “And now it’s turned off again. I don’t know how I’m doing it.”

“You need to learn to control—Wait. You’re a fore—” Nithael shoved his chair back, then let out a sharp “*Ow!*” when Cat reacted with claws and hissing and an abrupt leap onto the counter.

Craig paused his coffee prep to open the back door so Cat could exit in a snit. If she was going to stick around, he might have to install a cat door. “This shit is new. I don’t understand this whole manipulating the environment thing. I just see stuff. Unless *you’re* doing it?”

“No... It *sounds* like you're experiencing a resonant secondary effect, but that doesn't make sense. Unless someone else nearby has an atypical talent?” Nithael asked thoughtfully. “I know such things aren't common, in this dimension.”

“*Everything* is atypical in this—” Dimension. They really were talking about alternate universe sorts of things. Not just space travel. God dammit. “Maybe I should check with Gramps.”

“‘Gramps’?”

Shaking his head at himself, Craig smiled. “Grampa Ellis. The other seer in the family.”

Nithael stood up, scattering pages he'd dropped next to his chair, and walked across the papers to the coffee maker. “From your phone. Also a seer? That implies your foresight is hereditary, not a genetic anomaly. Which of your ancestors is from the *Cathair*?”

What?

Craig froze. That was an absurd question. There was no answer to that question, and Craig shouldn't have been able to come up with one. There was no way any of his ancestors were from another dimension. Craig didn't even know if Nithael's people were human. But Grampa Ellis's voice from earlier rang in his head. The description of his vision started to make some logical sense, which was disturbing enough on its own, let alone the fact that it held the answer. “Great-grandad Ciaran?”

Nithael just nodded as if unsurprised. “That makes much more sense than spontaneously developing such a detailed ability. The earliest settlers of the *Cathair* needed group workings to create an effect like that, with one of them as the focus of the others' power. You must be genetically predisposed for it. But that... At your age? But *why*?” he muttered to himself.

Craig could see the now-familiar symptoms of Nithael's mind wandering off on a tangent. “Stay with me here, kiddo.” He took hold of Nithael's arm as if physically keeping him in place would help ground his thoughts. Again, the tattoo felt like it buzzed under Craig's hand. “Or at least take me with you.”

“Genetic predisposition to various recognizable, distinct paths, as opposed to a random genetic mutation that mimics, but isn't essentially a manifestation of a known ability,” Nithael explained in a rush of words. “That means that standard diagnostic procedures—ones I've developed or refined, as a part of my

studies—should work on you. It sounds like you're either caught in a destabilization cycle due to an external trauma or that you're imbalanced in a more fundamental way.”

“Well, thanks a lot.” Craig’s skin prickled at words like *destabilization* and *imbalanced*. He’d worked hard for so long to stay in control. As he spoke, he tried—and failed—to keep from sounding offended. “Maybe I’m just three generations from the source and branching out.”

“Not unless you’ve had a constant infusion of other genetic material with different predisposition. But you only mentioned your grandfather and your great-grandfather. Statistically, all three of you share the same predisposition to foresight. Variations in your individual paths should all be related to sight, temporal shifts, or both.”

“Okay, fine. That makes... sense.” He couldn’t quite believe it did, but yeah. Weird how not weird it was. “But what about my mom?”

“Does she have a quantifiable ability, or did it skip her generation? That happens frequently.”

“It must have skipped her. And Uncle Brennan.” Craig had never really admitted to himself that he had never wanted children because he didn’t want to pass this down, but some part of him felt relief to hear it wasn’t inevitable. “But what can you find with your ‘diagnostic procedures,’ exactly?” Craig stopped himself from adding, *And is there a way to stop it?*

“A great deal. It ties in with your inability to control your sight. You’re obviously an adult, beyond the age when you should have learned control—” Nithael paused, head tipped to one side. “Can your grandfather control *his* sight?”

Craig tried to suppress his frustrated huff at once again having his lack of control shoved in his face. “Yes. And he tried to teach me, but I just never...” He grabbed Nithael’s mug and filled it from the full coffee maker for something to distract from the ridiculous lump in his throat.

“Then... Well, there are a few remote possibilities,” Nithael said thoughtfully. “But let’s rule out the basics first. Are you healthy?”

“I’m a soldier. Or, I was. Of course I’m healthy.” Craig set Nithael’s mug down next to his elbow without too much force.

“No history of brain diseases, uncontrolled growths, convulsions, or hallucinations? No traumatic injuries?”

“Everyone’s family has someone with cancer. But no brain tumors. And no, I managed to see any potential traumatic injury situations ahead of time and avoided them.”

Nithael frowned. “It *could* be that the genetic inheritance broke down over the generations. Have you had your DNA analyzed?”

“Do you have any idea what that costs? Besides, I had no reason to until you showed up.” Craig was tempted to take a sip of Nithael’s coffee, since he was ignoring it for once. It would probably be helpful right about now.

Nithael glanced around the kitchen, muttering, “I suppose. Though I could probably modify something to be able to examine it, if it becomes necessary. I’ll need you to actually invoke a few visions, so I can time the onset, duration, and recovery. See if you’re within norms.”

“A vision, or a random manipulation of some mechanism in the house? I only know how to make the first one happen.”

“Actually, if we could make the *second* happen, that would give me a great deal more insight into how your power works. Secondary effects like that are extremely rare; most people have an affinity to *only* one path. Even my own focused tactile deterrence is considered by some—uneducated as they may be—to be a side-branch of my technomancy. Which is like saying heat and magnetism are related because they both affect certain metals.” Nithael didn’t actually roll his eyes, but Craig could see the desire.

He tried hard not to smirk as he spoke. “At the risk of sounding ‘uneducated,’ what is ‘focused tactile deterrence’?”

“This.” Nithael lifted his right hand, and the tattoo slithered down to his fingertips. When he brushed against Craig’s bare forearm, the touch stung just a little, less than a spark of static electricity.

“You do that *on purpose*? It’s not just a side effect?” Even though it stung, Craig couldn’t make himself pull away from Nithael’s touch.

“Well, I *can*. It’s somewhat necessary. Spreading it through the nanos diffuses the effect, but it requires contact with a biological neural system or a closed electrical circuit to actually work. I have to bleed off my excess energy periodically, or it builds to dangerous levels.” Nithael scowled. “I *thought* I’d solved the issue, but that must have happened temporally close to when I teleported. It’ll come back to me.”

“Is that like how I should let the visions come so they don’t blow up in my face?” Craig wasn’t sure he wanted to believe that theory, but anything was better than what Nithael called burnout.

“Something like that, yes. They *will* come. It’s up to you to control how and when.”

“Right. I can sort of do that with the visions, but I don’t have any idea how the other shit works. I didn’t even remember there was a sprinkler system.” After a moment, Craig spoke a little softer and gestured to where Nithael was still touching his arm. “Is that helping?”

“What?” Nithael followed Craig’s gaze. His fingers twitched, but he didn’t pull away. “Oh. Actually, very much. At work, I have a basic luminescence circuit for this. I didn’t realize a *person* would be more efficient. It’s not disrupting you?”

“No, it’s kind of nice. I mean, it makes my arm tingle, but that’s fine.” Craig looked up from Nithael’s hand as the words ‘luminescence circuit’ registered. “Wait, does that mean you power your own light in your lab? Talk about off the grid.”

Nithael shook his head. “Too inefficient. I need mobility. I limit it to while I’m at my station, through foot contact plates.” He twitched his fingers again, petting Craig experimentally, then added, “My lab assistants avoid coming too close to me. Most people do. Otherwise I would’ve realized how well this works.”

Craig frowned at that. “But it doesn’t really hurt. Why do they stay away from you? That seems...” Lonely. Cold. Depressing. He shook his head, not able to say any of those options out loud.

“Oh, they don’t actually *like* me.”

“What? That’s...” Craig almost pulled out of Nithael’s grasp in his indignation, but at the last moment he kept contact. “Why do you keep them around, then? That seems... hard.” He was proud that he hadn’t said ‘sad,’ even though it was true.

Nithael blinked up at him in surprise. “It’s a very prestigious position. And they’re occasionally useful to have around, as long as they don’t actually talk to me. I can’t stand being interrupted while I’m working.”

Craig furrowed his brow and almost mentioned how he’d just interrupted Nithael a few minutes ago to talk about sprinklers, but he let it go. “So you sting anyone who touches you. Does it matter where?”

“The nanos diffuse the effect over greater—” Nithael stopped and gave a quick shake of his head, eyes going distant. “You helped me walk here. You didn’t feel anything?”

“I.. To be honest, I don’t remember. I was too focused on assessing whether you were injured or high or insane to notice if your skin was tingling.” Craig smiled at Nithael in apology.

“You may just have an unreasonably high pain threshold. This”—he pressed his tattooed fingertips against Craig’s arm—“doesn’t hurt, even after prolonged exposure?”

“Well, the skin feels a little more sensitive where you’ve been touching it, like it’s mildly sunburned, but I wouldn’t call it *pain*, necessarily. Which I *do* feel. This just isn’t that strong. Is that bad?”

As Nithael turned to face Craig more fully, the tattoo slipped back up his arm, leaving his skin and nails unnaturally light by comparison. He wrapped his hand around Craig’s wrist, drawing light, small circles with his fingertips. “Does this hurt?”

“No?” Craig pulled his gaze away from the pale hand on his to look into Nithael’s inquisitive eyes. “Why would it?”

“Most people avoid my touch, even without the nanos. Or they could just be avoiding *me*,” Nithael added thoughtfully. “Of course, I avoid them just as much. Even a casual touch could damage my hands in some way, which would make my research significantly more challenging.”

Craig reached with his free hand to take hold of Nithael’s. He moved slowly and checked Nithael’s face for any sign he should back off, but when he saw none, he grasped as if they were shaking hands, tightly enough that their palms pressed together. Without the nano-ink, Craig registered a slight vibration as of an energy field, sort of like the tactile equivalent of a quiet hum. It made touching Nithael feel that much more immediate and commanding of his attention. It felt good, and not at all painful. Not even close.

“There,” Craig said quietly. “Not the end of the world, is it?”

“Why would it be? And *how*? There’s not enough energy generated between us to take down the house, much less ‘the world’—which encompasses what? The planet? The star system?”

The complete seriousness on Nithael’s face made Craig laugh. He’d have to remember not to use too many idioms with his nonnative English speaker. Or

maybe just with someone who didn't have enough interpersonal experience to recognize them. "I just meant, this is okay, right? Feels okay to you?"

Nithael shot Craig a suspicious glance as if wondering what happened to the world-destruction, but he let it pass in favor of nodding. "It does, yes, which makes very little sense. It's been a very long time since I tolerated even a few seconds of physical contact, without a clear need—such as you helping me walk."

"Does it normally hurt for you, too, then? Touch?" Just the idea of anyone having to live with that sort of pain hurt Craig to think about, let alone this lovely young man who clearly didn't deserve a curse like that.

"Oh, not at all. I just don't lightly tolerate prolonged association with the unintelligent. I loathe wasting time on explanations that would be unnecessary if people would just *learn*." Nithael wrinkled his nose again. "Reminds me of the one term I had to teach basic energy sensing to novices. Never again."

Craig didn't know if he should take that response as a compliment or just count himself as an anomaly. Either way, he couldn't keep himself from pushing the envelope just slightly. "How about just *one* novice, who is very eager to learn?" He dipped his head and raised their clasped hands until his lips lightly brushed Nithael's knuckles for the briefest moment.

Nithael's eyes widened. When he spoke again, his voice had lost its sharp edge. "I already asked if we were intimate, didn't I? I vaguely recall that."

"You did, yes." Craig let their hands fall back down, but didn't let go. "The answer was no."

"That's disappointing."

"Past tense."

"True, but most people speak casually, without precision. Your use of past tense could have been reflexive, not intentional," Nithael said, still in that same soft, wondering voice.

"I was talking about your grammar, not mine." Craig raised his eyes from their hands to Nithael's face where he saw nothing but complete surprise.

"The answer was—'Oh. I said, '*were* intimate,' didn't I?" Nithael laughed, fingers tightening against Craig's hand. "You're surprisingly clever."

"I'm gonna try to take that as a compliment." Craig smirked and took a step back, but Nithael followed. So much for creating distance. "Speaking of, you let me know if you wanna start using the future tense at some point."

“Why not present tense?”

“That would require actions, not words.” Craig was strangely reluctant to make the first move. Whether that was to do with Nithael’s apparent youth, his status as guest, the fact that he hadn’t fully recovered his memory, or all of the above, Craig wasn’t sure. He just knew he didn’t want to press.

The slightest frown appeared. “What would be appropriate? It’s been some time, and... Well, I don’t associate with *people* much at all.”

Craig raised his eyebrows as he considered an answer. Nithael’s response was not one he’d anticipated, though by now it probably should have been. “Depends on what you want, I guess? Kissing’s considered a good place to start...”

The frown disappeared as Nithael’s shoulders relaxed. He leaned forward, then stopped, glancing down at their joined hands. “Where? Outside of fiction, I’ve no idea how things are done here. Your hand, as you did to me?”

Taking a moment to keep himself from saying “anywhere”—or worse, “everywhere”—Craig allowed himself to be charmed by Nithael’s possibly unintentional courtliness. “Sure? If you want. How is it done where you’re from?”

Nithael’s frown came back. “I was never—Well, I never bothered,” he said, looking down again. “I mean, I *have*, but it was incidental. Not intentional. People, you understand... There was a somewhat clever study partner towards the end of my studies. I enjoyed talking to her—she was outside my field of expertise, you understand. She had a fantastic talent for analyzing the processes of cellular regeneration. Top of her field, now.”

“Kissing, Nithael. Focus on the question. Do your people kiss on the mouth?” Craig was starting to wonder if this was going to be worth the trouble of dealing with such a distractible, literal, scientific mind.

This time, Nithael actually sighed in relief. “So it *is* like in your movies,” he said, crowding close to Craig, trapping their hands between their bodies, as he lifted his head. He had to raise up on his toes to touch his mouth to Craig’s, lips slightly parted, just enough to feel the warmth of his breath.

It had been *so damned long*...

Craig didn’t realize he’d let go of Nithael’s hand until he felt stubble under his fingertips as they ran along Nithael’s jaw to bury themselves in the shaggy hair at his nape. The mild, electric hum that Nithael’s skin gave off was

heightened when their mouths touched; the sensitivity of Craig's lips and tongue as they brushed against Nithael's lips registered a sharp sensation, even as they both were being gentle. It stole Craig's breath and made him press forward as he gasped for air.

Without breaking the kiss, Nithael said, "Oh, that's *very* good." He slid his arms around Craig's waist, fingers splayed, tugging at Craig's T-shirt. He touched his tongue to Craig's lower lip, briefly; then he did it again, licking slowly, luxuriously, as if tasting.

The shocking heat of Nithael's tongue and the unexpected compliment from his mouth both caused Craig's face to flush, and a white hot point of desire slid all the way down his spine. He hummed in agreement, opening his mouth to invite more exploration—an invitation Nithael didn't hesitate to seize. His fingers curled, nails scratching over Craig's shirt as he swept his tongue into Craig's mouth with a quiet, contented sigh. He shifted, easing one foot between Craig's, and the way he pressed his hip up against Craig's body had to be deliberate and knowing, despite how innocent he'd seemed.

Not wanting to lose that contact, Craig slid his free hand around Nithael's narrow hip to press against his back and keep him in place. Nithael made a quiet, needy sound, and Craig could feel him getting hard, even through their clothes. When Craig scraped his teeth lightly over Nithael's lower lip and the needy sound got louder, he couldn't keep from letting out a low growl.

His body wanted to crowd Nithael up against the counter, but his mind warned him not to be so aggressive. Nithael had just admitted he *didn't* do this—at least not often. And yet, his enthusiasm spiked Craig's interest and had him groping for ways to feel more of that slender body, short of stripping him naked.

It was Nithael who broke the kiss first, dropping back onto his heels as he stepped back, saying, "You're inconveniently—" When paper rustled underfoot, he looked down, then frowned as if surprised to see the floor covered with papers.

Craig touched Nithael's chin to gently raise it until he was making eye contact, in an attempt to keep him focused. "What, tall?"

"Yes. But I was calculating—"

He was so easily distracted. Craig bent down to kiss him lightly. When their eyes met again, Craig suggested, "Hop onto the counter, then."

Nithael grinned. “You don’t mind? I think I did that before, but most people object, despite counters and tables being perfectly serviceable—”

“Don’t mind. Get up there,” Craig interrupted as he took hold of Nithael’s hips to help guide him up. He weighed maybe a hundred forty pounds, if that.

“Very practical,” Nithael said, spreading his legs so he could pull Craig close. He put his arms around Craig’s shoulders and leaned in close, adding, “I like that.”

In their new positions, Nithael was about an inch taller than Craig, so he had the rare experience of tilting his head up for a kiss. It was slow and soft, and Craig enjoyed the feeling of being surrounded by all of Nithael’s limbs at once. “Mmm. Whatever you like.”

“This,” Nithael said, his lips featherlight against Craig’s. His hands went from Craig’s shoulders to his nape and back, as though exploring his body. “You should keep having good ideas like this.”

“How about this?” Craig’s hands slid from Nithael’s hips, under the hem of his shirt, and ran up his sides to his back and over his shoulders. The slight, tingling current of his skin warmed Craig’s palms and demanded his focus.

“Yes,” Nithael breathed as he arched like a cat and let his head fall back, eyes closed. His neglected, somewhat awful haircut did nothing for the shape of his face; with his hair swept back, Craig could see just how beautiful he really was.

When his hands skimmed back down, following the curve of Nithael’s spine, he remembered the tattooed stars. He brushed his lips down the side of Nithael’s neck as he said, “Speaking of practical, is all the ink on your body functional?”

“By what definition”—Nithael’s breath hitched when Craig reached the base of his throat—“of functional?”

Craig huffed a laugh and tugged on Nithael’s shirt collar with his teeth. “I was thinking along the lines of diagnostic ability and idiot-deterrent but with you... What?” he asked, raising his voice to be heard over Nithael’s laughter.

“Idiot—Idiot-deterrent,” Nithael gasped out, burying his face against Craig’s shoulder. “That’s perfect. Why doesn’t *anyone* else understand that sort of thing?”

Craig was at a loss. “I... That’s basically what you called it, which made sense somehow...”

“My mother would *never* approve,” Nithael said, still clinging to him and laughing in little hitches. “She’s always saying I’m supposed to be *nice* to everyone, even when they’re not intelligent enough to understand the most basic principles of energy manipulation.”

Craig had a moment of worry that if Nithael ever actually tried to explain all that stuff to him, he’d have a hard time, which made him pause before he nudged for room to nip at Nithael’s neck. “Nice is overrated. Come here.”

“I’m going to make you put that in writing for her,” Nithael murmured, sitting back for a proper kiss.

“I’ll have my sister cross-stitch it on a sampler and frame it for her.” Craig indulged in those plump, hot lips for a moment before sweeping his hands up Nithael’s back again, gathering the shirt at his wrists, and tugging to get Nithael to raise his arms. “Here, lemme...”

Nithael ducked and let Craig pull off the shirt, saying, “I hate clothes. Not in a lab, of course, but that’s a matter of safety. Otherwise, they’re terribly inconvenient.” As Craig dropped the shirt, Nithael shook out his hair and added, “You don’t mind? Everyone else always complains.”

Smiling at how stripping him could somehow distract Nithael from Craig’s seemingly obvious intentions, he replied, “You being shirtless is necessary for my next good idea.”

With a blink that seemed entirely guileless, Nithael asked, “Then why aren’t you executing it?”

“Because you keep going on tangents,” Craig mock-grumbled. Then he leaned down to kiss along Nithael’s collarbone and brush a hand over one of his nipples.

Nithael arched his back again, pushing against Craig’s hand, and combed his fingers through Craig’s short hair. “I’m always working. Though I must admit, you’re doing an admirable job at distracting me. You should also do that more.”

Craig wasn’t sure if Nithael meant for him to do more with his hand or his mouth, so he kept up with both. With his free hand he circled Nithael’s hips and pulled them towards him until his pelvis was flush against Craig’s. The contact made him grunt, and he bit down on Nithael’s shoulder to keep from swearing.

“Trousers,” Nithael said raggedly, bending down to nip at Craig’s ear. “Or is it too soon? If it’s not, I’d rather enjoy feeling you everywhere.”

As soon as the words were out of Nithael's mouth, Craig's vision was obscured by a bright, vivid image of the two of them in bed, Nithael's head thrown back in ecstasy, the electric hum of his skin resonating over every inch of Craig's, the heady scent of sweat and cum and saliva overtaking his nose. He gasped and felt Nithael's mouth on his, stealing his breath, as the heat of their bodies pressed together caused his hips to rock and a deep groan to escape his throat. Every sensation was a potent drug laced with a bottomless desire for connection.

Then a sharp buzz of power skittered down his spine, and he heard a gasp—"Oh!"—that came from outside, not the depths of his mind, snapping him out of the vision. He blinked, struggling to focus, and saw Nithael staring at him, wide-eyed, pupils blown dark.

Craig found his voice. "What—"

"What—No, tell me later. Let's *do* that first," Nithael said breathlessly.

"Fuck. You *saw* that?" Craig was trying to catch his breath and get control of his thoughts again, and the headache was starting, but he *knew* that wasn't how it was supposed to work.

"Some. Could be resonance from close physical proximity. I've never been intimate with a foreseer. Stop *talking* and"—Nithael gave a frustrated wave of his hand—"do that. You obviously have the experience."

"Hang on, that's not supposed to happen. Even Gramps and I can't see *into* each other's minds, and he and I have been close since I was born."

"And I'm not a seer at all, nor is any sub-path of *sight* congruent to micro-field manipulation, but I *did* see it, and would very much like to *start*," Nithael said with an impatient huff. "Because in my experience, limited though it may be, sex is *never* that... engaging."

"A vision isn't necessarily what happens in the future, you know..." Was it possible to give yourself performance anxiety? That was yet another new wrinkle. Craig finally focused on Nithael's face and saw a disappointed pout. He nipped at the protruding lip and smiled reassuringly. "But that doesn't mean we can't try..."

Nithael grinned and clawed at Craig's shirt, pulling and tugging and actually making it harder for Craig to help him get it off. "Where were we, in the vision?" he asked, throwing the shirt aside. Papers rustled, but this time he didn't even blink. Apparently, he'd found his focus.

“In my bedroom. Upstairs, down the hall, past the—” Craig cut off with a grunt as Nithael pushed into him, sliding down his body as he dropped off the counter.

“Now,” Nithael demanded, though he pressed the word into Craig’s chest before he started kissing and licking anywhere he could reach.

Craig cupped the back of Nithael’s head in his hand and kissed his forehead. “Water first, or the headache will get a lot worse.” He extricated himself from Nithael and grabbed the closest coffee mug, tossing the contents and filling it from the tap.

“Headache?” Nithael asked, staring at Craig as if derailed from his path. “What headache? Why do you have a headache?”

“Strong visions like that leave a headache and a deep thirst in their wake. Grampa Ellis gets them, too.” Craig was starting to have a hard time focusing his eyes, so he drained the mug and refilled it to drain it again.

Nithael crowded close behind Craig and rubbed his hands over Craig’s shoulders. “Is there anything I can do? No, don’t answer that. I’m terrible with biomanipulation.”

“Your hands feel nice just like that...” Craig made himself be good and drink one more mug of water before he got distracted with Nithael’s body and regretted it later.

“They do?” Nithael sounded surprised, though he kept petting.

“Yeah. They tingle. Like you’ve got electricity in your skin. Nice massage technique.” Craig turned around and wrapped his arms around Nithael’s waist, pulling him close. Nithael kept petting, leaving a trail of sensation beyond just body heat, as Craig leaned back against the sink.

“If I were doing it intentionally, I’d be happy to take credit, but I don’t believe that I am.” Nithael hesitated. “Doing it intentionally, that is. I suppose it could be—But why would it be continuous?” he muttered, getting that dangerous, faraway look in his eyes.

Craig kissed him on the nose to bring his focus back. “I like it, so you don’t have to figure it out right now. Wouldn’t you rather go upstairs?”

“Upstairs. Yes.” Nithael huffed and stepped back, dragging his hands down to Craig’s waistband. He hooked his fingers into the fabric and pulled insistently. “No headache? I’d rather not stop, once we start. It looked incredibly engaging.”

Having witnessed Nithael's single-minded focus already, Craig smiled at the thought of being its target. "Receding. Almost unnoticeable, especially when distracted."

Nithael hummed in approval and kept backing up, pulling Craig along with him. Pages scattered under their feet. "Even better. Perhaps we can prevent it altogether."

"Darling, you're—" Craig had to grab hold of Nithael's shoulders and shove him to the side before he bruised his backside from walking smack into the kitchen table. The push threw off his balance, and he slipped on a thick layer of papers, but Craig had a tight hold on him and kept him upright. "Here, let's..." Craig offered his arm, and when Nithael took hold, he guided them through the living room to the stairs.

"Have you considered—No, you don't have gravitic field manipulation devices," Nithael said, looking down as if enchanted by ordinary stairs. He went so far as to scuff one bare foot on the carpet runner before letting Craig lead him up. "It's very... solid?"

"Yep. Promise. And the bed you saw is up there."

Nithael smiled wickedly. "Excellent planning. I suspect you take lovers far more often than I do."

Craig's answering smile faded slightly. "What makes you say that?"

Nithael stopped in his tracks, a few feet away from the bedroom door. "Should I not have said it? It was just an observation. You haven't hesitated, even with the complication of an uncontrolled episode of foresight, and you seem to be comfortable and confident, implying you've done this before."

Apparently, Nithael had no idea how persuasive and insistent his enthusiasm was. Craig had been carried along by it, especially after the vision, happy to oblige him in attempting to carry out the act they both had seen. That, and it had been forever since he'd taken someone to bed with him. "'This' in the general sense, yes. Not 'this' as in 'try to recreate a vision with a visitor from another world.' I've never had a vision with sex in it before. Usually they're about death."

"That's... unpleasant. You should definitely try to do something about that."

"Well, they've helped avoid a lot of death, actually. So I'm kinda fine with it. Medic, remember?" Craig ushered Nithael into his bedroom before he remembered the massive pile of clean clothes on his bed.

“You mentioned that before. Why are you a medic, if your path is foresight?” Nithael asked, glancing around before he went right for the bed. He sat down, heedless of the socks and T-shirts under him. Then he got back up, hands going to the waistband of his borrowed sweatpants, and asked, “Off?”

“One sec.” Craig grabbed the corners of his comforter and bundled all the clothes up inside it, then shoved the whole thing into his closet. When he turned back to the bed, Nithael’s pants were already pooled at his feet. “Right. Okay.”

There was something serene about Nithael’s smile. He sat down, then stretched out on his back, without a hint of modesty or reticence. He held out a hand to beckon Craig, saying, “This is much more comfortable than a lab table.”

Oh, for Christ’s sake. If that was the expectation Craig had to exceed, he had no reason to worry. “I should hope so.” He unbuckled his belt and unzipped his jeans, dropping them to the floor along with his boxers. Then he stepped over to take Nithael’s hand and let Nithael tug him down onto the bed.

“It’s also been some time since I’ve done this while not running a timed procedure or computation,” Nithael said, turning just enough to hook one foot over Craig’s legs, pinning their bodies together. “It’s relaxing to not be in a rush, isn’t it? Unless there’s something you need to do?”

Craig successfully suppressed his eye-roll, but couldn’t hide the grin. “Not a damned—” Then he caught a glimpse of the dark sky outside, and he pulled away, saying, “Cat. I let her outside earlier, and I usually feed her about this time. She’ll be crying at the door in a minute. I’ll be right back. Don’t move.” When Nithael nodded, Craig tugged at the bedsheet, saying, “Get under this so you don’t get cold.”

Nithael smiled. “I don’t get cold. But you’re very much a caretaker, aren’t you?” he asked, sitting up so he could get his legs under the sheet.

Craig shrugged. He’d forgotten about the bioregulation something or other. “Medic, remember? Be right back.” He kissed Nithael’s forehead and left the room.

Cat was already waiting for him outside, meowing for attention. She slipped in and jumped up onto the counter as soon as he opened the back door. He scratched her chin and told her she was pretty until her purr was loud and deep, then filled her food bowl and refreshed her water. He pet her from ears to tail once, just to see her back rise in a wave to meet his hand as it traveled, and

resisted the urge to ask her what the fuck he was doing with this stranger from—impossibly—another world.

He hadn't done something reckless like sleep with someone he'd just met since the first few times he was home on leave. Nithael didn't feel like an unknown entity for some bizarre reason, though. Or at least he seemed to understand Craig even better than himself.

He shook his head and watched Cat ignore him for another few moments, then headed back to the lure of skin that made him tingle and the vision's promise of a connection he'd been craving for far, far too long.

Chapter 4

Nithael had moved to the edge of the bed, so he could reach the old clock radio on the nightstand. Craig wasn't surprised to see the tattoo had crawled down to his fingertips—though what the nanos “read” from a clock radio that wasn't even set to the right time, he couldn't imagine.

“It's only a receiver?” Nithael asked. “That's its functionality, so it's not broken, but *why*? Why not have a transmit function as well?”

He was distracted again. They were both naked, fresh from the memory of an overwhelming, enticing vision, and Nithael's scientific mind still hadn't turned off. Craig might have been insulted, but he was coming to regard Nithael's quirks as adorable rather than irritating.

“The transmissions it receives aren't looking for a response. They're just entertainment.” He took Nithael's blackened hand from off the radio and brought the palm to his mouth to kiss it. A tiny spark of power burst against his lips, but it faded to a gentle tingle.

“Ah. And the blinking numbers?” Nithael asked, pulling his hand back an inch at a time, as if to make certain Craig followed. He did, allowing Nithael to draw him onto the bed, where he caged Nithael in with his limbs, knees on either side of Nithael's hips and elbows next to his shoulders. Their faces were inches apart.

“Timekeeping. Kiss me.”

Nithael lifted his head, and his eyes fell closed as their lips touched, then parted. “Why isn't this tedious, with you?” he asked between soft kisses.

Craig worked his way along Nithael's jaw to his ear. “What, kissing? If you've found it tedious before, someone's been doing it wrong.”

Nithael huffed, turning to the side to give Craig full access. “I can't be expected to be an expert in *everything*,” he complained.

“I'm not expecting anything, hon.” Craig nipped at Nithael's earlobe, then the corner of his jaw.

“But... your vision,” Nithael said, turning—or trying to. “Don't you want that?”

Craig pulled away just enough to make eye contact. “Sure. It's something to shoot for. But desire and expectation are very different, Nithael.”

“That doesn’t necessarily have to be true. Maintaining a clear, fixed purpose—a goal—helps to ensure focus and proper attention to detail.”

“Then pay attention.” Craig bit down on the neck muscle behind Nithael’s jaw, hard enough to make him catch his breath.

Nithael’s hands went up to Craig’s hair, tugging at the short strands. “I am. Do—Do that more.”

Growling in pleasure at the permission, Craig bit his way down Nithael’s neck and along the top of his shoulder, leaving a line of tooth marks, and ending just above his tattoo. Nithael scratched down Craig’s back, as far as he could reach, then back up. He kicked to get the sheet out from between their bodies, then wrapped one leg around Craig’s.

“Tell me what you want,” he said, trying to pull Craig’s body flush against his.

The feeling of all that bare skin full of charged energy pressed up against his took so much of Craig’s attention, he couldn’t answer right away—especially with how nicely their pelvises lined up at the moment. “Ah... Jesus, you feel good. Anything. Everything. Just... yeah. This.” He leaned down to kiss Nithael and rocked his hips forward slightly.

Nithael’s moan was definitely closer to a purr. He arched up, panting into the kiss, cock sliding and bumping against Craig’s until they lined up even better. “That’s—Do more—Yes,” Nithael said incoherently.

Craig agreed wholeheartedly, and he started to rock his hips in a slow rhythm. Nithael seemed to not have much more of a vocabulary around his desire than that command, but it didn’t bother Craig in the least. He was happy to do a whole lot more, as long as he got the green light.

The tingling energy radiating from Nithael’s skin sent waves of heat through Craig’s body, making his heart race, tightening his chest until he felt almost dizzy. He made himself take a deep breath before nosing through Nithael’s hair to suck on his earlobe. “Like this?”

He couldn’t quite tell if Nithael’s response was an affirmative hum, a moan, or another purr. Maybe all three. Nithael certainly didn’t try to pull away; he pushed up in rhythm with Craig’s movements, hands skimming up and down Craig’s body. A few times, he lifted his head to mouth at Craig’s shoulder, but then Craig would hit the right angle, and he’d drop back down on the pillow with another beautiful, pleased sound.

It wasn't until Craig's fingers wrapped around Nithael's arms that he realized he was touching the tattoo, *without* the electric sting of power. At least, not any more than the rest of his body seemed to give off constantly. Whether Nithael could turn it off at will or was too distracted or aroused for it to work, Craig had no idea. It made him want to press his mouth to the not-actually-inked skin, though, so he leaned over looking up at Nithael to check if it was safe.

Judging by the dazed look in Nithael's eyes, apparently his quick mind *did* have an off-switch. It took a couple of blinks before he asked, "What is it? What's wrong? Did I do something?"

"Nothing. Can I... kiss it?" Craig nodded toward the pattern on Nithael's arm.

Nithael's brow furrowed in confusion. "You—Well, yes. If you want, that is. It might—Or... not?" he muttered, lifting his arm to regard the tattoo.

Craig took the decorated biceps in his hand and brushed his lips over both dark and light patches on its skin. The black areas felt slightly warmer to him, especially when he licked them, but other than that, there was no difference from the rest of Nithael's energy-laced skin. It didn't hurt or sting at all.

He nipped at a spot down near Nithael's elbow just to hear Nithael gasp in surprise, then trailed his mouth up and over Nithael's shoulder and collarbone. He buried his nose in the crook of Nithael's neck and murmured against it, "You feel fantastic."

"It didn't hurt? I didn't feel an energy discharge," Nithael said, his curious voice at odds with the way he pulled Craig intimately close.

"No... Is that a bad thing?" He kissed Nithael's pulse point slowly, in order to feel the heart rate underneath. Light and quick but steady.

"Yes. Well, no. Not that I want to see you hurt. But it implies—*Why?* It builds up at a constant rate. I've *calculated*—"

Craig turned his head and nipped at the underside of Nithael's jaw before raising up enough to face him. "Hush, baby." He breathed the words into Nithael's mouth before covering it with his own.

"But—"

"Nithael," Craig interrupted, bracing up on an elbow so he could touch Nithael's mouth with one finger. "Do you want to talk, or..." He deliberately thrust his hips down against Nithael's still-interested body.

Nithael's eyes closed for too long to be a blink; when he looked back up at Craig, the sense of distraction was gone. "Or. Definitely or," he said softly. "Which is terrible grammar—"

"Kiss me, then, before you get too distracted," Craig said with a fond smirk. This genius could lose focus for *anything*.

With a satisfied little hum, Nithael lifted his head and obliged, inviting Craig's tongue to explore with little licks and hot gasps. Craig couldn't remember ever having a lover so unselfconscious, so open to the idea of following the whim of his desire and seeing where it took them, without stifling any of his impulses. It was delightful. And it created a feedback loop connected to Craig's own arousal that was building, slowly and steadily.

Then Nithael wrapped one leg around both of Craig's and thrust up hard, and need spiked right through Craig, making him growl. "More," Nithael insisted without breaking the kiss. "More, Craig. Please."

Hearing his name from Nithael's mouth was something Craig hadn't realized he'd been wanting. When it washed over him, it sent a shiver down his back, and his face flushed hot. He couldn't help smiling at what felt like an accomplishment. He hadn't been sure Nithael had even remembered it until this moment. In gratitude, he kissed Nithael's neck, nipped at his collarbone, then licked the hollow of his throat.

The plea, so desperate and demanding, had helped Craig to focus. He thrust down, a hard, slow drag of his hips, lifting his head to watch Nithael's face flush. His mouth opened, and Craig silenced his cry with a kiss that stole the breath from both of them. Thoughts of what to do next—to give Nithael his mouth or to feel the electric heat inside Nithael's body—scattered under the more immediate promise of pleasure they shared now.

"Craig. Craig, don't stop," Nithael panted, scratching at his shoulders and down his back. Their legs were tangled together, bodies alive with power, and nothing in the world could have convinced Craig to stop, even for a moment.

He came in a blinding rush, liquid heat spreading between them for bare seconds before Nithael cried out wordlessly and joined him. Every inch of Craig's skin came alive, and his vision whited out, images flashing too fast in his head. It was like a broken connection snapping into place, a sense of deep satisfaction that far outstripped the pleasure he'd have expected from a quick, frenzied rutting.

“Oh, fuck, that felt good. Why did that feel so good? I mean, you’re made of electricity or something, but still...” Craig reached up to brush Nithael’s hair away from his face, just so he could look at it, beautifully flushed and lazily sated.

“It wasn’t supposed to feel good?” Nithael asked, baffled.

Craig laughed, smiling wide and loose. “No, sorry, it was definitely supposed to feel good. It just felt better than it should have, somehow.” He kissed Nithael’s forehead to make the frown ridges go away. It didn’t work, and Craig mirrored the frown in worry. “Did it not feel good for you?”

“It did. It—It felt *unusually* good, for what we did. More than the bed should account for.”

Coughing to hide the laugh at the way Nithael’s mind worked, Craig responded, “Always good to have a control, I guess...” He rested his hand on Nithael’s chest, and his chin on his hand. The heartbeat underneath was slow and steady, which was at odds with their exertions just now. “You all right?”

Nithael shifted the pillow under his head and smiled at Craig. “Very satisfied.” He touched Craig’s face, idly tracing the line of his jaw and cheekbone with his fingertips. “Is that something we’re supposed to ask one another?”

“No. Well, sure, but I... you calmed down really quick...” Craig leaned up a bit, took hold of Nithael’s hand, and pressed it to his own still-racing heart. “Not like this.”

Nithael’s frown reappeared, but only for a moment. “Oh. Part of my biological upgrade involves systemic regulation. There’s a failsafe to prevent abrupt changes outside acceptable parameters, but otherwise, I have complete control of certain functions.”

“You... you can *control* your own heartbeat?” Craig shouldn’t have been surprised. He was definitely surprised.

“Within reason,” Nithael assured him. “A too-abrupt change could be destabilizing or cause irreparable damage. And it’s *generally* used only for emergencies, but I find it’s useful to recover after exertion or a traumatic incident, such as an unplanned explosion. There’s no”—he made a twitchy motion with his hand—“tedious recovery period.”

Unplanned explosion. Right. Genius with no sense of self-preservation. “Huh. Okay. This isn’t linked to your ability to control the sting of your tattoo?”

“Oh, not at all. This is a nonstandard modification to the programming. The tattoo energy-bleed is an effect, not an intentional feature.”

“But it shut off while we were...” Craig had thought he understood how all of this worked, at least a little bit, but now he was lost.

“Well, yes. The biological system regulator is programmed to allow *normal* exertions. I overrode that parameter, of course, as part of my modifications, but I left in a switch so I *could* experience everything naturally, when I choose. It has the same result as how the original programming was intended, only with the benefit of being under *my* control, rather than messy biological autonomy.”

“I meant your—” Craig started before the implication of Nithael’s words completely caught up with him. “*Messy biological autonomy?* You mean you... hacked your own heartbeat because it’s *not tidy?*”

Nithael blinked innocently at him. “And breathing and temperature regulation. It’s more efficient. Oh, and sleep.”

Craig blinked dangerously back. “Sleep?”

“Wasting a third of my life sleeping is hardly productive.”

“So you... what? Don’t do it anymore? Nithael...”

“I need *some* sleep,” Nithael said, apparently oblivious to both the health risks and Craig’s growing concern. “I can just better time it to happen while experimental processes are running in my lab, every few days, if I’m converting the time correctly. Synchronized downtime, you could call it,” he added with a proud smile.

“That’s absurd and dangerous. And, honestly, that way madness lies. They’ve done research on long-term sleep deprivation...” Craig stared at Nithael’s guileless face and tried to not let his concern take over completely as something clicked. “Honey, it’s not that your lab assistants don’t like you; it’s that they’re scared of you.”

“Well, yes. It’s easier that way. Otherwise, they’re distracting. Or—What did you call me?”

Craig was brought up short by the question, unable to remember until he played his words back to himself in his head. “Ah, ‘honey?’”

Nithael smiled shyly. “I like that. It’s much better than other possibilities.”

“Such as?” Craig was quite free with his endearments once he started, and he wanted to know which Nithael preferred.

“They won’t translate well. Besides, they’re rarely from lovers. Colleagues, most often. And my relatives. And lab assistants,” he added, starting to frown.

Well, that was worrisome. Craig started to wonder if Nithael’s isolation wasn’t fully his choice. He wrapped his arms around Nithael’s neck and leaned in close until their noses were touching. “There are other sweet things I could call you, if you like them.”

Nithael’s eyes lit up with his smile. “Only if you’d like,” he said quietly. “And even if it’s not terribly productive, we don’t *need* to actually leave the bed.”

Craig leaned back a bit to better focus on Nithael’s face. “Well, I *am* going to make you sleep tonight, but maybe we should take a shower first?”

“Mmm, perhaps, yes. Would you like to go first?”

“You don’t want to join me?” Craig couldn’t help rocking his hips slightly while he spoke.

Nithael’s brows shot up. “Is there room?”

Shrugging noncommittally, Craig answered, “Basically, yes.”

Nithael grinned. “Let’s do that. It’ll also conserve water, yes?”

Again, Craig shrugged, this time with a smirk and another rock of his hips. “Depends on how long it takes you to come.”

“But even—*Oh*. That’s right,” Nithael said in sudden understanding. “You don’t need to conserve water like that. You have oceans and rain.”

“Well, dying oceans, and acid rain is still a problem in some areas, but yeah. What the hell do you have instead?” Craig raised up off of Nithael’s body until he was kneeling between Nithael’s legs. He looked down at the mess they’d made of themselves. A shower was definitely in order.

“Critically low water supplies. It’s become more difficult as our population increases, but there are measures in place to prevent that.”

“Such as group showers? Come on, babe.”

Nithael smiled and sat up as Craig climbed out of the bed. “I also like that.”

“‘Babe?’ Good. On the list.”

At least an hour later, soaked and overheated and sorely regretting the on-demand water heater his parents had installed, Craig wrapped his arms around Nithael's body and whispered, "We really should get out, babe. We need dinner."

"Bring it here," Nithael mumbled, leaning back against Craig's chest, though not so far that he was out of the shower spray.

"I'm putting you in a bath next time," Craig mumbled as he tested whether Nithael would stand upright on his own so he could get himself out and dried off.

"A bath? A *water* bath?" Nithael turned—apparently he *could* stand, if he chose—and droplets sprayed everywhere before he repositioned himself. "I've had chemical baths after a harmful exposure, to neutralize the effects, but never *just* water."

"Well, now you know what you have to look forward to tomorrow. But now it's dinnertime. Come on, baby." Craig tugged on the shower curtain to exit, hoping Nithael would follow.

"But..." Nithael unleashed the kicked-puppy expression. The wet hair hanging over his face in streaks of black and dark silver only made it that much more potent.

Craig leaned in to wipe the hair from Nithael's eyes and kiss his cheek. "Food. Then sex. Then sleep."

Nithael gave Craig a calculating look. "Sex? With you?"

"Would you rather it with someone else?"

"Well, no. Wouldn't you, though?"

"Who would I—No. I definitely want to fuck you again. Or for the first time, depending on your definition, given we barely got that far earlier." Even Craig wasn't sure if his own frown was from confusion or offense. When Nithael's face broke into a brilliant smile, though, Craig couldn't help but feel a touch of concern. Did he never have the same partner more than once?

"Then yes. I'd also like that," Nithael said, stepping away from the spray to put his arms around Craig's body.

Hugging Nithael tightly to him, Craig sighed. He really seemed to be good at adopting strays. "Good. Then our evening is all planned out. No getting

distracted and trying to calculate the answer to life, the universe, and everything.”

“Not my specialty. Cosmology and astrology are too broad and impractical.”

“Perfect.” Craig kissed the top of Nithael’s head and got him out of the bathtub before he could change his mind. Since he hadn’t shown Nithael how to operate the shower—otherwise, he was likely to find Nithael in there at two in the morning—he reached in and turned off the water. Then he pulled a towel off the rack to wrap around Nithael’s shoulders. “Here. Dry off,” he said, getting a towel for himself. “Meet me downstairs.”

Nithael caught his arm when he went to leave the bathroom. “Thank you for the shower.”

Craig brushed his knuckles along Nithael’s jawline and smiled. “Of course, babe.” Nithael let go with a smile, and Craig turned to leave, only to add up just how long Nithael had been in the house. Hiding a sigh, he deliberately turned to the toilet and lifted the lid. “If you’re messing with *that* biological system, there’s no need. There’s a bathroom downstairs, too. Just press that handle when you’re done, to flush.”

Nithael had the grace to look down as if embarrassed. “It’s *convenient*.”

“It’s *unnecessary*. And probably harmful, that amount of waste buildup. Be kind to your body, please. I like it a lot and I want it healthy.”

“I’ve done *a lot* of modifications,” Nithael said guiltily.

“Okay, right, but still. Don’t tax your systems unnecessarily. It’s okay to function like a human sometimes, hon.” Craig cupped Nithael’s jaw with his hand and pulled him close for a quick, soft kiss. “Meet you downstairs,” he said before he left. He closed the bathroom to keep the heat inside out of habit, though Nithael probably didn’t need it. Then again, the way he was taxing his body, there was no sense in making things worse.

Craig’s medical training had him distracted as he dried off, found a pair of boxers to wear, and then went downstairs. The list of possible “system modifications” was too long for comfort. He’d have to get more information, but at least Nithael was being honest with him—something he suspected was all too rare, at least with other people.

Down in the kitchen, he found Cat had entertained herself with Nithael’s papers, shredding more than a few of them. She’d made herself a nest on top of

the pile on the laptop. She cracked one eye and gave Craig a warning stare, just in case he was thinking of moving her.

“Not my problem, sweetheart. But *someone*'s gonna be pissed.”

He opened the fridge to search through its contents, remembering the fact that animal products were off the table, and found only orange juice and salad fixings that met Nithael's dietary requirements. There was still half a loaf of bread left over from this afternoon's sandwiches. After scraping the bread clean of peanut butter and jam, one finger-full at a time, Nithael had eaten the bread and had shown no ill effects. But PB and J for dinner was depressing. If he could eat bread, though, that meant he could eat pasta, so spaghetti with tomato sauce and a salad would work. Not much in the way of protein, but it would do.

Craig got started on heating the water for pasta, then eyed the coffee pot before deciding that neither of them needed more caffeine. In fact, he emptied the coffee pot, gave it a rinse, then shoved it against the back of the counter, hoping to keep Nithael from recalling its presence. Much like Cat, Nithael seemed to forget things existed if they weren't in his immediate line of sight.

And that thought made him remember Flower. Craig did try to spend a little time with the pony, though most of it was limited to glaring and occasionally evading Flower's bite. The pony was probably happy to be left without human contact, though, and Craig was positive he'd left enough fodder and water to last until morning. Besides, Flower wasn't exactly the delicate type. If something went wrong, the pony would just kick down the fence and show up at the back door. It had happened once or twice, according to Craig's parents.

Instead of finding pants and shoes so he could go outside, Craig gathered up Nithael's calculations into a ragged pile that he stacked to one side on the kitchen table. Cat actually got up and moved from the laptop to the papers—looking for a softer bed, he guessed—so Craig brought the unneeded laptop back to the office.

By the time the water was boiling and the pasta had been thrown in, Nithael walked into the kitchen, naked but dry, except for the lingering dampness in his hair. Craig left off chopping tomato and cucumber for the salad and turned to beckon him closer. “Hey, babe. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. Can you grab plates and bowls and forks?” He pointed to the respective cabinets and drawer to find things in. Then he remembered precision was necessary when talking to Nithael and quickly added, “Just two of each.”

“Isn't it more efficient to eat out of the pot?” Nithael asked, starting with the silverware drawer.

“Possibly, but efficiency isn’t always the goal, and both of us eating out of one pot would be messy.” Craig dumped all the salad vegetables on top of a bowl of lettuce, found dressing in the fridge, then set everything on the table. Cat gave it a baleful look. He picked her up and kissed her head, then dropped her onto a chair.

“Isn’t she eating?” Nithael asked as he got down the plates and bowls. He stacked the bowls on the plates, picked up the forks, and then turned to give Craig a questioning look.

“She ate already, when I let her in earlier. Her food is over on the counter if she’s still hungry.” Craig found the colander and set it in the sink for when the pasta was ready to be drained. When he realized Nithael was still standing there with the dishes, he added, “You can put all that on the table. The pasta’s not done yet.”

Nithael obliged, though he did nothing to stop Cat from jumping back up onto the table. Instead, he touched the stack of papers, saying, “That’s right. I was working on your power irregularities. And the teleport process so I can return to my lab.”

Craig had pushed it out of his mind that the endgame here was Nithael leaving to go home, and for now, he preferred to leave it that way. “Plenty of time tomorrow. Sit down. Do you want water or juice with dinner?”

“Tea? Or coffee,” Nithael said hopefully as he sat. Cat immediately walked over to head-butt his hand, and he obliged with a scratch between her ears. He was definitely trainable.

“Tea. No more coffee tonight.” Craig lifted the kettle off a back burner on the stove and gave it a shake to see if there was enough water in it. There was, so he set it down and lit the gas underneath it. “Do you miss it? Your lab?”

Nithael glanced around the kitchen, absently petting Cat. “I don’t know that I feel nostalgic for it. Granted, it’s easier to work with my own equipment. Paper quickly loses its charm. But...” He let out a frustrated sigh. “I *should* say yes, but this feels... good?” He shot Craig an uncertain look.

“Good.” It came out before Craig could stop it. He’d been thinking the same thing as he made dinner, but he had no right to impose his thinking on Nithael. Because this wasn’t like adopting a stray dog; it was like having a stray deer wander into his house and sit down to dinner. Nithael didn’t belong here, but it was nice to have him while he stayed. “I mean, yes. To me, too.”

That got him another beautiful, unselfconscious smile that was only briefly obscured when Cat turned and waved her tail in Nithael's face, trying to get his full attention back. When it didn't work, Craig couldn't help but feel just a little bit smug. Nithael stroked over Cat's back, pushing her tail down, and said, "In that case, I'll probably need more paper."

Nithael gestured with his fork, drawing the tines over his now-empty plate. "It gets both power *and* peripheral status feedback from the nervous system, but it's also aetheric. So it doesn't *drain* my energy so much as use my body to filter the incoming power, converting it to a useable form. Once I eat"—he tapped the plate—"I can route power to keep my mind sharp, negating the necessity for sleep. But if you're tired, you can go. I have more than enough work to last through—When does it get light again at this time of year?"

"About twelve hours after it gets dark. We're near the equinox. But that's not the point, honey. I want to go to bed *with* you." Craig stacked his bowl and plate and gestured for Nithael to hand over his.

"For sleep, sex, or both?" Nithael asked, gathering his dishes. He handed them to Craig and stood up. The scrape of his chair woke Cat, who was dozing on what was now her stack of papers.

Craig stood and brought everything to the sink to deal with in the morning, then turned to respond. "Your choice. No, wait. The sleeping part is mandatory."

"For how long? Sleep, that is."

"Humans in this dimension need eight hours a night, usually. So, no less than six. I won't get up before the sun rises."

"That's twice what I usually get."

"Well, you'll be well-rested for once, then. You can go home and tell all your friends so they can be shocked." Craig walked over to Nithael and offered his arm, as before.

"I have no one I'd consider a 'friend,'" Nithael said, taking possessive hold of Craig's arm. "Family, colleagues—rivals, in some cases," he added disdainfully, as if making clear that *he* didn't consider them rivals. "However many lab assistants I have this semester. Four or five is usual, I think."

Right. Way to put your foot in your mouth, Craig.

“How about me?” He leaned in to speak softly near Nithael’s ear as he guided them to the stairs.

“Wouldn’t you be my lover?” Nithael asked, sounding genuinely puzzled. “Or perhaps a colleague, though the biological sciences are only peripherally involved at most with my specialization.”

Colleague? Craig wasn’t anywhere close to understanding the basics of Nithael’s field of study, let alone a scholar in his own right. The idea seemed absurd, but he was deeply flattered that Nithael would think it of him. He’d known people—especially doctors—like Nithael who looked down on anyone who they didn’t consider to be their equal. It was a pleasant change for Craig, who’d always been on the receiving end of their disdain, to be considered an equal by someone significantly more brilliant.

At least Craig felt like he was starting to understand better how to talk to Nithael, and though he wasn’t fluent yet, he had faith that he would at least be conversant soon. For one thing, he’d figured out that Nithael had almost no sense of flirtation. Or at least not a normal one. “I was thinking I could fall under a couple different classifications. If that works for you.”

Nithael smiled and tightened his hold on Craig’s arm for a moment. “Both, then.”

Craig grinned as he led Nithael upstairs and into his bedroom. “All right, friend, into bed with you.”

Keeping hold of Craig’s arm, Nithael went for the bed. “I’ll try not to disturb you when I get up.”

“I’m a light sleeper. I’ll wake up regardless. It’s fine.” The mess of sheets reminded Craig that he’d used the comforter to hide his laundry. He slipped free of Nithael’s grasp and went to retrieve the comforter from the closet, but then he remembered that Nithael didn’t get cold. “I sleep with the window open, under a comforter. Can you shut off your thermostat so we can cuddle under the covers?”

“I think I’d enjoy that. I usually just sleep under one of the lab tables. Or on them, if the floor hasn’t been recently cleaned.”

He really was trying to get rid of as much of his humanity as possible. How sad. It was clearly time to remind him that it was nice to have a body sometimes, especially when it could be curled up with another body. Craig fetched the comforter and handed it to Nithael. “Here, straighten the sheet and spread that over top. I’ll get the window.”

“Do you usually sleep with someone else?” Nithael asked over the sound of rustling sheets.

“Just Cat these days, when she feels like it.” The window sash always stuck about six inches up, so Craig only bothered to tug it that far.

“My presence won’t disturb you?”

When Craig turned from the window, he saw Nithael was already under the covers, despite his words. He smiled at the need for reassurance. “No, darling. It will be a pleasure to have you.”

“I’ve never actually shared a bed with anyone. Not for an entire night.”

That sounded depressing to Craig, but he couldn’t tell if it was something Nithael preferred. Or maybe if it was simply a product of how little he slept. “Well, if you don’t like it, you don’t have to stay, but you’re definitely welcome.” He approached the bed then realized they’d run up against the problem of two people in a bed with only one side, since it was pushed up against the wall. “Hm. I can’t sleep against the wall, though. So, feel free to climb over me to get out.”

“I don’t want to inconvenience you.” Nithael moved over against the wall and rolled onto his side to face Craig. “You’ll tell me if I do?”

“You won’t. Or, the benefit of having you here will outweigh any minor inconvenience.” Craig figured being as clear as possible would help with any anxiety Nithael might be feeling, but he wasn’t sure. He climbed into bed and lay down facing Nithael. “All right?”

Nithael smiled and slid a hand over Craig’s hip. “Mmm, I rather think I like having you here with me. If nothing else, you’ll keep me warm. You don’t find the open window too cold?”

Craig smiled at the touch, and the knowledge that Nithael was letting his own biological processes run without interference. “That’s what cuddling is for, hon. And the fresh air this time of year is nice. Roll over.”

Obligingly, Nithael rolled onto his back, then allowed Craig to guide him onto his other side, with his back to Craig’s chest. As soon as Craig put his arm around Nithael’s body, he let out a contented sigh. “Yes. All right, this *is* better.”

“See? I told you, I’m full of good ideas.” Craig smiled into the mop of hair at the back of Nithael’s head, feeling stupidly content at the moment. He nosed

further until he found Nithael's nape, then scraped his teeth down a couple spinal ridges before kissing each of them, earning an even louder, lazily pleased groan.

"You are. You most definitely are. You could do—What *do* you do, anyway? Something biological, wasn't it?"

"Medicine. Earth medicine, which seems vastly different than yours. Very biological. Why?"

Nithael started petting Craig's forearm with slow, soft strokes. "You could do this as well. Sex and companionship."

Craig chuckled into Nithael's hair. He seemed to have no understanding of the connotations behind that suggestion. Or maybe there was no stigma for that sort of job in his world, which made it sound much more advanced and tolerant. "I've never thought of becoming a sex worker, but it's nice to have a backup plan if I fail my EMT certifications." He knew Nithael wouldn't get his joking tone of voice, but he couldn't help himself with that amusing thought.

"Mmm, consider it," Nithael murmured. He shifted and pressed against Craig's body, though it felt more cozy and affectionate than inviting. "Did you want to do that again? Now?"

Seeing Nithael so comfortable and relaxed had Craig thinking he might be able to get them to sleep, if he played his cards right. He snuggled up a little tighter to Nithael's body and brushed the hair out of his eyes, lightly stroking his face and neck and shoulder. "Not now, baby. Just this is perfect."

"I really do want to figure out your control issues," Nithael said, though the words came out in a drawl rather than his usual crisp precision. "Especially if your foresight is more often focused on disaster. That could get tedious. And distressing. You shouldn't have to endure that. Do you have an estimated ratio of positive to negative visions?"

This was not a topic of conversation that would lead to restfulness. Especially given the fact that aside from the vision he had earlier, there might have only been a handful of other positive things he'd seen since he started having them. "We can figure it all out tomorrow, honey. For now, let's just enjoy this." He started to comb his fingers through Nithael's shaggy hair, slowly and steadily, over and over. It wasn't staticky, but left his fingers feeling alive, and he hoped that meant he was sapping extra energy from Nithael.

After another drawn-out purr, Nithael halfheartedly protested, “I really do want to help you. And to figure out what’s gone wrong with your abilities. That feels very good.”

“You will, baby,” Craig cooed. “I have no doubt.” He focused on the softness of Nithael’s hair and tried not to marvel at the gentleness with which he touched it. He was accustomed to treating people’s bodies with care, but not like this.

“I’ve had a few incidents.” Nithael shifted again, pressing his body flush against Craig’s as if seeking warmth and comfort. “The energy bleed... That’s not precisely under my control. That is to say, it’s been known to happen. Though not like this...” Half his words were lost to sleepy, contented mumbling.

It sounded as though Nithael’s mouth had detached from his brain and was just sort of running down as he slipped out of consciousness. Craig continued to play with his hair without responding, and the mumbling turned into sighs and then to measured breathing. The last twitch of his muscles relaxing fully against Craig was the sign to stop petting his new resident genius and let himself fall asleep.

That, however, was easier said than done. His mind was full of Nithael and the time they had spent getting to know each other—which Craig calculated had been only about ten hours. That seemed absurd for how far they’d come and what they had shared. By that count, the progression to lovers—and to an intimacy beyond simply sex—was way too quick. And yet, he couldn’t shake how it hadn’t felt that way in the least.

Maybe Nithael was a time-traveler after all? As if this could get any weirder than it was already, with a random naked scientist from another fucking dimension just showing up and making himself at home like Cat had. And how the hell had Craig ended this day cuddling him to sleep when it had started out with nothing more than a quiet walk in the woods?

Nithael was already a fixture in his house—one that he could get used to. And *that* was a problem. No matter how close they felt, no matter how intimate they’d been, Nithael was a stranger, not just to Craig but to his whole world.

And yet... this had happened before. Nithael had spoken of portals as if they were used frequently to move between their worlds. Craig’s own great-grandfather, it seemed, had conceivably travelled over however many “shifts,” as Nithael called them, to settle on Earth. He’d even raised a family here.

Though look how well that had turned out, given the issue of Craig's uncontrollable "gift."

The whole "literally from separate worlds" thing was still a problem, but not one Craig could solve in bed with Nithael's warm body nestled against his own. There was time enough to get to know Nithael better tomorrow, assuming Craig could keep him from getting distracted by his work. He suspected that if this, between them, turned into something more than a casual relationship, he'd be wrangling his scientist most of the time.

Not tonight, though. Craig settled himself comfortably, spooned right up to Nithael's back, arm around his chest, and cleared his mind. And like any good soldier who'd spent too much time in the field, Craig was asleep in minutes.

Chapter 5

“Craig. *Craig*. Wake up.”

Through the fog of sleep, Craig registered the use of his first name, which kept him from feeling the need to snap to, ready to assess the threat level of his location. First name meant home. Family. Safety. The luxury to ignore whoever felt the need to wake him at this hour.

He grunted and twitched, ready to roll over, when he felt a very awake, very warm body pressed to his. This demanded attention. He cracked an eye open to let in light and grunted again, this time with an inquisitive tone. “Hmm?”

“I’ve recalled the anomaly that caused me to teleport *here*. It wasn’t a destination; it was an anchor. Specifically, you.”

“What?” Craig opened both eyes wide and saw Nithael looking at him with bright, excited eyes. It took a second for the words to filter into Craig’s brain and arrange themselves into meaning, though it seemed as though they didn’t have much of that to begin with. “That’s impossible.”

“Not at all. Well, yes, *theoretically* it’s impossible, but only if you limit yourself to conventional multidimensional thought. I simply added *intent* to the equation, and the teleport chose *you* as my destination. We have the same exact problem—which I should have realized earlier, but I was admittedly disoriented from the amnesia. Solving *your* problem will give me the insight to solve my own. It’s a matter of being forced to look at the issue from another point of view. Well, less *forced* and more given additional data, which naturally I wouldn’t have had without you, since you’re from, well, here.”

Craig grabbed hold of Nithael’s arm, hoping to steady himself and slow Nithael down. “But... yeah. I mean, no. You didn’t know I existed. How could you come to me?”

“It’s standard to any teleport, actually. You enter the coordinates, and you go there, whether you know *what’s* there or not.”

“You were flying blind? Nithael! You could have—I don’t even know what, but *death*.” Craig was not ready to deal with all of this so early. Or at least, so soon after waking. And before coffee.

Nithael pouted adorably. “I was very careful with the parameters I entered.”

Not being able to focus on anything else but the plump, protruding lip before him, Craig leaned in to nip at it. “Still sounds impossible. And ridiculous. Parameter intention for me.” He shook his head and moved to get up, but Nithael caught his arm.

“Not for *you*. For what I required to deal with my increasingly erratic energy patterns. Which, yes, *is* you—or at least your own inability to control your power—but not for you because of some less significant reason. I don’t teleport out of my office on a whim, after all.”

“Glad to know showing up in some random guy’s backyard, taking over his kitchen with mounds of paper, drinking all his coffee, and then fucking him isn’t counted in your book as a whim,” Craig muttered as he pulled himself free of Nithael’s grasp and stood up. “Coffee?”

“Coffee. Yes. And then,” Nithael said excitedly, “I think I can work out how to fix everything.”

There was no sense in trying for anything like a normal morning routine—not for Craig and not for Cat, at least. Craig had no idea what Nithael’s morning routine was like, if he noticed such trivial things as “morning” at all.

Craig made coffee for himself, set up the pot to brew more for Nithael, and then went out back alone. Cat had abandoned Craig in favor of sitting on Nithael’s lap, claws digging into the too-large sweatpants Craig suggested he put back on, because nudity was charming only in limited quantities. So Craig went out alone and sipped his coffee while he took care of Flower’s pen.

At least the pony was acting normal. He was as ill-tempered as ever and spent most of his time trying to chew on Craig’s sleeve or arm or hair—whatever came in reach. Craig was used to being on his guard around the pony and made it out without more than a couple of near-misses and some slobber on the flannel shirt he kept in the barn to keep his normal clothes clean.

Once Flower was fed and provided with a clean stall, Craig went back inside. Nithael hadn’t moved towards the full coffee pot; he was scribbling furiously with one hand, petting Cat with the other.

“Caffeine,” he said. “And food. I’m unusually hungry this morning.”

Right. Bed and breakfast proprietor. Wordlessly, Craig filled a mug and set it near Nithael’s elbow, then went to the bread box. Toasted PB and J was a thing, wasn’t it?

Nithael didn't say another word, even when Craig provided the best vegan breakfast he could manage. Craig had become a puzzle to solve, not a person to get to know, and the whole point of Nithael being here was to figure that out so he could fix his own problem and go home.

Well, might as well go about his morning as though he was alone in the house, given one, he effectively was, with Nithael stationed silently at the table, and two, it was going to be SOP again soon, at the rate Nithael worked.

He went into the living room to do his usual morning stretches and one hundred crunches, then flopped down on the couch and thought about calling Grampa Ellis. Not that he knew what to say. *"I've got my hands full with an adorable, infuriating, genius scientist from another world. Thoughts on what the fuck to do with him?"* Not gonna happen.

Of course, within a minute, his phone rang.

Craig answered with the words, "Thanks, Gramps."

"I thought so. What's up, Doc?" Grampa Ellis's voice was mild and affectionate, not worried. It eased something inside Craig. Maybe he could actually have this conversation.

"Where was Pawpaw Ciaran from?"

"Ah." The pause before and after the one syllable spoke volumes. Grampa knew about this other world, but how much did he know?

"Exactly. Okay. You know that can happen whenever, right?" Craig asked.

"And...?" his grandfather asked in return, sounding unsurprised.

Good, they were on the same page. Or maybe Craig was just now catching up. Might as well cut to the chase. "And he says he can fix me."

"I didn't know you were broken, kiddo." Grampa's voice was a combination of tender and corrective. This was a common theme in their conversations about Craig's gift.

"No, I know. I mean my... control issue."

"Ah. Uh-huh. So what's the fuss?"

Of course it was easy for him to take all of this in stride. He'd been raised by a citizen of the *Cathair*. "Heh. Well, why? And why should I let him?"

"Does it sound odd to say *karma*?"

Somehow that made sense, but Craig didn't know if Gramps meant it was Craig's job to right a wrong of Pawpaw's or something more nebulous. "Familial or dimensional?"

"Hmm. Both, I'd imagine."

Great, that didn't help narrow it down at all. His voice came out as close to a whine as he allowed, at his age. "Gramps..."

There was an impatient pause on the line, something Craig was always surprised existed, until Gramps executed one. "Does it fix an imbalance?"

"Well, kinda. He's got a control issue too."

"Then, good. That makes it right." The word "right" was given a weight that Craig wasn't sure he wanted to carry. Doing what was right wasn't the problem; it was in understanding the consequences where things got difficult.

"And then what?" Craig asked, hoping for a bit of guidance.

"That, you'll have to tell me, son."

"Right. Shit. Okay." This wasn't Grampa's story to tell. It fell on Craig to follow it to its conclusion. Craig could feel the silence between them after he spoke as an acknowledgement of their connection, and it gave him strength, as it always had.

"Ring me again soon, you hear?" Grampa's words of farewell were spoken softly, and with fondness.

Craig had to clear the lump in his throat to speak. "Yeah. Will do. Love you."

"You too, Craig."

First name again. That was rare from Gramps. Craig put his phone away wondering if that was a good sign or a bad one. He didn't like worrying Grampa Ellis, but more, he didn't like it when there was something bad enough *to* worry him.

Absolutely nothing about this situation felt bad, though. Except the prospect of it ending.

The need to eat—and to feed Nithael—something other than peanut butter finally spurred Craig into moving. He took a quick shower alone, then dressed and went downstairs. "What do—"

“Invoke a vision,” Nithael interrupted, looking back over his shoulder at Craig. “Right now.”

“What? No. I can’t. It doesn’t work like that.” Despite himself, Craig walked up to Nithael’s chair and rested a hand on the back, looking between Nithael’s face and the pages in front of him. “Why?”

“Invoking a vision should be as easy as breathing. Well, not autonomic, but as easy as *intentionally* breathing. Back away”—Nithael made a shooping motion—“and invoke a vision.”

Craig let out a frustrated huff. He wondered if lab rats felt this way. “It’s not that simple. Never has been. Gimme about fifteen minutes, and I might find something.”

“It should only take a few seconds. Try,” Nithael told him as he picked up the pen and went back to writing, not even looking in Craig’s direction.

He pulled out the chair next to Nithael and sat down. He planted his feet, aligned his spine, closed his eyes, and breathed slowly—and yes, intentionally—in and out. He quieted his mind and let the scratching of Nithael’s pen be the background noise of his meditation. When a thought caught his attention, he set it free to float away without taking him with it, keeping his attention on his steady breathing. Letting everything drift away like that had been a somewhat reliable way of allowing space for a vision to grab hold. Sometimes it took him longer than others, unless there was something vitally important for him to know ASAP. Then those visions didn’t wait for him to make room.

Today the air in the room felt different, and it was easier to sharpen and dull his focus as needed. He did have to constantly pull his attention from Nithael—the noises and movements he made, the aura of concentration he let off, his breathing—until he realized that allowing space for his attention on Nithael to be part of his meditation was something that kept him grounded in space and time. And then, not long after he figured out how to support all the things in his head at once without actively holding onto any of them, his mind’s eye and senses were taken over. He was thrown into the experience of something like a huge electromagnetic pulse—sort of a lightning strike without the igniting spark—in the air directly before him.

It was loud and bright and explosive without actually being any of those things. It was as if the air had been hit by a force beyond sight, making his reality feel like the surface of a pond when a stone drops through it. The

concussion reverberated through every fiber of his being. He staggered back and fell, nostrils filled with ozone, eyes tightly shut to the disorienting sight, skin tingling with residual energy. The grass beneath his hands felt cold and damp, his ears were ringing, and his only thought was, "Where's Nithael?" A bolt of fear and longing shot through him, drying his mouth. He reached out with his hand, his mind following, and his waking consciousness responded to the call, pulling him back to his present reality.

He was lying on the floor, looking up into Nithael's curious face, cast into shadow by the overhead kitchen light. Nithael still had the pen in one hand. "That was dramatic," he observed.

Craig huffed out the breath he was holding, rubbed his face with his hands, and then blinked to bring himself back fully into his body. "You could say that. Wait. For you? What did you see?"

"You stood up so abruptly, you nearly broke your chair. Then, you staggered about for a few seconds before collapsing. I don't think you're injured—I risked touching you to check, and to cushion your head." With the hand not holding the pen, Nithael brushed at Craig's hair. "You were unconscious for almost two full minutes."

"Thanks. Sorry if I worried you." Craig had forgotten why he used to search for visions in his bed, or at least lying down in the desert. He sat up and looked back to see a kitchen towel folded up on the floor where his head had been. "You didn't get a flash of the vision, then?"

Nithael frowned, letting his hand trail down Craig's arm. "No. Did you expect that I would? Were you trying to broadcast? You're not a telepath as well, are you?"

"No, no, I just... You saw the last one, and I have no idea what I just experienced." Craig knew he was frowning and tried to smile at Nithael, but it probably ended up a squint. He turned his hand palm-upward to catch hold of Nithael's fingers when they swept over it.

Nithael's fingers spread, lacing with Craig's, and then curled to hold their hands together. "Was it *not* a vision? It didn't look like a seizure, nor were you at risk of harming yourself."

"No, it was. It's just that I don't really understand what I saw. It was an explosion without anything actually exploding." The warm tingle of energy from Nithael's hand was surprisingly comforting, and Craig was tempted to pull him into a hug to feel it against his racing heart. "Oh. Shit. Headache."

“‘An explosion without anything actually exploding’ sounds like a massive, instantaneous energy transfer. That could be anything from a catastrophic power discharge to a high-mass teleport. Can you give a frame of reference for the”—he hesitated, fingers twitching, and frowned—“strength of the explosion?”

“Do you have lightning? Felt like it struck the air right in front of me. Knocked me back a few feet.”

Nithael shook his head. “We don’t have a *complete* dimension—just the *Cathair*, the Shadowlands around the perimeter, and established portals here. No weather, no natural day/night cycle, no proper ecosystem. But you shouldn’t be having a vision from that side in any case, unless you’re meant to go there.”

“That sounds awful.” Craig spoke before he realized how insulting his words were. “I mean, not to have a fully established world sounds... well, not something I understand, obviously. Sorry.”

“It’s very convenient, except for the water and the occasional issues with our food supply if we can’t bring enough across from here. It’s *much* less erratic than simply letting interconnected chaos-based systems have their way—weather and all that.” Nithael smiled as he added, “Though your shower is very much a benefit.”

“Water is the source of all life on this planet.” Craig tried to let go of Nithael’s hand to stand up, but it didn’t really work. “Speaking of, I need a lot of it right now, before the headache takes hold. Coming?”

“But we’re not finished,” Nithael protested. “I need to see if physical contact has a measurable effect on your foresight.”

Craig stood and tugged at Nithael’s hand to get him on his feet. “I just need to get to the sink, babe. Let go or come with.”

Nithael rose and walked with Craig, holding onto him absently. “It would help if you could have an *identifiable* vision next time. Emotional attachment is difficult to quantify, but it’s possible—in a broad sense—as long as it’s kept simple. Try to see something with meaning and not an obscure energy event.”

“I don’t get to choose, Nithael,” Craig said as he filled a glass from the tap. “But there was a shot of fear at the end, if that helps.”

“Marginally. Was it personalized fear? Direct harm to you? Or to someone else?”

Downing the entire glass of water in one long drink to buy time, Craig tried not to worry how Nithael would react to the coming admission. "I didn't know where you were." He turned to refill his glass, avoiding eye contact.

Nithael turned towards him, rubbing a hand over his arm. "Was it backsight? Were you seeing my arrival here?" he asked, and the sharp, focused edge was gone from his voice.

"N—Oh. I felt an incredible sense of loss. Will it look like that when you leave?" Craig couldn't turn back around to face Nithael. He just stood at the sink, looking down into his glass of water.

"Like..." Nithael's hand went still. Very slowly, as though choosing his words with care, he asked, "Is that what you saw? Me leaving?"

"I don't know. But so far, I've only ever seen things that might happen. A lot of them haven't, but they all could have." Craig turned around to take hold of Nithael's hand, glancing up at his face. So far, he'd seen Nithael lost in ecstasy and scientific speculation, mildly puzzled or adorably exhausted. He'd never seen this before—the way Nithael frowned, eyes darting about without focus, the way he had his lips pressed together as if to hold back something he wanted to say. Craig looked away before he had to hear it, instead focusing on lacing their fingers.

"Do you *want* me to leave?"

It came out calm and slightly curious, just like most of Nithael's other questions, but there was an odd heaviness in the words, spaces between them that hadn't been there before.

Craig found himself shaking his head before he even looked up and found his voice. "I don't want you to feel stranded here, away from your family and your lab, but... No."

Nithael relaxed, leaning against Craig's side. "It's not possible to be stranded here. We're *from* here, if you recall."

"If I—What? Seriously?" Craig wrapped his arm around Nithael's back and settled so Nithael's shoulder fit better against him. "How?"

This time, Nithael gave his much more familiar "*you really don't know this?*" frown. "My ancestors—well, *our* ancestors—left here hundreds of years ago, when their energy manipulation skills were misconstrued as superstitious nonsense. They pooled their knowledge and determined how to best create a stable side-dimension, limited in scope but sufficient for their security."

A thousand questions flitted through Craig's head, but only one seemed pertinent. "How often does someone come back here to stay?"

Nithael blinked. "I've no idea. Is that relevant?"

Craig was caught short. To him it was. In his experience, long distance didn't work unless it was for a set time period or the distance wasn't that far. Dating someone in another dimension was neither of those things. He scrambled for some scrap of reasoning that didn't make him look ridiculous. "You said something about not being stranded, and if this was your original home, I wondered if people still came back to stay on purpose sometimes. Like my great-grandad did."

"I suppose, yes." Nithael shrugged. "If nothing else, it's encouraged for genetic diversity. And I know visits are fairly frequent now, though generally through monitored portals to prevent... well, an incident such as how *we* met. Though actually, it wouldn't have prevented that at all. And to prove that, *you* need to have another vision while in physical contact with me."

"But... that's five events in twenty-four hours. That's a lot for me. I dunno if I can do that. Or if I should even try."

"I could *try* to stabilize you," Nithael said thoughtfully. "You've already proven adept at bleeding off my own excess energy buildup, which implies there's a resonance between us."

That was definitely true. After a night's worth of physical contact, Craig had been feeling the desire to touch Nithael's skin at every opportunity, and it was getting harder to resist by the minute, especially after being drained by the vision. When they weren't touching, he was starting to physically miss the hum of Nithael's skin on his. "Yes. All right. But it might not work."

"If it doesn't, that's also confirmation."

"Of what? Do I even want to know?" Craig finished off his water and nudged Nithael to start walking with him towards the stairs.

Nithael shook his head. "I came here to find a solution to my energy imbalance. The teleport algorithm focused on *you*. If you're the superstitious sort, then it's 'magic' that found you."

"Well, it's good to know some random machine and its equations have that much confidence in me." Craig leaned in to kiss Nithael's temple, then nudged him again to get him headed upstairs. "Come on. Bed."

“It’s not some *random machine*,” Nithael said, sounding offended. “I modified that teleporter myself. And I modified the algorithm entirely on my own. It was *perfect*. You’re the best fit for all the parameters I entered. It’s just a matter of degrees.”

“Of course it was, honey. I didn’t mean it that way. And I’m flattered. I just don’t know...” Craig trailed off, thinking about what it meant for Nithael to have basically set a computer to match him with another person, and it had taken Nithael to another dimension to find *him*. Extreme computer dating. “Um... I don’t know if I’m as confident in my abilities as the teleporter.”

“‘The teleporter’?” Nithael asked. “My teleportation device or the algorithm I designed?”

“Ah, both, I guess.” Craig ushered Nithael into the bedroom. “How much surface area are we looking for here?”

“It shouldn’t—” Nithael stopped and shot Craig a look that would’ve been credibly suspicious, if not for the smile hovering on his lips. “Is this a hint that you’d prefer we do this naked? In your bed?”

Craig smiled at the first inkling that Nithael might be learning subtext, even though he hadn’t been intentionally aiming for sex. “Lying down on a soft surface before trying for a vision seems smart, given where I ended up last time, and you wanted to be touching me while I did it, so... Yes. The answer is yes.” He stripped off his T-shirt and tossed it at Nithael’s head.

Nithael caught it, and the smile blossomed. “It’s normally hazardous to be naked in my lab, you know. This is much safer.” He pushed down his borrowed sweatpants and stepped over them, heading for the bed.

Leaving his boxers on to aid in focus—or at least to discourage distraction—Craig climbed in next to him and lay down on his back. “More experiments clearly need to be happening in bed, then.”

Nithael rolled over and curled up against his side, one leg trapping both of Craig’s. His fingers drew little circles over Craig’s chest. “I’m *positive* the College of *Ollavs* wouldn’t sanction that.”

Craig huffed a laugh. “Not official experiments for publication. Just private research to sate our own curiosity.”

“Research for its own sake is useful only for learning proper scientific processes. Otherwise, research is *meant* to be shared.”

“Well, darling, if you want to share the highest number of orgasms I can give you in a twelve-hour period with your colleagues, that’s fine.” Craig smiled as innocently as he could and blinked at Nithael, who was staring back at him, wide-eyed.

“Highest twelve-hour colleagues what?” he asked in a rush. “You can—*We*—Did you have a vision?”

Breaking Nithael’s brain was quickly becoming one of Craig’s favorite pastimes. He couldn’t manage his grin at the sight. “When? Of that? No. But it sounds like a good idea to study that sort of thing.”

Nithael ducked his head, but there was no hiding the flush that crept up his cheeks. “Focus,” he said, though it came out more like a plea than a command. “A vision.”

“I haven’t had one—Oh! You want me to try. Yes, I can do that.” Craig had to admit that even he was a bit distracted after thinking up that research project. And having Nithael’s body pressed up against his side was *not* the best way to get him more focused. Or maybe it was, just not about the vision.

Nithael let out a quiet laugh and rested his head on the pillow beside Craig’s. “If I hurt you, let me know,” he said, holding up his hand as the tattoo swirled under his skin, covering the back of his hand. “I suspect this might help keep you stable.”

Craig found himself actually looking forward to the slight stinging sensation of Nithael’s nano-whatevers, and it made his face flush hot. He nodded and watched as the swarm of ink-like darkness coated his fingers, all the way to the tips. Then he closed his eyes to better feel Nithael’s touch on his chest as he tried to clear his mind and focus on his breath, which of course caught with the initial brush of nano-enhanced skin over his heart.

“Yes,” he said softly. Nithael tensed and went to pull his hand back, but Craig caught it, saying, “I mean, no. It doesn’t hurt. Yes, it helps.”

“Good.” Nithael flattened his hand on Craig’s chest and snuggled closer. “I suspected it might.”

Breathing deeply and grounding himself in place and time, Craig couldn’t help but ask, “Does it feel as good for you as it does for me?”

“It does. It’s... soothing,” Nithael said after a moment’s thought. “It’s like there’s always a weight pressing down on my chest. I’ve grown accustomed to it, so I don’t notice it until it’s gone, like it is now.”

Yes. That made sense. That was what it felt like the first few minutes after he had a vision. The relief was diminished by the headache and thirst, but falling into a vision was the lifting of a weight.

Craig wanted that now, and he made himself focus on the touch, letting it sweep away all other thoughts in his head. Before today he would have never thought that focusing on someone else would help him clear his head for a vision to come, but somehow, within only a couple minutes he was at that place of not holding on to anything but finding balance and clarity.

And the vision came all at once, as if he were slammed forward in time to witness a possible life with Nithael. A simple moment in a day like many they'd had and would have. Where lemon yellow sunlight filtered through the kitchen window, the homey scent of vegan blueberry pancakes hung in the air with the dust motes, and Nithael's eyes shone as he picked Cat off the table to set her in his lap. The texture of the kitchen table under Craig's hand, the tang of blueberry mixed with sugary sweet maple syrup, the warmth of a chuckle bubbled up inside him, sharing space with Nithael's bright laugh.

Dropping out of that vision would have been painful if Nithael's touch hadn't been the first thing he could sense. He drew a deep breath and then took hold of Nithael's gently tingling hand, exhaling slowly to savor both the vision and this moment of connection with his lover. His... something more than that. The person with whom he could share this deeply hidden facet of himself as if it were as normal as breathing. Craig couldn't quite articulate how much that meant to him, how easy it was to breathe around Nithael simply because he didn't have to hold back a very important part of the way he functioned.

"Thank you, darling." Before he even opened his eyes, Craig had spoken the words.

Nithael hummed thoughtfully. "I suspected as much."

That didn't follow. Craig was still a bit fuzzy, but he could tell Nithael wasn't quite with him. "What? Did you figure it out?"

"Of course I did." Nithael sat up and turned to lean his back against the wall so he could face Craig. "My teleport was programmed to bring me to precisely whatever I require to stabilize my own energy buildup issue. If *you* are what I require, that implies that we share not only a resonant connection but certain characteristics—energy processing coefficients, for one. It's uncommon, though not particularly rare. Though for it to happen with someone *here*... The chances of that are almost nil. Hence the unprepared multi-shift teleport."

Craig blinked. *You are what I require.* Was that what this was? And if so, did it have to sound so technical and sterile? “Can you be more... concrete in your explanation? What do you mean by ‘energy processing coefficients’?”

“Understand, I’m not a geneticist or biomancer,” Nithael explained, “but everyone has a certain set of characteristics defining how they sense, manipulate, control, and route energy, generally referred to as energy processing coefficients. When two people share the same or similar coefficients—though we have yet to determine *how* similar, because of a limited study pool—shared workings create a multiplicative effect, rather than additive.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Craig started to wonder if it wouldn’t have been easier to deal with someone who spoke an alien language than deciphering Nithael’s science-speak. “So... tell me what it means for you and me.”

“It’s the genetic consequence of how we came to the *Cathair*. Because it was a *group* working, my genetic ancestors—*our* ancestors,” he corrected, “were inclined towards shared coefficients. As I said, it’s not uncommon to find two or more people who are stronger when working together. Stronger *and* more stable. I didn’t consider that in my calculations for *myself*, which... well, is why I was so unprepared to end up here.”

“What did you think you would find, then?”

“Information. An explanation for my energy buildup and discharge issue.”

“And instead you found someone who makes you a better, more stable person. Who knew an algorithm could find you a soulmate?” Craig smirked at the idea.

Nithael blinked at him a couple of times. “A what?”

Ah. Shit. It was never fun to have to explain a joke, and this one could quite possibly make things uncomfortable. *Idiot.* “I was joking, really, but it’s the perfect person for you. Someone who completes you. I wasn’t saying...” But he was, sort of. And Craig didn’t want to back down from that because of the possible romantic implications that Nithael might not even catch.

After a few awkward, silent seconds, Nithael shook his head. “Oh. No, I’d never expect that from you! A working partnership is perfectly efficient, without any emotional expectations.”

Craig wasn’t sure if that statement was born out of Nithael’s seeming inexperience with emotional things, or his preference for working above all

else. He sat up and rested his hand on Nithael's knee. "But, baby, we can't work together. We aren't in the same discipline. And you've said yourself that you barely even tolerate lab assistants in your space."

"And they barely tolerate me," Nithael agreed. "No one actually *likes* being around me for any length of time, and only that much at conferences and lectures. Even my family finds me intolerable after a few hours."

Sliding his hand up Nithael's thigh, Craig leaned in and spoke soft and low, but very clearly. "We just spent twenty-four together, and I'm doing just fine. Better than fine."

Nithael's brows shot up. "Yes, but I was *helping* you. You don't need me anymore, except the minimal contact required for both of us to stabilize."

"Is that all you want from me? Minimal contact?" Craig took his hand from Nithael's addictive skin but didn't back away, wondering if Nithael could possibly miss the touch as much as he did.

"I... don't want you to not like me," Nithael said uncertainly.

Craig reached out to touch Nithael's cheek lightly. "Honey, every hour I've spent with you, I've come to like you more, not less."

"That's—" Nithael started to shake his head, then stopped, as if he didn't want to pull away from Craig's hand. "People don't... do that. Me. *Like* me, I mean."

"I'm not 'people,' hon. I'm your person." Craig smoothed the hair out of Nithael's eyes and kissed his nose.

Nithael tipped his head, staring at Craig in fascination. "That's not... a very normal response. I don't want you to come to dislike me. I thought—Well, I thought if we could minimize our contact, it wouldn't happen. At least, not so quickly."

Craig huffed in frustration. "I'm telling you that's not necessary, Nithael. I not only feel the need to be around you and touch you, but I *want* to. Unless that's something you *don't* want, shut up already."

"But—" slipped out before Nithael closed his mouth. After a couple of seconds, he nodded, still staring at Craig with wide eyes.

Smiling at how literally Nithael took his statement, and sighing inwardly in relief, Craig said, "Fantastic. Glad that's settled. Now, do you want to touch me?"

Again, Nithael nodded. Silently.

Aha. Still following orders. Craig tried not to enjoy that too much, but it was too convenient at the moment. "Right now?"

Another nod.

"Is there anything pressing that you need to say before you do so?"

"Are you certain you're both sane and rational enough to make this sort of decision? I really can be very intolerable."

Craig grinned. "Not at all certain. But very willing to try. Now touch me."

Carefully, Nithael lifted his hands to cup Craig's jaw and leaned in close, staring into his eyes until the moment their lips touched. The kiss was gentle and tentative—or, no, not *tentative* but precise. It was as if he were afraid of doing it wrong.

Did he think Craig would change his mind if he wasn't perfect? They'd get nowhere that way. And the more they sat there, the more Craig wanted to revel in the connection between them, which at the moment meant as much physical touch as possible. "Beautiful. But definitely not enough. Do you want more?"

"Mmm. Definitely not enough," Nithael repeated, leaning in close again. This time, he licked and nipped, throwing all of his scientific focus into a much more heartfelt, passionate kiss that Craig felt all the way down to his toes.

Yes. Good. This was very good. And satisfied something deep inside Craig in a way he hadn't expected. Something had started to line up right for them, and he wanted nothing more than to slake his thirst with Nithael's body.

He wrapped his arms around Nithael as he returned the kiss, shivering at the warming energy of Nithael's skin. He needed more contact. "Might never get enough," he whispered into Nithael's mouth. "Lie down, babe."

Without hesitation, Nithael turned and shifted, pulling Craig down with him as he stretched out on his back. When Craig lay down beside him, he broke the kiss and asked, "You'll tell me if I do something you don't like?"

"Yes. Of course. As long as you do the same." A gentle press on the shoulder got Nithael to move closer to the middle of the bed. Craig rolled on top of him and looked down into his face, marveling at how this man could even exist. And had found *him*. "But I kinda like everything. And we have some experimenting to do."

Nithael's eyes lit up with his sudden smile. "Perhaps we *are* well-matched," he agreed, sliding his hands down Craig's back so he could get his fingertips under the waistband of Craig's boxers. "Experiment all you want."

Craig hummed, once again pleased at the permission. He kissed Nithael hungrily, pressing their bodies together and rocking his hips with the need to share that pleasure. And when Nithael spread his legs and wrapped them around Craig's hips to hold him more tightly, Craig responded with a thrust that made him remember the hot surprise of yesterday's pleasure.

But now, he wanted more. He wanted so much more, both for himself and for Nithael. Though he wasn't entirely sure about Nithael's past experiences, he suspected they hadn't been very satisfying. The thought of Nithael's pleasure always being clinical and matter-of-fact, rather than emotionally-based and hedonistic, was disheartening to consider.

He pulled away from Nithael's mouth to kiss down his throat to his chest. Then, with his mouth over a nipple, asked, "How do you—" before he caught himself. That sort of open-ended question was likely to end in a discussion, complete with flow charts. Instead, hiding a grin, he asked, "Do you want me inside you? Or something different?"

"I have no idea. Anything you want," Nithael said in a rush. "You have a remarkable instinct for sex. At least, sex without a deadline. Do... *more*."

"Yes, sir." Craig couldn't help the half-reflexive response to Nithael's familiar refrain. He bit down lightly on Nithael's nipple, making him gasp as if surprised, though he didn't pull away. That made Craig bite a second time, just a little bit harder, before he reached to unwrap Nithael's legs around his waist and said, "Gimme one sec, and I will."

"What? Why?" Nithael pushed unsteadily up onto his elbows to watch as Craig got out of bed.

"'More' requires supplies. It's a good idea, I promise." He padded over to his duffel in the corner and fished around for his first-aid kit, thankful he hadn't completely unpacked. He scattered pressure bandages and suture packets, and he finally found a pack of nitrile gloves and the strip of condoms folded up at the bottom of the kit. There hadn't been much opportunity to use them recently, but they were new enough that they could be trusted. Then he went for the nightstand, where he remembered seeing a half-empty bottle of lube at the back of the bottom drawer, left over from his home visit over the Christmas holiday last year. He set everything down on the nightstand, shucked off his boxers, and sat on the edge of the bed.

Nithael had rolled onto his side and was watching intently. “Supplies, yes. But that?” He nodded at the condoms.

“They’re condoms. For protection against sexually transmitted diseases...”

Nithael was still frowning, though after a few seconds, he said, “Oh. I’m perfectly healthy.”

Tempted as Craig was to forego the condoms, he was too medically aware to take that chance with either of them. “We’re from two different worlds. I may have immunities to things that could get you sick, and vice versa. Let’s not take chances.”

“Foresight or forethought?” Nithael asked with a sly smile. “Contingency planning is part of a good experimental process.”

Craig smiled, remembering Nithael’s mention of expected versus unplanned explosions. He’d probably have to work with Nithael on refining his “contingency planning” techniques. And that made him realize it was probably best to head off any experimentation in this case. He ripped open one of the condom packets and offered the contents to Nithael. “Here. It’s a barrier,” he said, handing the condom to Nithael.

Sure enough, Nithael spent about a minute poking at the latex, unrolling it, muttering things about elasticity, permeability, and tensile strength as Craig absently put a glove on one hand and watched his scientist lover. Nithael’s curiosity, intellect, and focus made for a peculiar sort of charm, Craig realized—a charm that had become an addiction.

He couldn’t keep the amused grin off his face as he remembered Nithael wasn’t the only one who was supposed to be experimenting. He turned and crawled onto the bed and started petting Nithael, subtly encouraging him to lie back down. When he did, Craig inched down and stroked lightly over Nithael’s thighs. That got him a soft hum of appreciation, and Nithael spread his legs just a bit.

Perfect, Craig thought, letting his fingers rove up over Nithael’s balls. He teased through tight curls and had to grin when he saw a few silver strands. He moved up, dragging his fingers over the soft foreskin, and Nithael’s breath hitched. His cock, which had softened a bit in his scientific distraction, began to thicken again.

Craig settled next to Nithael’s leg, indulging in his own research, learning what Nithael liked. Light, teasing touches made Nithael gasp and twitch; harder

strokes earned soft moans. And after a moment's thought, Craig decided to trust in Nithael's biostabilization system just a little bit—enough for a couple of long, slow licks that made the condom fall from Nithael's fingers, forgotten.

“Oh. Oh, do that,” Nithael said on a gasp. His fingers touched Craig's hair lightly, as if he were afraid Craig would stop, which he had to for a moment, sadly.

“I will, if you hand me a fresh one of those.” He nodded to the condom on Nithael's stomach. The hot tingle of Nithael's cock on his tongue was thrilling, but Craig knew better that to be tempted by it.

Nithael turned, scanning for the condoms. He picked up the whole strand of them, examined it for a couple of seconds, then ripped one off and offered it to Craig. “These wouldn't be terribly useful in my lab. It's usually not safe to undress more than the bare minimum.”

“This is *not* a substitute for clothing, Nithael.” Craig grinned at the image of Nithael in nothing but a condom, doing experiments in... something to do with “field manipulation.” Odds that it looked remarkably like Tony Stark's lab were high.

He ripped open the packet and discarded the wrapper, then took hold of Nithael's cock by the base. He set the condom in place and was about to roll it on, when he looked up and saw Nithael's focus on his hands was razor-sharp. “Do you want to...?”

“To what?”

Craig smiled. “To put it on. You roll it down. Keep about this much”—he pinched up the tip of the condom—“slack, and roll the rest down, all the way.”

“I see. Yes, I think so,” Nithael said thoughtfully, reaching down.

And then it was Craig's turn to stare at those long, clever fingers, making him wonder if he shouldn't encourage Nithael to use them on him. Or in him. *Mission focus, soldier.* He shouldn't get distracted, too, or neither of them would ever get close to climax.

When the condom was in place, Nithael ran his fingers over the surface, then wrapped his hand around his cock and stroked slowly. “It feels... interesting. New.”

“Should I leave you to it, then? I can focus my energies elsewhere...” Craig reached for the lube and brought it close to hand.

“What? No. I want to feel your mouth first, through this.”

A tight ball of liquid-hot desire dropped through Craig's stomach to coil through his pelvis. He loved the intimacy of bringing his partner pleasure with his mouth. He pumped some lube into his gloved hand to warm the cool liquid, then took hold of Nithael's cock with the other and leaned down to lick from base to tip.

Nithael let out a shuddering exhale. “A bit harder. It's—It still feels—” He cut off as Craig licked again, pressing harder. “Yes. That's *very* good. I want to try that with you.”

The desire in Craig's pelvis coalesced and pooled at the base of his cock, making it thicken at the image of that pretty, expressive mouth, being full of him. “Please. Let me show you how.”

He licked up and over the tip of Nithael's cock, then ran his tongue around the head before taking it into his mouth and sucking on it. Nithael let out the most perfect groan, and his hands went to Craig's hair, catching at the short strands. The hot desire deep in Craig's body flared into burning heat, and he sucked harder, taking Nithael's cock further into his mouth.

“That's—That's—” was all Nithael could gasp out before his words broke down again.

Resisting the urge to drop his free hand between his own legs, Craig teased under Nithael's balls instead, timing a brush of his fingers with a deep stroke, all the way to the back of his throat. Nithael's response was breathtaking, a twitch that stopped just short of being a thrust and a sharp, needy cry that had Craig's heart racing.

And when he pushed his fingertip inside Nithael's body, that cry shattered into “Yes” and “More” and then into soft, needy moans. Any thought Craig had of going slowly turned to ash, and it took all his self-control to hold off long enough for Nithael's body to relax around first one finger, then two.

“Craig. Craig, I want...”

Lightheaded at the spike of need that followed hearing his name, Craig lifted his head and licked his lips as he looked up the length of Nithael's body. All of his scientific focus was gone, replaced by blown pupils and a desperate, needy gaze. God, he was gorgeous to see like this.

“I know, hon,” Craig said as he eased his fingers out, stripped off the glove, then slid the condom off Nithael's cock. He nearly asked if Nithael wanted to

put a condom on him, but he suspected that would be too much. Instead, he put the new condom on himself with quick, light motions, and then slicked the surface with more lubricant. He wanted this to be perfect for Nithael—for both of them.

And it was. He eased into Nithael's body almost effortlessly, and Nithael canted his hips and wrapped his legs around Craig's back, encouraging him to go as deep as he could. Sparks of power crawled over his skin, making him shiver. He wrapped his still-slick hand around Nithael's cock and stroked, and the shift of Nithael's body as he shuddered caused Craig's vision to white out in a shock of pure pleasure.

For once, he wasn't pulled out of the moment and thrown into a different reality. All he felt was the combination of a deep satiation and a sharp, electric need that coursed through him and bound his consciousness to the reality of his body in the present.

And that reality was nothing but Nithael, which felt so very *right*. He thrust deep and out and back in again, and a charged thrill shot through him as their connection ran from his hand to his cock to his mouth as he pressed it to Nithael's. It built and filled him, stealing his breath, and the energy galvanized him in a rush of pleasure that washed over him and through him in a wave of blindingly bright heat. The feeling of Nithael trembling beneath him and around him cut through his own selfish pleasure, and he found the willpower to stroke hard and fast, just as Nithael liked most.

Distantly, he heard Nithael moan, and as the last tremors shot through him, he thrust hard and twisted his hand, moving up and down. He was rewarded with a sudden gasp that broke into a cry. Energy flared around them both, making every one of Craig's hairs stand on end, as Nithael's body clenched tight around him.

"That's it," Craig whispered as warmth spilled over his hand. "I've got you, babe."

Nithael blinked his eyes open, looking dazed and sated. He smiled and practically purred, "Mmm, yes. That was *very* nice."

Craig laughed, the sheer joy in him pouring out, and collapsed onto Nithael's chest. "You could say that."

Chapter 6

Sweats, one pair of jeans, underwear, socks, a couple of T-shirts. Not a bad haul, Craig thought as he turned into his neighborhood. Clothes had been easier than a substantial vegan diet that would keep Nithael healthy—biostabilization system notwithstanding—and not bore him to death. Admittedly, when in science-mode, Nithael could probably eat sawdust and not notice, but Craig had his hopes of teaching Nithael to take pleasure in things other than experimentation or discovery. Besides, a steady diet of peanut butter wasn't healthy.

The brakes squealed as he approached the stop sign at his corner. He'd have to get the pads checked—

Thoughts of the mechanic and his shopping trip vanished under a quick rush of power that flooded his brain, as if a dam had suddenly burst. He saw a powder blue car in the driveway at his house—his grandfather's vintage '57 Chevy, lovingly maintained, one owner from new.

A mental *push* cleared the vision away, fast enough that the driver behind him didn't even honk. A little shaken by the flash-speed of the foresight, Craig went through the intersection, driving mechanically. An unregulated, unplanned vision would've normally knocked him on his ass. He'd spent years terrified of having one while driving, until concentrating on blocking them had become second nature. So why had this one actually slipped through?

Nithael. It had to be. Nithael had said their energy was complementary. If Craig's subconscious understood and accepted that, maybe it was allowing visions through, because they *wouldn't* make him black out, risking a dangerous accident.

Hell, had his mind somehow held the vision until he'd reached the stop sign? Maybe.

He pulled up to the house in time to see his grandfather get out of the car, carrying a messenger bag over one shoulder. Despite his advanced years, he stood tall and strong, with perfect vision for everything but reading, and had never had a moment's difficulty renewing his driver's license. And instead of turning to go up the walkway to the front door, he walked down to the foot of the driveway, eyes fixed on Craig's car, as if he'd timed their arrival to coincide.

Then again, he probably had.

Craig pulled into the driveway, careful to leave three feet of space between his car and the precious baby-blue paint. He shut off the engine and got out to greet his grandfather. "You came."

Gramps walked up and engulfed him in a tight hug. "You wanted me to."

"Well, yeah..." It was true, but in a more abstract way than this. Craig wondered if Nithael was able to amplify his connection with Grampa Ellis as well as breaking down the internal barriers to his gift. "I just didn't get the message until a minute ago. Nithael will be surprised. But delighted," he hastened to add, as he pulled away slightly and patted Gramps on the back.

Gramps kept one arm around Craig's shoulders as he turned toward the house. "That's your young fella?"

Craig ducked out from under Gramps's arm and went to open the back door of his car to retrieve his shopping bags. "He's not *that* young. He's thirty—or that's what he calculated, since time doesn't run the same way 'over there.' He just feels young." He handed the clothes bags to his grandfather and grabbed the groceries. "But yes. He's 'my fella.'"

The slow smile on Grampa Ellis's face made Craig look away, then back again. "Good. That's how it works, then? His fix-it job on you?"

His face heating up, Craig ushered Gramps to the front door. "We are *not* talking about the mechanics of this. But yes, it's an emotional connection based on touch. He'll show you his energy diffusion system, I'm sure."

Grampa's arm went around Craig's shoulder again, patting it as they climbed the steps, side by side. "Looking forward to it, kiddo."

Craig set down the groceries to unlock the door, then stuck his head in to call out, "Nithael, honey! We have company! Please tell me you're wearing pants..." Only when he was sure it was safe did he open it the rest of the way and gesture for Grampa Ellis to enter.

He grabbed the groceries and walked quickly through to the kitchen to set them down and scan the rooms for anything embarrassing before Gramps came through. Nithael was too enamored with the bed to want to fuck anywhere else, so at least there wasn't lube or condom packets lying around.

At the foot of the stairs he called again. "Babe? You busy?"

“Cat wants *something* in the sink, but I can’t figure out what!” Nithael yelled back. There was an echo to his voice that implied he was in the upstairs bathroom.

Laughing, Craig climbed halfway up so he didn’t have to yell so loud. “She wants you to turn on the faucet so she can drink. Don’t. Just come down and meet Gramps.”

“She’s very insistent,” Nithael said a second before he appeared at the top of the steps. He was wearing the too-large swim trunks that served as temporary shorts and one of Craig’s T-shirts. It was both ridiculous and adorable.

“Come here, love. Contrary to popular belief, she doesn’t get everything she wants.” Craig held out his hand to Nithael.

“You did say she runs the household,” Nithael said as he came down the stairs. He took hold of Craig’s hand as soon as he was in reach, then smiled at Grampa Ellis.

Nodding, Gramps said, “My Charlie is the boss at my house. We serve cats and clean up after them, and then we wonder why they treat us like the help.”

“She’s very intelligent,” Nithael said. It was, Craig had learned, his highest compliment.

Craig brought Nithael over to Gramps, who had put his laptop bag down between two tall, messy piles of papers with pages scattered around them on the coffee table and floor. “Gramps, this is Nithael, from the *Cathair*. Nithael, this is my Grampa Ellis. The foreseer.”

Gramps held out his hand with a wide, generous smile that crinkled his eyes. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Nithael of the *Cathair*.”

Instead of accepting the handshake, Nithael pulled back, asking, “Are you stable? I don’t want to disrupt your energy.”

Glancing at Craig, then making eye contact with Nithael once more, Grampa’s voice softened as he said, “Thanks for your concern, but yes. I’ve always had very stable energy around my gift.”

Nithael relaxed and clasped his hand. “We’re still learning our tolerances. This is the longest Craig’s left me. I wasn’t certain the energy buildup would—though I *could* calculate it—”

Leaning over to catch Nithael’s eye before they lost him to equations for the rest of the afternoon, Craig said, “Darling, you already grounded yourself on me when I walked you down the stairs.”

“I... did, yes.” Nithael tipped his head, looking distantly in Craig’s direction without focusing. “I should factor that into the calculations. Determine the minimum time required for positive safe grounding.”

Craig grinned sheepishly at Gramps. “Still a lot to figure out. Namely, how to keep the scientist occupied. Takes a lot of paper and snacks.”

“You brought snacks?” Nithael interrupted before Craig could say anything else.

Unable to keep the triumphant grin off his face, Craig nodded, turning to wink subtly at Gramps. “Yep. Tons. Shall we?” He gestured towards the kitchen, allowing Grampa to lead the way.

Over his shoulder, Gramps said, “Let’s. I missed elevenses on the way up.”

“Cat’s still in the sink,” Nithael said, a hint of worry creeping into his voice.

The grin on Craig’s face from Grampa’s remark got even wider at Nithael’s. This was his life. What a gift. He offered his arm to his “fella” as he said, “She’ll come down when the snacks appear.”

Craig turned back from rinsing their “elevenses” dishes to see Nithael waving his hand—dark as ink, with his nano-tattoo—an inch over Cat’s back. She was crouched down like a sphinx, purring her heart out, and would have looked beautifully dignified if not for the way her fur stood on end, rippling in waves that matched the motion of Nithael’s fingers.

“Cats have always been sensitive—Charlie knows every time I have a vision—but this...” Grampa Ellis said, grinning, “this is feline tolerance at a whole new level.”

“She likes this much better than being brushed,” Nithael said.

“Nithael’s gift is much different than ours, Gramps.” Craig walked over to kiss Nithael’s head, then sat down facing Grampa Ellis.

“What gift—or, path, did you say?” Grampa Ellis asked.

“Path, yes,” Nithael said, flexing his fingers as the tattoo receded back up his arm. “Technomancy. Human-machine interface, Craig called it once?”

“You sort of *are* the interface, love.” Craig squeezed Nithael’s knee under the table. He wasn’t aware of how strong the need to touch was until there was someone else to notice.

“And the... tattoo helps with that?” Grampa’s eyes were mild and curious, trained on Nithael’s face.

“They’re nanoaetheric sensors: microscopic machines, though there’s a level of swarm-intelligence to them,” Nithael explained.

“Aetheric—that’s the type of ‘energy’ that we’d call ‘magic,’ isn’t it?”

Nithael’s grin brightened his eyes and lit up his face. “Yes.”

Grampa Ellis grinned right back. “And that’s what gave you those streaks in your hair? Exposure to aetheric energy?”

“Yes. The more time I spent in my lab, the more my hair turned silver. But how did you know?”

Grampa Ellis smiled at Craig. “My pops was almost completely gray by forty.”

Craig wondered how long it would take his own hair to go gray, with the uptick in energy transfer and use in this household. When he looked over at Gramps to ask when he’d gone gray, he saw—and felt—that there was a reason Gramps had come to visit besides “meet the boy.”

He turned to Nithael, who was focused on Cat. “Don’t turn her gray too, babe. Why don’t you go upstairs and try on the clothes I got you?”

“She likes it,” Nithael protested, though he stopped the tattoo that was crawling back down his hand. This time, he petted Cat the conventional way as he stood up. “Should I put her back in the upstairs sink?”

Craig shook his head. “She’ll just end up following you to the bedroom anyway.”

Nithael nodded and brushed his hand over Craig’s shoulder. “Cat,” he called, though she was already on her feet.

“Don’t take off any of the tags just yet, in case we need to return stuff,” Craig added.

“Tags?” Nithael’s eyes narrowed. He’d quickly developed a powerful distaste of T-shirt tags, though he had yet to figure out how to cut them off at the stitching without harming the shirt. Instead he just wore them inside out.

“Just price tags. If the clothes fit, you can take off all the tags you want. Or I can help.”

Nithael huffed disdainfully, though he nodded again. When he left the room, Cat followed him out.

Looking over at Gramps with a fond smile he couldn't banish, Craig said, "So, that's Nithael..."

Gramps pursed his lips, but his eyes were all smile lines. "Yes, so it is. An odd sort of charm, though pleasant."

Craig nodded. Getting approval from Gramps never felt like something he'd needed before, but hearing that, something loosened in his chest. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I was going to ask how serious you two were, but I think I don't need to."

Feeling a blush creep up his cheeks, Craig narrowly kept himself from sounding about fifteen when he responded, "We stabilize each other. You know how long I've been looking for that. I'm not gonna let it go that easy."

Grampa Ellis nodded. "You *can* block it, you know—if that's the only reason you two are together. I've been digging—"

"It's not. Or, that's only the beginning of why our connection is so important. But it's not need-based. I want this, Gramps." Craig didn't mean to sound so adamant, but he hadn't felt so strongly about something—someone—in his memory. And if anyone needed to understand that, it was Grampa.

"I know, kiddo. I can see it," Grampa Ellis said, holding up his hand. "I just had to put it out there. And now, we can forget about it and get to the important stuff."

Craig let out a deep breath that he hadn't noticed he'd been holding. "And that is...?"

Grampa Ellis leaned to the side and pulled something out of the back pocket of his jeans. It was a folded piece of paper that he offered to Craig. "That's the nearest portal back to the *Cathair*. Your fella will want that, so he can introduce you to his family, go home for visits, all that."

Wide-eyed, Craig took the paper and unfolded it to find a map of Bear Mountain State Park, which was about two hours away. The family used to go camping there every summer when he was young. There was a point marked in red to one side of a hiking trail. He looked up from the page, momentarily terrified Nithael wouldn't come back if he left. But that was just the remnant emotion from that vision of him leaving, not based in the reality of their situation.

“Okay. Right. Thanks...”

Not that Craig's matter-of-fact tone of voice fooled his grandfather for a moment. “It's *right* that he knows this,” he said, tapping the corner of the page.

“No, of course. I wouldn't keep it from him. He has to *want* to stay, or there's no way this will work.” Craig set the map down on the table and slid it to the side, leaving it unfolded and visible from the doorway. “Thanks. I mean it.”

“That's my boy,” Grampa Ellis approved. “Now, you two will at least want to call the portal guardians who live there. I have their numbers programmed into my phone; don't let me leave without giving them to you. They can help set your fella up with whatever he needs to integrate. Money exchange from whatever resources he has on the other side, ID papers, all that. That is... I'm assuming you two are going to stay here?”

Craig gawped at Gramps for a moment. Then he remembered to close his mouth. “You... I dunno. We haven't really talked about it yet. I keep meaning to, but he gets distracted, and...” And Craig was a coward. And the idea of having to choose seemed unfair to both him and Nithael. “He's got a lab back home, but I don't wanna be... Do you think our connection”—he gestured to himself and his grandfather—“would span the distance?”

“Not sure. But I know it's a heck of a lot easier for your boy to move here than for you to go there. As I understand it, there's a population problem over there.”

“Nithael said they have a water shortage.” Craig couldn't help but smile. “He took his first bath the other day. You've never seen someone so in heaven.”

Grampa Ellis's laugh came out more like a cough. “I'll leave that to you.”

For what felt like the umpteenth time that day, Craig's face got hot. “Sorry, yeah. Point is, sometimes I wonder if he only loves me for my hot water.”

Love. That was an unintentional slip. They hadn't used that word yet, though Craig had caught himself on the verge of thinking it before. Felt weird to say it to Gramps first.

“You think that, you're not paying attention to how he looks at you,” Grampa Ellis said with a huff. “You're that boy's whole world—even more than Cat.”

Craig huffed back, even as he was dumbstruck by Grampa's observation. He didn't even know how to begin acknowledging something like that. The possibility that it was true shot a tingle down his spine. "Well, I *have* noticed that I lost a pet when I gained a partner. She's his shadow now."

"Speaking of which," Grampa Ellis said, an odd twinkle coming to his eye, "how's he get along with Flower?"

"He mentioned something about reprogramming him once, whatever that means, but really, Nithael doesn't leave the house much." Or at all. But Craig didn't want Gramps to think Nithael was a complete oddball. At least, not yet.

"You might want to let him get at that. Turns out that my pops had to get permission to bring him here, back when you were little. Or haven't you wondered what he's doing, still up and on his hooves after all these years?"

"I figured he just didn't die out of spite. But now that you mention it, he called Flower a synth the moment he saw him." Craig wondered how often Pawpaw went home, whether it was allowed with some frequency, and how difficult it was to get used to. "Should we take him back, you think?"

"See if your fella can't do something about him. Make him over into a critter that looks new." Grampa Ellis chuckled, adding, "Maybe a little less ornery."

"I'll see what I can do." Craig put it on his mental list of projects to keep Nithael busy. When he got bored, he started taking electronics apart. "Anyway. You might be right. About staying here. Might be better."

"I'm glad you said that. I didn't see you leaving, but..." Grampa Ellis shrugged and fell silent, turning, as Craig heard footsteps on the stairs.

"I don't like socks," Nithael said as he walked into the kitchen. He was wearing the new jeans, which didn't fit too badly, and holding a pair of white socks in his hand. He'd also skipped putting on a shirt.

"You will in the wintertime, when you have to wear shoes. Didn't any of the shirts fit?" Craig secretly thought it was a shame to cover up that torso, but he was trying to train Nithael to remember that nudity wasn't acceptable in public.

"I like your shirts better," Nithael said, voice coming close to a whine. "They're softer."

"But they're too big for you. The blue one with the circles and the star on it is soft. The point was to see if what I bought fit."

“The jeans are also too...” Nithael waved a hand at them. “Why can’t I just wear your shorts?”

“Because they want to fall off you when you aren’t looking.”

“That might be the point, kiddo,” Grampa Ellis said as if he were being helpful.

Nithael blinked, then slowly smiled. “That *is* true.”

Craig would have raised his hands to cover his burning face if they both hadn’t been looking at him. He would not admit to either of them that he only wanted that to happen when he *was* looking. Instead, he gave his best soldierly glare. “I bought you a pair of sweatpants. Those will do at home. We’ll keep the jeans for when you leave the house.”

“We don’t have to leave. You had that boxed food delivered. We can just do that,” Nithael said hopefully.

Turning to Gramps, Craig smirked. “Nithael just discovered Chinese food.”

Nithael nodded. “It’s very inefficient to eat with those sticks or conventional tableware, but if you wrap it in leaves or a tortilla, it stays together nicely, even when writing.”

“We’ll order moo shu tofu next time, hon. Go try on the sweats and that blue shirt.”

Nithael started undoing the fly as he turned. Fully expecting the jeans to be off before Nithael reached the bottom of the stairs, Craig refused to watch. Instead, he turned back to his highly amused grandfather.

“You’ve got your hands full with that one, huh?” Gramps asked.

“Just a bit.” Craig winked at Gramps and smiled as he stood. “Nothing I can’t handle, somehow. Come on, lemme show you to your room. You’re at least staying the night, right?”

“Absolutely. I didn’t come all this way to get thrown out,” Gramps teased. “I’ll just get my laptop set up. Wireless password the same?”

“Yep. Knock yourself out. I’ll go get your suitcase. You’re in the office, ’cause the bed in there should have clean sheets.” Craig didn’t mention that it was also close to the second full bathroom and a floor away from where he and Nithael slept. He didn’t have to.

“Take your time. Go make sure your boy remembers to put on pants.” Gramps patted Craig’s shoulder, then went out to the living room to get his laptop bag.

Knowing that could be a long and involved process, Craig went out to get the suitcase first. He couldn’t help smiling at the way Nithael had charmed Gramps with his naiveté and unselfconscious brilliance. It didn’t hurt that Gramps was one of the more open-minded people Craig had ever known, and he’d never once batted an eyelash over the people Craig had chosen to date, no matter what their gender expression. He found himself looking forward to Grampa’s visit, especially since it had been a long while since they’d shared space. They talked often, but there was something really comforting about being near each other.

Not to the level of being in contact with Nithael, but just being around someone else with a gift had always helped ease the constant low-level anxiety he had lived with up until a few days ago.

Thank God—or all of the gods in all dimensions—for Nithael.

As he pulled the hardside rolling suitcase from the Chevy’s trunk, Craig thought about how he’d accidentally used the word “love” earlier. It seemed absurd when he counted days—not even a week!—that he could be thinking in those terms already, but he knew emotional states weren’t governed by time. Besides, Craig was almost certain Nithael wouldn’t have any preconceived notions about the weight placed on that term by this dimension’s cultural norms. It was just a feeling, after all. And it was an accurate one.

He dropped the suitcase in the living room and took the stairs two at a time to the second floor to find Nithael. He was in their bedroom wearing the Captain America shirt and the new sweatpants. Cat was already doing her part to make sure Craig couldn’t return anything to the store, shedding her fur all over Nithael as he petted her.

“She doesn’t like the jeans, either,” Nithael said without looking up.

Craig pressed his lips together to keep himself from smirking. “Fine, but we *are* keeping them for special occasions.” He walked up to the bed and sat down next to Nithael, then kissed his temple. “You all right? You look good in that shirt.”

“I like your grandfather. He really does have very stable energy.” Nithael frowned slightly, turning to watch as Cat crossed his lap and went to demand attention from Craig. “Should I have told him that?”

“You could have—he would’ve taken it as a compliment—but it’s fine that you didn’t. Besides, he’s sticking around for a day or two, so you still have a chance.” Craig’s knuckles rubbed Cat’s chin, but his eyes didn’t stray from Nithael’s face.

Nithael smiled and inched closer, being careful not to upset Cat. “That’s good. You probably need to associate with people other than me. Most people do.”

A careful twist of his torso meant Craig could wrap his arm around Nithael’s shoulders while still petting Cat. “That’s true of everyone, darling. You included. But I was more looking forward to having you hang out with him. Gramps has always been my safe space, until you, so he’s the important one for you to meet.”

“No, I meant—” Nithael shook his head. “*You* need people other than me. Everyone I’ve ever worked with agrees that it’s important to take a break from associating with me.”

Craig thought he’d already addressed this, but he was willing to explain it again. “One, I’m not working with you. And two, I get breaks when you fall into a calculations hole. I’m doing fine, hon. Totally not bored with you yet.” He smiled fondly and hugged Nithael’s shoulder to his side.

Nithael looked away. “I hope you—” he began, then frowned. “You’ll tell me when you do, won’t you?”

Letting go of Cat to turn Nithael’s face towards him, Craig said, “Hey, babe, come on. I’m pretty sure that won’t happen. Isn’t that kind of how this works? You are the best thing for me. And being around you makes me not just more functional but *better*.”

“I’ve been working on calculating the minimum exposure necessary to keep us both stable. That should help.”

Trying not to sigh, Craig shifted so he was facing Nithael, which made Cat growl and huffily hop off his lap. “That might be important if we ever have to travel without the other one.” Craig tried hard not to think about Nithael going home without him. “But aren’t there more important things to be figuring out?”

“Not that I know of. Keeping you—well, both of us—stable is my priority. Did I miss something?” Nithael asked worriedly.

Craig was starting to feel like he was on less-sure footing, which was mildly terrifying. “We *are* stable, sweetheart. Because we like spending time together.

Unless you've decided you need more alone time or something, I think I'm the one not getting it."

"No. Not at all. It's for when you need to get away from me."

Taking Nithael's face in both his hands and realizing how much he needed the contact to ground him, Craig found his voice came out a little more insistent than he'd meant it to be. "I don't need that, Nithael. I don't want it. It makes me crazy inside to even think about it. Please stop saying it."

"It's not—" Nithael shook his head again and covered Craig's hands with his own. "Craig, *nobody* wants to be around me too much. It's not you. It's me. I'd rather calculate how often you can safely leave *before* you get tired of being with me at all."

"Don't you understand how upsetting that is?" Craig took hold of Nithael's hands and held them tightly in his lap. "I *want* to be with you, Nithael. I want that so much, it physically hurts to think about us being apart. Hell, today Gramps showed me a map to the nearest portal, and I panicked at the thought that you'd want to leave."

"But—"

Craig cut in, "Not done yet. Whatever it takes so we can be together, I'll do it—even if it means you have to keep going back for your work or family or whatever else. Even if it means we have to figure out how I can go there, to be with you."

"And I want to be with you," Nithael said earnestly, "which is why I *don't* want you to get tired of me. Everyone does."

"I'm not *everyone*."

That got a faint, sad smile. "Well, no. You're... special. A singularly unique person."

Breathing a sigh of relief and cracking a smile, Craig responded, "Great, then stop treating me like I'm not, or you actually *are* going to annoy me for the first time ever."

"But I don't want you to stop liking me," Nithael protested. "Craig... nobody has *ever* mattered to me like this. It's not just because we stabilize each other. You're... important."

That sounded big, coming from Nithael. It made the tightness in Craig's chest ease a little further. He leaned forward and rested his head on Nithael's

shoulder. “Thank fuck. I was sure you were working up to say you didn’t even like me, let alone love me.”

Nithael put a hand on the back of Craig’s neck. “Of course, I love you. That’s obvious, Craig. You’re a very easy person to love.”

Craig dragged in a deep breath and let it out on a laugh. It was the kind of laugh that could have been crying if something hadn’t shifted at a critical moment. Even so, tears stung his eyes at the near miss, and his shoulders shook in about the same way they would have if it hadn’t been joy spilling out of him. “Christ, Nithael. Why didn’t you say so?”

“I didn’t want you to feel pressured,” Nithael explained as if that were the most logical thing in the world.

Baffled and raising his head to look into Nithael’s sincere eyes, Craig said, “But... How was it not obvious that I love you?”

Nithael’s hands tightened on Craig’s. “Because that’s ridiculous, Craig. The qualities that make me the top of my field as a theoretical technomancer also make me the *worst* candidate for an emotional relationship. You’re really better off falling in love with Cat.”

Beautiful, idiotic genius of a man. “Huh, okay. Let me make this perfectly clear. I love you, Nithael, and I want to be with you. I enjoy your company, and I share space well with you. I have never felt more physically and emotionally comfortable with anyone, let alone a romantic partner. I want to be around you, not just because you help to stabilize my energy, but because you make me happy.”

The frown returned, full of distress. “I do? How? What am I doing right?”

“Baby, that’s—”

“No. No, you need to tell me, so I can keep doing it. Or *not* doing it. Maybe make a list? I do much better with guidelines. Not rules,” he added head tipping to the side. “I tend to disregard most rules, which is why it’s considered hazardous to work in my lab, but guidelines—especially for something this important... That would help.”

Craig’s grin got wider with every word that came out of Nithael’s ridiculous, perfect mouth. “One simple guideline: continue being your completely adorable self. That’s it. Real simple.”

“One of my instructors once said I could irritate an entire building full of people by walking past the entry doors.”

“Were you doing it naked? Because if so, ‘irritate’ is not the appropriate English word.” Craig smirked and leaned in close so his nose was almost brushing Nithael’s.

“Nudity wouldn’t have that effect,” Nithael said, voice dropping to a near-whisper. “It did inspire me to develop an aetheric field disruptor that has the effect of causing hallucinations and nightmares—”

“Focus, love. And kiss me.”

“Yes. I think I’d like to.”

“That wasn’t a suggestion, babe.”

Nithael blinked once in surprise. Then, smiling, he tilted his head and kissed Craig, softly and sweetly. Only the tight grip of his hands betrayed the emotion he was so good at hiding—even from himself.

As the kiss ended, Craig pulled one hand free and touched Nithael’s cheek. “We can’t get distracted now. Let’s go find out what Gramps wants for dinner. Then we can talk more about this portal and what to do about it.”

“If... If you wouldn’t object, I rather like it here. Granted, I’d like a proper lab, but I can bring much of my equipment across. But otherwise, I’d miss Cat. And baths. And you did mention those bigger bathtubs...”

Craig laughed at what really should have been a predictable response. “Jacuzzis. I’ve got some money saved up, and I’ll start getting my retirement in a few months. Yeah, we can get a Jacuzzi.”

Nithael grinned. “I promise, I won’t use it for any experiments.”

“Mmm, I can think of a few we should try.” Craig leaned in for one more quick kiss, reminding himself not to get distracted. “But we have plenty of time together, love—our whole future.”

The End

Author Bio

Ray Van Fox spends way too much time in front of a computer, but at least fifty percent of it is spent actually writing. Ray grew up in Chicago, came out in Iowa, changed pronouns in Seattle, and finds family in queerdom.

Jordan S. Brock has been writing for close to four decades and plans to keep at it for at least four more. Jordan's writing spans from unpublished sci-fi/fantasy epics to fanfiction to published romance under another name.

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A SECOND CHANCE FOR THREE

By Christa Tomlinson

Photo Descriptions

Photo 1: Two men stand outside in the rain. They hold each other in a tight embrace, the hard muscles of their bare arms straining as they cling to each other. Rain dampens the longish black hair of one of the men, drops trickling down his neck and leaving goose bumps in their path. The other's lips are slightly parted, maybe hoping for a kiss from his lover in the rain.

Photo 2: A dark haired man lounges in bed, his thumb rasping over the well-trimmed scruff of his beard. He's relaxed, bare chested and only wearing sleep pants that sit low on his hips, revealing his toned, flat abs. But he's still wearing his wire rimmed glasses as he peruses the work he's brought with him to bed.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Two years ago, X stopped his friend Y from accidentally killing himself (apathy, starvation, prescription meds, drugs, etc.—up to you) following the reported death of Y's (military, mercenary, CIA, special ops, journalist, etc.) lover Z overseas. X took Y into his house and X and his pet(s) have helped Y piece his life back together. X held Y as he mourned and watched as Y finally began to smile and enjoy his work again. X and Y have been part-time lovers for the last few months, but X fears he is not enough for Y to be completely happy.

However, now Z has escaped from whatever hellhole prison he was in and is at the door, waiting to reclaim Y. X knows he should let Y go, that Y and Z still love each other. But how can X and pet(s) bear to let the man they have come to love go? Y has loved Z for many years—Z is his heart and inspiration—but X has become his rock. Z's dreams of returning to Y kept him alive, but how does Z feel when he comes home after two years of worrying about Y to find him in the home of another man?

Request: *Lots of past and/or present angst/emotion/grief/doubt. If X and Z didn't know each other before, then enough time needs to pass for them to get to know each other. No instant-love. Feel free to have Y & Z break X's heart, as long as they make it better. One or more pets. HEA/HFN for all three men, but not without working through their problems. I love epilogues.*

About the pictures: *The man on the bed writing in the first picture is X. The two wet men in the second picture are X and Y. Z refused to have his picture taken until he recovered. Or maybe his work made him camera shy. I don't know. It is up to you to convince him otherwise, if you can. Or try to take one when he isn't looking. Good luck with that.*

P.S. Their names don't have to start with X, Y, and Z.

P.P.S. I envision this as a contemporary book, but if you really want to, feel free to make it sci-fi—overseas can become another planet or space and the pet(s) can be something alien but cuddly.

Sincerely,

Jean Reads

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: artists, photographers, ménage m/m/m, friends to lovers, grief, hurt/comfort, slow burn/UST, reunited, men with pets

Word Count: 23,980

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A SECOND CHANCE FOR THREE

By Christa Tomlinson

Chapter 1

Rob held the phone up with his shoulder, so he could have his hands free to go through papers. The dial tone echoed in his ear multiple times, but he didn't hang up. He'd been trying to get a hold of one of his clients, Tyler Evans, for days now. It was getting down to the wire. Tyler was a metal sculpture artist who had a commissioned piece for Brooks Corp. due in a few days. Rob hadn't heard from him to set up delivery of the sculpture. And that worried him. The owner of Brooks Corp. was temperamental and demanding. Rob knew he'd be angry if he didn't get the piece on time.

Rob sighed when the phone rang for the sixth time. The voice mail was about to come on and he didn't want to leave yet another message that wouldn't be returned. But this time when the ringing stopped, he was greeted with Tyler's live voice instead of a recording.

"Hello?"

Rob sat up straight in his chair. "Tyler. I've been trying to reach you."

Tyler's voice came across the line, slurred and vacant sounding. "Yeah I uh... I couldn't... didn't want to talk."

Rob frowned. "Are you okay? Did something happen with the Brooks piece?"

"What? No, it's finished."

There was a pause, and Rob heard what sounded like Tyler taking a drink.

"I think... I remember finishing it. It's Cole."

"Cole? Why? What's going on?" Cole Bryant was Tyler's boyfriend of several years. He was currently on a photographic tour of South Korea.

"He's dead."

"What?" Rob shot up out of his chair, blood rushing from his head. He didn't know if it was because of his sudden movement or the news he'd just heard. Cole wasn't just Tyler's boyfriend. He was Rob's best friend since college.

"He's dead," Tyler repeated. "Someone from the State Department came by four days ago and told me he died."

Rob braced a hand on the desk, still lightheaded, just barely able to process what he was hearing. Then it clicked. Four days. Tyler had been suffering through this on his own for four days. He pulled himself together. “Tyler, put down whatever you’re drinking. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“Don’t worry about it. I think I’m going to sleep finally. I took... something so I could sleep.”

Rob panicked as he realized Tyler had probably mixed sleeping pills and alcohol. “Ten minutes. I’ll be there in ten minutes, Tyler.”

Rob hung up and ran down the stairs. He took them two at a time, his heart pounding. He wanted to keep Tyler on the phone, but with the way he planned to drive he’d need to focus on the road with both hands on the wheel. As he grabbed his keys off the hook by the door, his two dogs perked their ears up, but for once he didn’t stop to say goodbye or grab leashes to have them along.

Rob drove through the dark streets of Conroe, Texas, trying to stay as calm as possible. But his hands gripped the steering wheel hard, and his stomach was clenched so tight it ached. He didn’t know the full story on what happened with Cole, but even if he were dead, he couldn’t let Tyler follow him. Not like this. Cole wouldn’t want that. And neither did Rob.

He pulled up in front of the loft building where Cole and Tyler had an apartment. He didn’t bother going into the garage or trying to find paid street parking. Stopping right in front of the doors, he got out, uncaring if he got a ticket. With all of the nervous energy flowing through him he was tempted to take the stairs, but the elevator could get him to the floor faster. Once inside, he jammed a finger at the number seven, and then waited impatiently as the doors closed and the elevator rose.

Rob looked at his reflection in the doors. His dark hair was a mess from running his hands through it, and he was impatiently tapping one foot. He didn’t do anything to stop the movement. Once the elevator came to a stop, he slid out before the doors were all the way open. There were only three apartments on this floor. He ran to the door at the end, banging his fist on it so hard he knew the neighbors had to hear it.

“Tyler! Tyler! Open the door!” Rob’s furious pounding didn’t get an answer, and he was too terrified to just stand there and wait. Knowing Tyler’s propensity for forgetfulness, he figured there had to be a spare key around somewhere. Rob lifted up the doormat but there was nothing. He stood and ran

his hand over the top of the doorframe. Nothing. His panic and fear tinged with desperation now, Rob looked around again. There had to be something there. The small metal sculpture of a frog that was next to the door caught his eye. This was his last chance. The door was solid metal so he couldn't kick it in. If there was nothing hidden in the frog, he would have to waste time finding the landlord to get the key.

Rob knelt down in front of the frog. The metal was cool and heavy in his hand as he picked it up, searching for any places that might hide a key. His hand touched a piece that moved. He kept probing, pushing that piece down. Rob slid his fingers into the opening that appeared, and his fingers touched a key. Relief swamped him, making him sweat, but he got the key out and opened the door.

Inside, the apartment was quiet. The loft was a large open space. The only completely closed-off areas were the bathroom and the darkroom that Cole built. It was quick and easy for Rob to look around. No television. No music. And no Tyler. Rob noticed a nearly empty whiskey bottle on the floor in front of the couch, the last dregs spilling out onto the gray throw rug. Halfway between the couch and the large interlocking metal screens that blocked off the sleeping area, a glass lay shattered on the painted concrete floor, the shards sitting in a puddle of amber liquid. Rob raced around the metal screens and found Tyler.

He was lying facedown across the foot of the bed, legs hanging over the side. Rob shouted his name as soon as he saw him, but Tyler didn't move. Rob sat on the bed and rolled Tyler over. "Tyler. Wake up." Tugging Tyler onto his lap, Rob patted him on the cheek a few times, but Tyler still didn't stir. Rob didn't hesitate. He hauled Tyler up further and smacked him hard across the face. "Wake up!" Tyler's eyes blinked open slowly. They immediately fell shut again, but he spoke, his words even more slurred than they had been on the phone.

"Rob... what are you doing here?"

Rob didn't answer. He was trying to get his phone out of his pocket. It was hard to do so while holding up Tyler's weight with one arm. His body was hard with muscle from carrying and working with large pieces of metal, but Rob managed to do so and dialed 9-1-1. When an operator came on the line, he explained what happened. "Should I make him vomit?"

"No, sir. Get him to the emergency room. And if you can, bring what he took."

Rob was scared to let Tyler go, but he eased him back onto the bed so that he could check the bathroom for whatever he might have taken. He found a bottle of prescription sleeping pills open on the counter. He didn't know how many had been in there before, but it was empty now. Shoving the bottle into his pocket, he ran back out to Tyler. He heaved Tyler out of the bed and onto his feet. Keeping one arm around his waist, Rob held Tyler's other arm across his shoulders and walked him out of the apartment. He talked to Tyler, forcing him to be as awake as he could on the trip down to the car and across town to the hospital. Thankfully, emergency room staff met him at the doors with a stretcher, so he didn't have to half-carry him any further. Rob handed over the empty pill bottle and followed close behind the rushing staff until they stopped him, directing him to the waiting area.

Rob went over to the vinyl benches and sat down. He dropped his head into his shaking hands, all the emotion and adrenaline from the past hour draining away. He felt sick, like he was either going to pass out or lose his dinner, but he forced himself to take in several deep breaths. Eventually his hands stopped shaking and his stomach settled. Rob slouched down in the seat, throwing an arm across his face. He'd done everything he could. Now all he could do was wait.

Chapter 2

Tyler turned his head from staring at the wall when he heard the door open. It was Rob. He started to push himself up to a sitting position, but he still felt sick and lethargic, so he stayed where he was. Rob came over and pushed the button to raise the bed. Metal scratched across linoleum as he pulled a chair up next to the bed.

“How are you feeling?”

Tyler shrugged. “Here. Embarrassed.”

“Don’t be. You were hurting and made a mistake.”

“Did I? If Cole’s not here I’m all alone. And maybe I didn’t want to face that.”

“That’s not true. You have friends—”

Tyler cut him off. “Friends, sure. But no one close. No family. And Cole...” His voice broke. Tyler looked down at the pale blanket covering him. He couldn’t tell if it was light gray or dingy white. “Cole was my everything.”

“Tell me what happened.”

Tyler rolled his head to look at the ceiling. It was just like any other ceiling you’d see in public buildings. White squares with irregularly shaped black dots, each square enclosed by connecting metal frames. Tyler stared at one of the panels, his attention locked on one of the circles that was darker and bigger than the others. “I opened the door to some guy in a suit. They told me Cole was on a boat that sank off the coast of South Korea. No survivors. All bodies swept out to the Sea of Japan, so I won’t even have anything to bury.” Tyler blinked, momentarily losing sight of his dot. He’d said the words, but they still didn’t register. His brain just threw up a wall whenever he tried to think about what happened to Cole.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

Tyler looked at Rob. “I’m sorry. I know Cole was your friend before he ever met me.”

Rob shook his head, his gray eyes somber behind silver wire-framed glasses. “Not just because of that. I’m your friend too, Tyler. You shouldn’t have tried to go through this alone.”

Tyler didn't respond. He just looked back at the ceiling. It didn't take him long to find his dot. Rob was quiet for a few moments too before he spoke again.

"They'll discharge you after a few hours of observation just to make sure everything is out of your system."

Tyler gave up on staring at the ceiling. He needed to think about what had to be done when he was released. He cleared his throat. It was sore from the tube they'd used to pump his stomach. "That's fine. You were calling me about the Brooks piece, right? I need to take care of that."

Rob looked surprised for a moment, and Tyler gave a hoarse laugh. "You're surprised I remembered? Me too."

"No. I'm surprised that you think that's important right now. Let me take care of that for you."

Tyler shrugged again. He didn't really care. "I guess that's what agents are for, right?" Rob reached out and put a hand on his arm. Tyler felt the weight of it, but it was just one more thing that didn't register. Nothing did.

"We'll get through this, Tyler."

Tyler went back to looking at the ceiling. He wasn't sure he wanted to get through this.

Tyler let Rob handle as much as he could of the discharge process. His grief and near OD made him feel like a zombie whose head was wrapped in a hundred cotton balls. He didn't have the energy or the motivation to handle business right then. Once they were out of the sterile building, Tyler felt like he was bombarded with the light and smells and sounds of the world. He knew it was ridiculous to think that the rest of the world had ended just because his had, but all the stimulation was still a shock.

He followed Rob over to his car and got in, relieved when the door closed, blocking out some of the noise. Rob was silent as he started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. That was fine with Tyler. He didn't feel like talking. He barely paid attention to the drive, until he noticed they were passing the exit that led to his and Cole's apartment.

"Where are we going?"

"To my house. You can stay a few days with me. You shouldn't be alone right now."

Tyler looked at Rob once, then went back to staring at the window. He felt like he should protest, he wasn't Rob's problem to take care of. But pained emotion rose up from his chest, closing off his throat and making it hard for him to speak. He settled on a stilted thank you, continuing to stare out the window.

"It's nothing. Cole would want me to look out for you."

They didn't talk the rest of the ride to Rob's house. When they arrived, Rob finally broke the silence. "You know my dogs are well behaved, so they won't jump on you. But they'll want to get reacquainted with your scent."

"That's okay. I don't mind. I've always liked them."

Rob led Tyler into the house. His two dogs came scampering forward, nails clicking on the stone floor. At his command, they halted and immediately sat. Rob nodded, and Tyler went forward, holding his hand out. They sniffed at his hand and pants legs for a few moments before sitting again and watching him. Tyler looked back. One of them was an Australian Shepherd with large, gray-blue eyes and mottled gray patches decorating her long white fur. She tilted her head to the side as she stared at him and let out a little whimper.

"What's her name again?"

"That's Nancy. The sleek sort of Whippet-looking guy is Rocket. Both of them are mixed breeds."

A memory clicked in his head of Cole asking why he'd named the dog Nancy, and his laughter when Rob answered it was because she was the first lady of the house. Tyler could picture Cole's imperfect but beautiful smile, his teeth bright in his tan face, laugh lines around his dark green eyes. He pushed the image away. He wasn't ready to think of Cole's smiling face. "I remember."

Tyler held his hand out, and Nancy came forward. She nuzzled under his palm, and he stroked over her head. "She's sweet." He would have smiled if he had it in him. But he didn't. He felt like he was frozen, only able to get his muscles to obey his brain's commands by focusing on the task. His mind still shied away from the news about Cole. Yet somehow, at the same time, it was all he could think about. Rob spoke, and he realized he was still stroking the dog, while he stared blankly at her fur.

"Do you want to eat anything?"

Tyler shook his head. "No. If I could just lie down that would be... great." That was a lie. Nothing was great, but what else was there for him to do? He followed Rob out of the kitchen and down the hall to a spare room. Nancy went

with them, walking next to his side. Tyler followed Rob into the room and just stood there, listening through a fog as Rob reminded him where the bathroom was.

“Can I bring you anything?”

“No. I’ll just lie down.”

“Alright then.”

Rob went to leave and called Nancy to him. The dog looked over her shoulder at her master, then back at Tyler. She stayed put. Rob called her again, but Tyler raised his hand. “It’s okay, she can stay.” Rob hesitated, but eventually he closed the door behind him and left.

Tyler stayed there, standing in the middle of the room for some time, before he forced himself to take off his shoes. He laid down on the bed, still dressed, his knees tucked to his chest. He heard Nancy settle on the floor next to the bed, giving a big sigh as she relaxed. The room grew quiet, leaving Tyler with nothing to do but listen to his thoughts. He only had one. Cole was... gone.

Rob went to his study. Tyler was a wreck. He wasn’t going to be able to handle any business for a while. Rob didn’t particularly want to either. He’d take care of only those items that were pressing before he grieved. Picking up the phone, he made the calls necessary to change the plans for the delivery of the sculpture for Brooks Corp. Then he contacted his other clients and let them know that he’d be unavailable for a week. When he was finished he hung up and sat at his desk. Resting his elbows on the desktop, he bent and held his head in his hands. He couldn’t believe Cole was gone, just like that. He needed more information, but he knew Tyler was in no condition to give it to him.

Rob had been friends with Cole since college, when he’d taken a beginner’s photography course. He hadn’t taken the class because he wanted to be a photographer, but because he knew he wanted to be an agent for artists. He figured learning a little about the different mediums would be to his benefit. Cole had been the TA for the class, and Rob had noticed him immediately. Cole was a free spirit, always ready to grab his camera and head out for the next adventure. He specialized in action shots, traveling the world to capture images of bull runs, surfing and hang-gliding. He wasn’t reckless in the situations he chased after, but he never turned down a challenge. And the photos he shot were beautiful.

They'd struck up a friendship, but even though Rob had been attracted to Cole, he'd never tried for anything more. Although he'd known he was gay since high school, he wasn't out back then and had yet to be in a relationship with a man. Cole had been a great friend and was one of the first people Rob had come out to. They'd stayed friends after college, with Rob eventually becoming Cole's agent. Now he was gone, leaving Tyler behind. Tyler, whom Cole had met and fallen in love with.

Rob had instantly understood what attracted Cole to Tyler. He was Cole's opposite in every way. Dark where Cole was blond, quiet next to Cole's exuberance. Tyler was the typical artist, lost in his own world. He had an air about him that made you want to take care of him. To do things like make sure he remembered to eat when he was holed up for hours with metal and a blow torch, working on his sculptures. As wild as Cole was, he needed that in his life. Cole wanted to care for someone. He'd wanted someone who would be an anchor for him, someone that he could come home to.

Nevertheless, Cole had been worried. Worried that he couldn't take care of Tyler while satisfying his own need to jet off on photo tours across the globe. Rob had encouraged him to talk to Tyler about it, to find out what he was looking for in a relationship. Apparently, whatever they'd discussed suited them, because they'd started dating seriously, and Rob had watched as they'd fallen in love. Watched from the outside. He was in their lives as Cole's friend and agent. He'd signed Tyler as a client as well and eventually they'd become friends too. However, he was still on the outside.

None of that mattered now. Cole was gone, and Tyler had almost followed him. He could barely process that he had lost one friend. He didn't want to think about losing them both. Rob folded his arms on the desk and sank down until his forehead rested on them. Cole, his vibrant, amazing friend was gone.

Chapter 3

Five days later, Tyler was still at Rob's house. He didn't care where he was really. He had a place to lie down and think about Cole, and that was all that mattered. He got up to take care of his body's needs or to let Nancy in when she whined at the door, but that was it. Rob forced him to down sports drinks and soup. Tyler did it only so Rob would leave him alone. He didn't feel any thirst or hunger. It took so much concentration to make himself swallow that he was exhausted every time. Once he'd taken a few sips of whatever it was that Rob was offering him, he'd lie right back down. Nancy was usually in bed with him, her body heat keeping him warm.

Tyler lay there, Nancy softly snoring at his side. He didn't sleep much. He just dozed, dreaming of Cole each time. Most times when he woke, the pillow beneath him would be damp, so he knew he cried in his fitful sleep, but tonight he couldn't even manage to escape into those short snatches of rest. There was a storm outside, and it was keeping him awake.

Normally whenever Tyler was having trouble sleeping, he would take a prescribed sleeping pill. He'd found himself taking them a little more often while Cole was on this latest tour. After the incident earlier that week, however, he figured he probably shouldn't take any of them for a while. At the next crack of lightning, he got up, telling Nancy to stay as he left the room. She was such a calm dog that the early winter storm didn't bother her at all.

Out in the hall, he hesitated. He didn't think Rob would mind if he wandered around his house, but he didn't know what he wanted to do. He wasn't interested in watching TV, and he doubted he'd be able to concentrate on a book. Tyler thought for a moment that he should go home, but it was late, and his car wasn't there.

Besides, he wasn't ready to go back to the home he'd shared with Cole. Being in their space without Cole while he was on one of his trips had always been hard. At least then he'd had the security of knowing that Cole would be home soon. Now that security was gone. The second he'd received notice that Cole was gone, that apartment had ceased to be a home. It was just a space with furniture and clothes.

Another bright flash of lightning and rumbling thunder brought him out of his head. He was still standing in the middle of the hallway, his feet cold on the hardwood floor. Tyler started to turn and go back to the guest room, but he felt

an irrational flash of anger at that room. He didn't want to be in there. Looking down the hall to his right, he noticed Rob's door was only partially closed. Tyler approached it quietly, not really sure why he was doing so. He tried to stay quiet when he pushed the door open, but he must have made a noise, or maybe Rob wasn't asleep either, because he immediately turned over, sitting up when he saw Tyler standing there.

Rob rubbed his eyes. "Tyler. Is everything alright?"

"It's the storm."

"You're afraid of the storm?" Rob asked with confusion in his voice.

Tyler huffed a slight laugh. "No, but it's keeping me awake. Sleeping pills are out, so I got up to roam around. I saw your door was open and..." He trailed off, still not sure why he was in Rob's room.

Rob sat there, watching him across the dark space. He lifted the covers, a silent invitation for Tyler to join him. Tyler hesitated. Then he walked over and slid into the bed. Rob pulled the covers over him, and Tyler was immediately warmed. He lay there on his back, staring up at the ceiling. The room filled with sharp white light, thunder rumbling around the house just as he forced his mouth open to speak. "I miss him."

Rob didn't say anything, and Tyler assumed he hadn't heard him over the thunder. He didn't know if he could get the strength up to say the words again. Saying that he missed Cole was admitting out loud that Cole was gone. However, Rob answered, interrupting his thoughts.

"I know. So do I."

It grew quiet again. What else was there to say? There was nothing in his head but Cole. Everything he could think to say about his lover made his chest ache, made him cold again. He didn't think he would be able to breathe if he talked about Cole. Besides, nothing he said would bring him back. So he stayed there, silent. He could tell that Rob was still awake from the sound of his breathing.

After a while Tyler turned to face Rob, who was lying on his back. It was dark in the room, but the moon shone bright enough for Tyler to take in Rob's dark hair and familiar profile. Tyler turned more fully on his side. When he did, Rob turned his head to look at him. He stared at Rob. Tyler felt cold and frozen, like icy waters were going to rush over his head and drown him if he didn't reach out to hold onto something. Leaning forward, he kissed Rob on the lips. Rob returned the kiss for the briefest of seconds, before he jerked back.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t... I don’t know.” Tyler flopped onto his back, pressing his forearms over his eyes. “Jesus. I’m sorry, I don’t know why I did that. I wasn’t coming on to you, I swear. I just...” he trailed off, not knowing what to say. He sat up, throwing the covers off. “I’ll go back to my room.” A hand on his arm stopped him.

“Don’t go. I know you weren’t coming on to me. Grief... grief affects us in all kinds of ways. You probably just want contact with someone who shares your grief. That’s okay.”

Tyler looked back over his shoulder. Now that Rob was sitting up, the light from the moon was behind him, so Tyler couldn’t really see his face. He made a sound that would have been a laugh, but it was too bitter to fall into the category of sounds normally reserved for joy. “So you’re saying I need a hug?”

“Basically. Lie back down.”

Tyler slowly lay back down. This time he lay on his side, facing away from Rob. Rob pulled the covers over him again. After a moment, his arm went around him. Tyler stiffened slightly. He’d meant it when he said he wasn’t coming on to his friend.

“Relax. You’ve been completely alone through all this. Cole was my friend too. My best friend. Let me comfort you.”

When Rob didn’t do anything other than hold him, Tyler did relax. There was nothing sexual to Rob’s touch. The heat of his chest behind Tyler warmed him some. His chest still ached with cold. Nothing would change that. He didn’t *want* anything to change that. He held that cold close to him because somehow, it made him feel closer to Cole.

The storm started to fade away, the lightning not as bright, the time in between the flashes of light and thunder growing longer. When Tyler closed his eyes he saw Cole as he always was. Smiling, in a T-shirt and cargo shorts, a camera around his neck. Finally he fell asleep.

Chapter 4

Tyler woke up the next morning to weak sunshine lighting the room. He looked out the window and saw there were still low-hanging clouds in the sky. He lay there for a moment, surprised that he'd slept the whole night through, but after nearly two weeks of not sleeping, his body must have taken over, forcing him to get the rest he needed. He was alone in the bed, the spot next to him cool. Rob must have been up for a while.

Tyler got up and left Rob's room. He stopped in the hall bathroom before he headed into the kitchen. Rob was there, sipping from a steaming mug of coffee. He was dressed for work. A pinstriped button-down and gray slacks were neat and ironed on his tall frame. His longish black hair was brushed back from his face, his light beard trimmed and neat. The wire-framed glasses that he always wore were on his face. Cole had joked once that they made Rob look like a sexy professor.

There was a plate of toast and bacon on the granite bar top next to a bottle of orange juice. Rob turned when he came into the room, but Tyler looked away. He was embarrassed about last night. He felt slightly guilty for sleeping with Rob, even though nothing had happened.

“Good morning.”

Tyler returned the greeting and took a seat at the bar. “I should probably get out of your way and go back... back to the apartment.”

“Do you want to go back?”

“No. Not really. But I don't want to be in your way. You've probably got stuff to do.” Tyler finally looked at Rob. “And I shouldn't have come into your room like that. I'm sorry. You probably think I'm the most disloyal boyfriend ever.”

“Stop. I don't think you're in the way, and I definitely don't think you're disloyal.” Rob calmly drank his coffee. “Like I said last night, grief makes people do strange things, and there's nothing wrong with seeking comfort from someone you trust. So if you need to stay here for a while longer, that's okay.” He paused. “But I'd like to see you start taking care of yourself.” Rob pushed the plate of bacon and toast towards him. “Eating would be a good start.”

Tyler looked down at the food. “I'm not hungry.”

“That might be true. But you’re going to get sick if you don’t eat.”

Tyler stared at Rob for a moment, but he only watched him with a steady gaze. Tyler finally reached out and took a piece of bacon. When he took a bite, he noticed the glimmer of a smile in the gray eyes still watching him.

“You’d also probably sleep better if you got out of the house, maybe go for a walk.”

Tyler stopped chewing. He didn’t think he was ready for that.

“Take the dogs. Nancy is really attached to you. She’d love for you to take her on a walk.”

Tyler swallowed the last bite of bacon. “I can’t.” He thought fast for an acceptable reason. “I don’t want to lose one of your dogs.”

“Nancy will come back to your side, and she’ll herd Rocket along. All you have to do is whistle if they get too far. You can whistle, right?”

“Yeah, I can whistle,” he admitted grudgingly.

“Tyler, it’s okay to grieve. Just don’t neglect yourself.” Rob poured a glass of orange juice and pushed it over to him, along with a piece of toast. “Eat, get a little exercise each day and you will get through this.”

Tyler eyed the toast and juice. He knew Rob was right. Lying in bed day after day wasn’t doing him any good. Tyler picked up the toast and took a bite. “Alright. I’ll go for a walk,” he said after he swallowed. “Any other instructions?”

“Yes. Eat lunch too. There’s sandwich meat in the fridge.” Rob turned away to rinse his mug. “I’ll take you to get your truck when I come home from work if you want.”

“Yeah. I guess I should be able to get around if I need to. Thanks, I appreciate it.”

Rob turned back around to face him. “Don’t worry about it.”

Tyler was glad that he’d borrowed a pair of rubber boots from Rob. The ground was muddy in places from the storm last night. He’d taken the dogs out for a walk in the open field that ran along the road, away from Rob’s house. Rob didn’t live in the country, but the location was rural enough that there was only a two-lane road with very little traffic. The area was dominated by trees,

the houses on half-acre lots rather than the postage stamp-sized yards common to most of suburbia.

Tyler walked with the dogs, no plan for how long he would stay out in mind. He figured when he got tired, he'd turn and go back. Rocket darted ahead, but Nancy mostly stayed close to him. He reached down and scratched her behind the ears as they walked. She was a really sweet dog. He'd never had a pet of his own, but he liked the way this one seemed to have attached herself to him.

Tyler took a deep breath of the rain-washed air. Even though he was outside, walking around, he knew he was still hiding from the world. He just wasn't ready to really face life without Cole. Wasn't ready to go back to the home they'd shared. As long as Rob was gracious enough to let him stay, he intended to do so.

Tyler picked up a stick and threw it. Rocket took off after it, Nancy loping after him. Rocket got to it first. Once Nancy caught up, the two of them tussled over the stick. Tyler watched for a moment before he whistled. Nancy immediately stopped and headed back towards him, herding Rocket along, just as Rob had said she would. Tyler waited for them. Once they'd reached his side, he turned back the way they'd come. He'd been outside enough for one day.

Rob looked out the window of his office. He'd told Tyler not to feel bad for their brief kiss last night. Unfortunately, he was having a hard time following his own advice. He'd been attracted to Tyler for a long time, and when he felt those lips pressed against his, for one crazy second he'd kissed him back.

The guilt he felt for that small kiss was probably blown way out of proportion. It was just that he loved Cole, and feeling attraction to his dead friend's lover was about as low as he could get. Even though he honestly didn't believe Tyler would have tried to take it any further, Rob knew he'd done the right thing in ending the kiss as quickly as he had. Tyler was clearly lost and hurting. The kiss had been nothing more than someone in pain seeking comfort from a friend. It was just best not to confuse their relationship during this awful time of grief for them both.

Chapter 5

Three months later, Tyler still hadn't gone home. He didn't appear to want to, and Rob liked having him there. So neither of them mentioned Tyler leaving and he just... stayed. Tyler was working through his grief, as was Rob. He knew it was harder for Tyler. Losing a significant other was probably the hardest thing for a person to suffer, so while Rob still encouraged Tyler to eat and go for walks, he understood that sometimes Tyler just wanted to hole up and be alone with his grief. Those were the hardest days for them both. Thankfully, they were becoming fewer and farther between.

Rob looked at Tyler in the moonlight. He was currently in bed, lying on his side and facing Tyler. They had often shared a bed these past few months. Nothing ever happened between them—it wasn't like that. Tyler had admitted that he hated sleeping alone. That's why he'd had the prescription for sleeping pills. Now that Cole had passed, it was even harder for him to rest. So as a *friend*, Rob let Tyler sleep with him on occasion. With the exception of a brief hug when Tyler was having a hard night thinking of Cole, they never touched.

But tonight, Rob wasn't thinking of anything but the fact that there was a beautiful man in his bed. A man that he was attracted to. Before he could stop himself he reached out and touched Tyler on his bare arm. Tyler rolled to his back and looked at him. There was enough light that Rob could read the questioning expression on his face. But Rob didn't say anything. If he spoke... He couldn't put words to what he was about to do. It would make it too real if he did.

He leaned forward, going slowly, giving Tyler enough time to move or leave the bed if he chose. He didn't. Rob brushed his lips across Tyler's. Once. Twice. Tyler still didn't move. Rob pressed their lips together and felt Tyler kiss him back. Easing into it a little more, Rob lightly traced his tongue over Tyler's lips. Tyler's lips parted, his hand coming up to rest on Rob's shoulder. Feeling Tyler's hand on him brought Rob out of the sweet fog of arousal he was letting himself drift in. He jerked back.

“Jesus. I'm sorry.”

Tyler looked confused. “Why are you sorry?”

Rob ran a hand through his hair. “Because you trust me, and I just took advantage of that trust. You're here for comfort from a friend, I didn't have any right to do that.”

Rob got up, not wanting to talk about his poor judgment anymore. He left the room, closing the door softly behind him. Rob headed straight for the living room and dropped down onto the couch. “Jesus,” he swore again. He couldn’t believe he’d done that. He had no right. But Tyler had been so warm, so at ease as he rested, curled up next to him. He hadn’t been able to resist. He was crazy for starting that, knowing that Tyler, that *both* of them were still healing. Hell, he was crazy for letting Tyler sleep in his bed so often. He should have known something like this would happen eventually. Lately, whenever Tyler joined him, Rob found himself lying there beside him, fighting an erection. Fighting the desire to reach out to Tyler in the dark. Tonight he’d failed on both accounts.

He hung his head in his hands, ignoring his current erection. He wanted... he wanted to go back in there. Tyler was in his bed. He’d been receptive to his kiss. He could be making love to him right now. Rob clenched his fists. He could be, but he wasn’t. There was no way that was a good idea. Rob sighed and got a blanket from the chest that served as a coffee table and settled down on the couch for the night. After what had just passed, he knew he couldn’t sleep with Tyler anymore.

“Hey.”

Rob tossed his keys on the kitchen counter. He’d just come in from work. “Hey.” He wasn’t surprised that Tyler was there waiting for him. They needed to talk about what happened the night before. He headed over to get a drink from the fridge. Tyler’s voice sounded behind him while he stood in front of the cool air from the open refrigerator.

“Why did you leave last night?”

Rob closed the door, but didn’t turn around. “I told you why. I had no right to take advantage of you like that.” He heard Tyler come up behind him.

“You weren’t. I would have said something if I didn’t want you to kiss me.”

Rob turned around to face Tyler. He’d lost some weight, but his body was still naturally solid and strong. Tyler hadn’t bothered with a haircut in a while so his soft brown hair tumbled down over his forehead. He was beautiful. Beautiful and sad. The sadness was still deep in his dark eyes, in the lines surrounding a mouth that never smiled. “You’re still healing from losing Cole, Tyler. You don’t need me confusing things for you.”

“But you wanted to kiss me.”

“Yes. I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t want to.”

“So you wanted to kiss me. And I wanted to kiss you. Tell me again why you left?”

Rob sighed and set the bottle of juice down. “Tyler, you’re not really recovered from losing Cole. I don’t want you while you’re still hurting. Still sad. That wouldn’t be fair to either of us.”

Tyler looked down. “I may never completely get over losing Cole. This might be the only way you get me.” He turned away. “I understand if that doesn’t sound very appealing. I wouldn’t want to get involved with anyone like me either.”

Rob lightly grasped Tyler’s arm and turned him back around. “That’s not it.” Rob took a deep breath, prepared to admit the truth of how he felt. “Tyler, I do want you. I’ve wanted you for a long time.”

Tyler stared at him, surprise evident on his face. “How long?”

“Years, Tyler. Years.”

Tyler ran his tongue over his lips. “You never said anything.”

“Of course not. You were with Cole. I respected that, and I love you both.”

“But now Cole is gone. And I’m still here.”

Rob swallowed hard. “You’re still here.” He pulled Tyler into his arms, staring into his dark eyes. Tyler didn’t resist. He leaned further in, until Rob felt the warmth of him against his chest.

“I’m still here,” Tyler repeated.

Rob nodded, pulling him closer. Their lips met in a kiss just as soft as the one last night. Tyler’s eyes fell shut, his body relaxing completely against Rob’s. Rob took advantage of that permission, licking into the mouth beneath his. Tyler returned the kiss, their tongues meeting and softly rubbing together. Rob stroked down Tyler’s back until he grasped his hips. Rob was already hard and when he pressed Tyler’s hips against his, he felt that the other man was in the same state of arousal.

Passion flared between them, the kiss going from gentle and sweet to hot and intense. Rob’s fingers tightened on the slim hips in his grasp, Tyler’s arms tightening across his back. Tyler moaned and Rob’s body grew even harder. He didn’t think he’d ever be the one to cause Tyler to make that noise. Rob pulled back enough to walk them out of the kitchen. Tyler’s fingers slid into his hair,

tugging him back down into their kiss. They made it down the hall, still kissing, Rob leading them to Tyler's room.

Rob lay Tyler back on his bed, coming down on top of him. He kept kissing Tyler, his lips, his jaw, his neck. Tyler's skin was warm beneath his lips, his breath soft as it washed over his skin. He moaned again, his head arching back into the pillows to give Rob more access. Rob groaned at Tyler's passionate responses. He pushed Tyler's shirt up, placing kisses across his chest and flat stomach. Rob dipped his tongue into Tyler's belly button at the same time that he opened his jeans. Tyler's hips jerked up off the bed slightly, giving Rob just enough room to tug the jeans down. Tyler let out a desperate-sounding moan when Rob gripped his cock, his fingers coming up to dig into Rob's back.

Rob held himself braced on the bed with one hand, as he stroked Tyler with the other, pumping him, feeling him grow slick against his palm. Tyler's hips arched off the bed again, moans sliding from between his lips over and over. He whispered that he was about to come. Rob leaned down and pressed their lips together, kissing Tyler through his climax. Rob stroked him faster, enjoying the way Tyler rubbed his hands over his back as he came, his body trembling beneath him.

When Tyler came down from his release he opened his eyes and looked at Rob. Rob watched as Tyler took a deep breath then reached for his still-closed jeans. Rob grabbed his hand, staying his movements. "Not today."

Tyler looked confused. "What?"

"I don't want you while you're sad."

"I told you—"

Rob shook his head, cutting him off. "No. I don't believe that. I know losing Cole has been devastating, but I believe that you can heal and become yourself again. I'm willing to wait until that happens." He leaned down and kissed Tyler lightly. "When you're working again, when I see you laughing, then come to me." Rob got up from the bed, turning to leave the room. Tyler called his name.

"Rob."

He turned back to see what he wanted.

"You're really going to leave me?"

Rob shook his head again. "I'm not leaving you, Tyler. I'm waiting for you."

Chapter 6

The next morning Tyler sat on the couch in Rob's living room, thinking about their conversation yesterday. He missed Cole, everyday. But that didn't mean that he had to stop living himself. Maybe he *could* start a new life. He thought about Cole and how he'd lived his life with such exuberance. He knew deep down that Cole wouldn't want him to be this sad shell of himself forever. Cole would be pushing him to get up, to find intriguing pieces of metal and create. And he wouldn't want him to be alone.

Tyler looked outside. He hadn't gone for a walk in a few days, and he hadn't worked in months. He didn't have his tools there to try and sculpt anything, but getting out of the house could be a good place to start rebuilding his life. He got up, whistling for Nancy and Rocket.

Outside, Tyler walked through the tall grasses of the field on the side of the road. It was spring in southeast Texas, which meant that the wildflowers were in bloom. There were even a few patches of bluebonnets scattered around. The occasional car passed by, and a few birds swooped overhead. Other than that, Tyler and the dogs had the area to themselves. Nancy was trotting alongside him, Rocket a few paces ahead.

Nancy suddenly stopped, her ears pricking forward as the rest of her went still. Tyler kept going, knowing the Aussie would catch up, but when he looked back Nancy was heading towards a thick-trunked tree off to the right. He stopped to let the dog explore for a moment. He watched as she trotted up to the tree, tail low and wagging. Whatever was there must not have been a threat. After a few moments of watching her sniff around, he called her back to his side. "Nancy! Here!"

The dog took a few steps towards him, but then circled back to the tree. She was clearly agitated, giving sharp little barks. Tyler finally just went to see what had caught her attention. He heard the whining first. When he was close enough, he saw a tiny black puppy shaking in the grass. Tyler patted Nancy on the head, and she calmed and sat.

Tyler knelt down and held his hand out to the puppy. He gave it a minute to get up the nerve to come forward and sniff his hand before he tried to pet it. Once it did, he stroked a palm over the puppy's back, feeling the softness of its fur. The dog wiggled under his arm, paws coming up to rest on his thighs. Tyler's heart melted, as he looked down into soft, black eyes. He picked the

dog up and saw it was a boy. Tyler knew he couldn't leave it out there alone. Cradling the little puppy in his arms, he whistled for Rocket and headed back for the house.

“Nancy found him hiding beneath a tree. He wasn't wearing a collar and there weren't any other dogs around.” Tyler watched as Rob held the puppy, looking him over. “Would it be alright if I kept him?”

“We should take him to the vet make sure he isn't chipped first.”

Tyler felt a beat of disappointment that the dog might have an owner looking for him. “Oh yeah. I didn't think of that.” He took the black dog back and held him to his chest.

Rob reached out and scratched the floppy ears. “But if he's not, you can keep him.”

Tyler held the wriggling dog up to his face. His apartment didn't allow dogs, but he'd worry about that when the time came for him to leave Rob's. Besides, he'd probably want a new place anyway. He'd just make sure to find one that was pet-friendly.

Chapter 7

“No chip. And my clinic hasn’t received any notice to be on the lookout for a lost black Lab.”

Tyler had taken the dog to a nearby vet to be checked for a pet microchip and general health. He held his hand up to let the puppy lick him while the vet worked. “I haven’t seen any posters around either.”

The vet continued to look the dog over, having to hold him still as he wriggled all over the exam table. “Looks like we have a case of an irresponsible owner. Or it might have been someone who let their dog breed and then couldn’t find homes for all of the puppies. Black dogs are usually harder to place.”

Tyler shook his head. He hated to think of things like that happening, but he knew it was an everyday occurrence.

“So are you keeping this little guy?” The vet tugged at the puppy’s big paws. “Not that he’ll be little for very long.”

“Yep. I’m keeping him.”

“Great. Looks like he’ll be getting a second chance at having a good life.”

Tyler looked at the vet. “Looks like it.” He picked the dog up off the exam table. “I guess if I’m keeping you I should give you a name.” He looked the black dog over. “Can’t be anything typical like Shadow or Midnight. I’ll have to think of something slightly more original.”

“You named him Sirius?”

Tyler smiled. “Yep.”

Rob looked at him over his shoulder as he turned the steaks to sear them on the other side. “Like the radio station?”

Tyler assumed Rob was joking, but just in case he wasn’t he explained. “No. Like Sirius Black from Harry Potter.”

Rob looked down at the puppy energetically chewing a toy in the middle of the kitchen floor. “I know. I was just teasing. Red is a good color for him,” he said as he gestured at the new collar Tyler had bought him.

“Thanks.”

“So. Three dogs in this house.”

Tyler looked at Rob. “Are you sure it’s okay?”

“I’m fine with it.” Rob smiled. “As long as you’re the one doing the house breaking.”

Chapter 8

Tyler drove out to the junkyard, Sirius on the seat next to him. For the past three months, Sirius had gone everywhere with him. The Lab was growing into a big, gangly dog with huge paws and long legs. He fit right in with the rest of the pack. Nancy taught him proper behavior, while Rocket played with him until his almost boundless puppy energy was exhausted, and although Tyler had indeed been responsible for the house training, Rob had helped as well.

Tyler stopped and went around to open the passenger door. Over the past few weeks, the owner of the junkyard had gotten used to him coming there with his dog, so he let Sirius out to run around, while he looked for parts.

Tyler was working again. Rob had gone with him to get his tools from the space he rented and helped him set up a workshop in the garage behind his house. He was still staying with Rob, so it just made sense to have all of his tools and supplies nearby. He'd started off easy with just a few small sculptures. He hadn't kept any of them. Instead he'd donated the small angels to the hospital. However, now he was ready to work on a large piece. It wasn't commissioned by anyone; it was something he was envisioning for a collection that he could show. When he'd told Rob about his plans, Rob had smiled and said he'd start making the arrangements for a showing.

Walking around with a flatbed, Tyler found several pieces that he liked. Heavy gloves protected him from cuts as he dug through the piles of scrap metal. Sirius trotted alongside him, sniffing at everything he selected and laid on the flatbed.

When he felt like he had enough to create something along the size of what he had planned, Tyler headed back to the front to have the metal weighed so he could pay. He smiled, a frisson of excitement running through him as he waited. The feeling was familiar, reminding him of how he'd always felt at the start of a new project. That encouraged him. If he was feeling excited, looking forward to feeling the heat of a blow torch, then maybe he could still create art that others would enjoy.

Twenty minutes after paying, Tyler was back home. He'd taken Sirius into the house before unloading. The Lab was still too much of a rambunctious puppy to be safe around sparks and sharp metal. In the garage, Tyler looked at what he'd brought in. He had a mix of new and recycled junkyard metals. He thought the juxtaposition of the bright, smooth sheet metal with the warm and

rusted parts would be an interesting contrast. Tyler pulled on his gloves and flipped down the visor to his welding mask. He was ready to get started.

Rob came in to the house to the smell of smoke. He followed the acrid stench back to the kitchen. There he found Tyler scraping something from the bottom of the pan into the trash. "Smells delicious."

Tyler jumped slightly at the sound of his voice. He gestured with the pan, an embarrassed look on his face. "I tried to cook us fish, but I burned it."

"I see that. And I smell it."

Tyler's face turned red, but he laughed. "Shut up. I tried."

Rob stood there surprised for a moment. This was the first time he'd heard Tyler laugh in months, but he didn't draw attention to it. "You did try. And I appreciate it." He headed over to the fridge. "Since you're scraping that, we can have something quick and easy. How about grilled cheese and tomato soup? I'll make the sandwiches and heat up the soup. You make a spinach salad."

"Don't trust me around the stove?"

Rob gave a sideways glance to the still smoking pan.

"Would you?"

The laugh came again. "Nope. Not in the slightest."

Tyler and Rob worked together to prepare their dinner. When they were done, they sat down at the kitchen table together to eat. While the two men talked, the dogs munched on their kibble in their corner. Tyler was still excited about his new project. Most of their conversation was him explaining the way he intended to form sharp blades into different structures. There would be three, *Beginning*, *Middle*, and *End*.

After dinner they moved to the couch in the living room. They turned the TV on, but didn't pay it much attention. It was Rob's turn to talk about work. He'd signed two new artists that he thought would make a big wave once their work got some exposure. They watched the dogs as they talked. Rocket had finally gotten tired, but Sirius still wanted to play. He kept nudging and jumping on the older dog until Rocket finally turned around and nipped at Sirius's scruff. The black Lab let out a high-pitched bark, jumping back in surprise. Tyler laughed and called the dog over to him.

Rob watched Tyler as he smiled and scratched Sirius behind the ears. Tyler looked up and caught him staring, but Rob didn't look away. "It's good to see you laughing again," he quietly remarked.

Tyler looked down at the dog awkwardly trying to climb into his lap. "Time and Sirius have helped." Tyler looked back at him, his dark eyes serious. "And you."

Rob reached out and lightly traced a finger along the soft stubble on Tyler's jaw. "I'm glad."

"For a long time I really thought that I wouldn't laugh again. But having you to lean on through losing Cole helped so much. Too bad I'm still living in your house, like the house guest who won't take a hint and leave."

Rob smiled. "There are no hints for you to leave." He took his hand away from Tyler, not wanting to make him nervous or think that just because he was working and laughing like Rob had asked that they had to be intimate. But even without his fingers running over Tyler's skin, tension grew between them. He could see it in the way Tyler looked at him before his eyes flicked away, a flush warming his cheeks. Rob himself felt the heat of arousal, but he didn't say anything. If they were to take their relationship beyond just friends, it would have to be Tyler who made that decision. And apparently he wasn't ready to make that decision tonight.

Tyler ended the moment by gently pushing Sirius off his lap. "You are too big to be a lap dog," he teasingly scolded the Lab. They both laughed at Sirius's forlorn expression and went back to their earlier conversation.

Chapter 9

Tyler stood in the middle of his bedroom. A week had passed since he'd burned the fish, and Rob had told him he was happy to see him laughing again. He'd seen it in Rob's face that the other man remembered what he'd said Tyler had to do before they took things any further. But then he remembered what Rob had said. He would wait for Tyler to go to him.

Was that what Rob was waiting for? For Tyler to make the first move? A rush of emotion for Rob went through Tyler. Rob had been such a good friend to him. He always had been. He'd gone above and beyond what any friend could be expected to do, and Tyler was grateful for it. But it wasn't just gratitude that Tyler felt for Rob. The other man was attractive. He was different from Cole, with his dark hair and gray eyes and quiet demeanor. Tyler knew that that quietness didn't mean that Rob was shy or weak in any way.

Rob easily took control of every situation, easily getting things to progress smoothly whenever necessary. His job as an agent suited him. He was able to wrangle the often flighty creative types under his umbrella and handle all of their affairs so that they didn't have to be starving artists. Tyler knew he appreciated the way Rob ran his own dealings, and his strong, steady personality had drawn Tyler in until he wanted to be closer to Rob than just friends.

Tyler looked at his closed bedroom door. He hadn't shared a bed with Rob since the night of their aborted kiss. They'd both agreed that it was best if they didn't do so, now that their attraction was out in the open. He knew that if he went to Rob now, Rob would know he wasn't there just to sleep. Was he ready to make that move?

Deciding that he was, Tyler gave Sirius a goodnight scratch behind his ears and left the room. He walked down the hall and stood outside Rob's bedroom door. Tyler hesitated for a few moments before he knocked. "Come in," he heard from the other side. He opened the door and went in to see Rob sitting on the edge of his bed. Tyler closed the door behind him, but didn't go any further into the room.

"Hey." Tyler left it at that, not sure what to say.

"Tyler." Rob didn't say anything else.

Tyler cleared his throat. Clearly Rob wanted him to start the conversation. "I've laughed. I'm working. And now I'm here. Are you going to reject me again?"

Rob got up from the bed and walked over to him. He didn't say anything until he was right in front of him. "I was never rejecting you. Just waiting until you were ready. Until we were *both* ready." Rob cupped Tyler's cheek, tilting his head back. "Are you ready, Tyler?"

Tyler ran his tongue over his lips in a slightly nervous gesture. It went without saying that he hadn't been with anyone besides Cole for a very long time. "Yes. I'm ready."

Rob brought their lips together in a gentle kiss. Tyler parted his lips, letting Rob in. Strong arms went around him. Tyler pressed close to Rob, feeling the solid warmth of him against his body. He tilted his head back, giving Rob access to whatever he wanted. Rob took advantage, trailing hot kisses up and down his throat. When Rob reached the spot behind his ear, Tyler shivered. Rob laughed softly, his warm breath blowing over Tyler's skin.

"Is that a sensitive spot?"

Tyler nodded, shifting restlessly against Rob. They were both in thin pajama pants, and Tyler could feel the rigid length of Rob's erection pressing against him. Rob licked him behind his ear, making Tyler shiver again.

"Let's see where else you're sensitive."

Rob grabbed his hand and tugged him over to the bed. Tyler sat down, settling on his back at Rob's gentle push. Rob straddled his hips, leaning down over him. He cupped Tyler's face again before he kissed him. Tyler lay there beneath Rob. He felt safe and cared for, as Rob softly kissed him, their tongues lightly dancing together. Rob whispered to him through their kisses, making sure he was okay as he touched him. Tyler nodded permission as Rob caressed his chest. He sighed a "yes" as Rob stroked over his hip. And he moaned in response to Rob sliding his hand into his sleep pants, asking if he could take them off.

He lifted his hips at Rob's direction, helping him get them down his legs. When they were off, Tyler tugged Rob down until he lay against him. He moaned again at the weight of Rob on top of him. Tyler brought his legs up, wrapping them around Rob's waist. Their kiss deepened, Tyler stroking his hands over the breadth of Rob's back. Rob began moving his hips, rubbing their shafts together. His voice sounded rough and husky in Tyler's ear.

“I like the way you feel beneath me, Tyler. I’ve waited to feel this.”

Tyler unlocked his legs from around Rob’s waist so he could push his sleep pants off too. “So have I.” When they were both naked, they continued to kiss and rub against each other until they were both moaning and gasping. Tyler’s skin was hot, his cock slick and hard. Rob was the same. Tyler knew it because he couldn’t keep his hands off his lover. He touched Rob everywhere. His hair-roughened chest, the muscular strength of his thighs and ass, and his shaft, strong and throbbing in his grasp, the head silky wet. Tyler wanted to feel it inside him. He arched up, breathing out Rob’s name.

Rob understood what he was asking, because he rose up and leaned over to the night stand. He got out a condom and lube, then came back to prepare them both. Tyler flinched slightly as Rob eased a slick finger inside him. He relaxed, knowing Rob would make sure he was ready. Rob took his time, easing that finger in until he brushed against his prostate. Tyler shivered again, his fingers clenching on Rob’s forearms.

“Looks like I found another sensitive place,” Rob said, the hint of a smile in his voice.

Tyler tried to nod, but he couldn’t. Instead his head arched back into the pillows, as Rob kept stroking over that spot, slipping another finger in to join the first. It felt so good, sending tingles racing along his spine. By the time Rob pulled his fingers away, Tyler was writhing beneath him, his chest heaving. He was definitely ready.

Rob lay on top of him. Tyler spread his legs to make room for him, biting his lip as he felt the heat of Rob’s cock against his ass. He felt Rob reach down between them to grasp his cock. Tyler stroked along Rob’s forearms as he pressed the broad head of his shaft against his opening, seeking entrance. He gasped when Rob pushed inside him. Rob stopped.

“Okay?”

Tyler swallowed hard and nodded. “Yes. Don’t stop.” He pulled Rob down to him. Rob kissed him once before murmuring against his mouth, “I won’t.”

He pulled back then pushed forward again, reaching deeper this time. Tyler moaned, his eyes falling shut. Rob’s thick length stretched him, his weight on top of him making him feel better than okay.

“Tyler... you feel so...”

Rob didn't finish his sentence. He was breathing hard, his skin damp with sweat beneath Tyler's palms. Tyler understood, because he couldn't speak either. Rob pulled back, his cock dragging along all of the sensitive nerve endings inside Tyler. He slid back in slow and deep, making pleasure spark in Tyler's fingertips and low in his belly. He moaned, his legs coming back up to wrap around Rob's waist again. His toes curled, fingers pressing deep into Rob's back. Rob groaned, the low sound of it vibrating against Tyler's skin where Rob's face was pressed to his neck. Tyler pushed his hips up, and Rob's hand slipped beneath him, cupping his ass.

Rob started moving faster. His thrusts were still steady, reaching deep inside Tyler. As they increased in speed, the heat and passion spiked between them, until moans poured from Tyler in a constant stream. He reached down to grasp his shaft, stroking himself in rhythm with Rob's movements. Their orgasms were coming. Tyler could feel it rising in his shaft, could feel it in the way Rob pulsed inside him, his movements losing some of their smoothness. A soft curse slipped from Tyler. Rob leaned down and kissed him harder and more insistently than he ever had before. He groaned into Tyler's mouth.

“Come for me, Tyler. I need to feel that. Feel you.”

Tyler stroked himself faster, his cock stiff and his balls aching. Finally, he came in a burst of pleasure that left him breathless. His skin tingled, and his body tightened around Rob, who held him as he moaned and writhed his way through his release. When his body eased, he swallowed hard and looked up at Rob. He hadn't felt anything like that for so long. Rob kissed him once.

“Still okay?”

Tyler nodded. “Still... yes. I'm okay.”

Rob kissed him again, this time leaving their mouths pressed together, their tongues entwined as his hips pumped his own climax. Tyler lay beneath him, holding on to him, relishing the fact that he'd managed to make calm, steady Rob Miller shudder and curse with pleasure in the dark of night.

Tyler curled onto his side, away from Rob. After a moment, Rob brushed a kiss over his shoulder.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes. Just thinking about Cole.”

Rob was quiet for a moment. “Do you feel guilty?”

Tyler turned to his back and looked up at Rob hovering over him. “No. Not like that. Just... I guess moving on with you means that I’ve finally accepted that he’s gone.”

Rob stroked Tyler’s hair back from his forehead. “Are you sure you were ready?”

Tyler didn’t hesitate to answer. He knew that he was, and he wanted to make sure Rob knew it too. “I was ready. And I’m glad it was with you.”

Chapter 10

Rob headed up the walk to the small gallery that was hosting Tyler's show tonight. His phone buzzed just as his foot hit the first step. He took his phone out and saw it was a text from Tyler.

Are you almost here?

Rob smiled as he texted back.

I'm walking up the gallery stairs right now.

Tyler was anxious for this showing. Rob had done his best to keep him calm, but from years of working with artists, he knew that Tyler wouldn't relax until the doors were open to the public, and he got the first feedback from viewers.

He opened the door and saw Tyler standing there with his arms crossed. He was chewing on his thumbnail, his entire body tense. When Tyler saw him, relief eased his clenched jaw and he dropped his arms from around himself. He met Rob halfway.

"You're here."

Rob stroked a hand down Tyler's back, feeling how tense he still was. "Did you doubt I would be?"

"No. Just... it's better that you're here."

Rob dropped a kiss on Tyler's temple. He'd been with Tyler every step of the way during the six months it had taken to create this collection. It had come out beautifully and looked amazing, with the stark, white backdrop of the gallery surrounding it. Tyler hadn't used subtlety with either the names or the designs.

Beginning was made up of curved blades that swooped and danced around each other, before ending up entwined at the top of the piece. *Middle* had blades that were thicker and welded together in intricate interlocking patterns. Tyler had used more of the older, rusted pieces of metal for that one. *End* was the most spectacular. The blades were all so sharp and bright, it almost hurt to look at them. None of the blades in *End* touched or connected at all. Instead they exploded out in a burst of steel and iron that dared you to try and touch it. He'd already noticed some of the people who were working the show reach out to it, but none of them risked the pain that getting too close to *End* would cause.

Tyler had actually ended up with four pieces. *After* was a small sculpture. Its blades rested on a base of melted, lumped-up old metal. The blades were all shiny and new, twisting up in fragile curls, almost like smoke. Rob had looked at that one often. He understood what Tyler's collection represented, *After* in particular. Seeing that piece, small and delicate compared to the others, told Rob how Tyler felt about his life after losing Cole. Rob knew he had to tread lightly or he would hurt that vulnerable piece. Hurt Tyler. That was something he would never do.

Next to him, Tyler took a deep breath. Rob looked up to see the gallery owner, Terese, coming up to them. She was a woman of average build, with light brown hair pulled back into a low ponytail. Gold-framed glasses accented her naturally tan and freckled face. She smiled at them as she approached.

"Are you two ready?"

Tyler took another deep breath. "I'm ready."

The showing was over. It had been a success, just as Rob knew it would be. All three of the big pieces sold. A wealthy patron named Bradford Thomas swooped in and paid an exorbitant amount to have *Beginning, Middle and End* together. Rob had taken advantage of a free moment to purchase *After* for himself. He planned to gift it to Tyler later. He didn't like the thought of that piece going to anyone else's home.

Tyler had also received several offers for commissioned work. Rob would look those over later. Right now he looked around for Tyler. They needed to settle with the gallery owner before they went home. Rob spied Tyler over in a dark corner. Tyler looked over his shoulder as he approached, but then went back to staring at the ground.

"Hey. You alright?"

"Yeah." Tyler finally turned and faced him. "Thank you, Rob."

"For what?"

"For everything. For putting this together. For being my agent. For bringing me back to life." He paused and looked down. "For being with me. Thank you."

Rob moved closer. He cupped Tyler's cheek, lifting his face until they made eye contact again. "You don't have to thank me for any of that." He leaned forward and kissed Tyler gently. He wanted so much more from Tyler than his

gratitude. But he didn't know if he had it, and Rob was afraid to lose what he did have with Tyler by pressing him for more. So he swallowed back the words that he wanted to say, deciding instead to just focus on celebrating this night.

“Come on. We'll join your hipster, artsy friends for some micro-beers.”

Tyler laughed. “You might not be an artist, but you're just as hipster and artsy as the rest of us. Especially with those wire-rimmed glasses. All you need is a beret.” Tyler linked their fingers together. “Let's go.”

Chapter 11

A year later

Rob sat on the couch, enjoying a peaceful evening. Rocket and Nancy were sleeping on the throw rug in front of the fireplace. Sirius was busy chewing on a piece of pig ear. Tyler lay across the couch, his head in Rob's lap as they watched a movie. It was a perfect evening. Well, almost perfect. There was something on Rob's mind, and it was keeping him from fully enjoying the night. Tyler poked him in the side, and Rob looked down at him.

"This looks like an ad for Gay Quarterly Magazine. All we need is for the fireplace to be lit."

With a complete lack of any build-up, Rob blurted out what was on his mind. "Move in with me."

Tyler smiled, a little bit of confusion on his brow. "I already live here."

"True. But I'd like it if you shared my bedroom with me. And maybe let go of your apartment."

Tyler rolled over and looked up at him. He didn't say anything for a long time. Rob's heart beat hard as he waited for his answer.

"I'd like that."

Rob smiled and pulled Tyler up and into a kiss. Tyler came up further to straddle his lap. They continued to kiss, the touch of their lips sweet and familiar after a year and a half of being together.

Rob slid his fingers into Tyler's hair, pushing him back slightly. There was something else he wanted to say, and it was beyond past time he said it. Tyler looked down at him with a small smile on his mouth, his dark eyes sparkling with happiness. Rob wondered if Tyler knew what he was about to say. Rob cleared his throat. "Tyler I—" The doorbell rang, interrupting him. Rob cursed, and Tyler groaned.

"Neither of us is expecting anyone. It must be a vacuum cleaner salesman."

Rob laughed and pushed Tyler off his lap to go answer the door. His hand on the doorknob, he looked through the peephole. What he saw had him immediately yanking the door open. Rob couldn't bring himself to say anything. He just stared, unable to comprehend what he was seeing. He heard Tyler coming up behind him.

“Just tell him we already have a vacuum cleaner.”

Rob turned to look at Tyler. He wanted to warn him, to ease him into what was on the other side of that door, so Tyler didn't experience the shock he just had, but he couldn't find the words. Tyler's smile faded, a worried expression crossing his face.

“What's wrong? Who is it?” Tyler stepped around him to look out the door. He went stiff, his body rocking back on his heels. “Cole?”

Rob finally snapped out of his shock when he saw the blood draining from Tyler's face. He grabbed him by the arms and shook him. “Tyler, don't pass out.”

Tyler shook his head hard once. Then he made a strangled noise that was a mix of anguish, joy, and surprise. He tore himself out of Rob's grip and launched himself at the man still standing silently on the door step. “Cole!”

Tyler couldn't believe what he was seeing. But when he wrapped himself around Cole, he felt the solid reality of his body and knew he was really there. “Cole. How? They told me...”

“I know. But maybe we can discuss this inside? I'd like to sit down.”

When Cole spoke, tears came to Tyler's eyes. Cole looked different. He was thinner, much thinner, and his face looked exhausted instead of happy and confident as it used to. But his voice. His voice was the same, the voice that Tyler loved. Tyler pulled Cole into the house. Into the living room where he and Rob had been just moments before. Rob took Cole's small bag from him and sat in the armchair.

“How?” he asked again. Tyler shook his head. “Never mind, I don't care. Just... I can't believe you're back!”

Cole looked at him, a smile tugging at his mouth. “And that makes you happy? Or sad? I can't tell with the tears.”

Tyler laughed and ran a hand over his face. “You know it makes me fucking crazy happy.” Cole reached for his hand and tugged him close. Tyler laughed again as he fell against his chest. He stayed there, wrapped in Cole's arms, listening to his heart beat against his ear

Rob stood up to give the two a moment alone. “I’ll get you something to eat. You’re skin and bones, man.”

Rob was warming up some of the leftover lasagna when he heard someone come into the kitchen behind him. He knew it was Tyler.

“Rob.” Tyler cleared his throat before he went on. “I hate to ask you this when you’ve already done so much for me, but can Cole and I stay here tonight? It’s already late, and you know the apartment hasn’t been lived in for a long time.”

“Of course.” Rob continued fixing the plate. He couldn’t look at Tyler just yet. It was awkward. He’d just had Tyler in his lap, kissing him and about to confess his love. And now Tyler’s boyfriend, who they’d thought dead, was back. Sitting on that same couch. It was too surreal. And of course he felt guilty.

“I’m sorry.”

Rob finally turned around and went over to Tyler. “Don’t be. It’s a miracle to have my friend back.” He cupped Tyler’s cheek, leaning forward to give him one last kiss. He knew he wouldn’t get the chance again. “I know who you really belong to.” A look he didn’t know how to read flashed across Tyler’s face, but he turned his back to it. He couldn’t deal with Tyler’s emotions just then, not if he was going to hold it together in front of Cole.

He went back out to the living room and gave Cole his food. He listened to Cole tell the rest of his story. He had been on a boat, but that boat had been captured by North Korean forces, not sunk in a storm. Because the United States didn’t negotiate with terrorist demands, and that boat shouldn’t have been in North Korean waters, they’d put the story out about the boat sinking. They didn’t want the incident creating an international storm that might lead to escalated actions around the world. It was only through quiet, clandestine dealings that Cole and the others had gained their release.

Rob listened, joy that his friend was returned and guilt at how he’d betrayed him mixing in his head until he had a world-class headache jabbing at his temples. He didn’t say anything, not wanting to ruin this reunion. And when the time came, he left Tyler and Cole to go to bed together while he went to his room. Alone.

Chapter 12

“Best shock I’ve ever received in my life. It’s wonderful to have you back.” It was the next morning. Cole and Tyler were preparing to leave. They’d packed up all of Tyler’s things, which were thankfully all in the spare room. That kept any questions from being asked. Tyler’s work tools were already in the back of his truck.

“It’s good to be back. I can barely believe that I am.” Cole looked over at Tyler saying goodbye to the dogs. “Thank you for taking care of him,” he said, holding his hand out.

Guilt burned Rob’s face. He wanted to come clean with his friend, but now wasn’t the time. And Tyler should have the right to tell his lover everything that had happened. So he just shook his friend’s hand before pulling him into a tight hug. Tyler came over.

“Thank you for taking care of Sirius. I promise I’ll have things figured out so I can take him with me in just a few days.”

Rob fought to keep from clenching his jaw. He didn’t want to keep hearing thanks and gratitude from these two men. He felt like shit, but he wanted more than that. He wanted... Rob cut the thought off. It didn’t matter what he wanted. Cole and Tyler were together again, and he was just the friend who was there to help. He closed the door behind the reunited couple, unable to watch them drive away from him.

Chapter 13

Cole watched Tyler. He was sitting on the couch, sketching out plans for a new sculpture. He'd been home for two weeks. Cole was glad to be out of that hut where he'd been starved and occasionally beaten for two long years. He was happy to be home. He'd already bought a new camera to replace the one that had been confiscated. He didn't anticipate any problems in resuming his career.

His personal life, on the other hand, looked like it was going to need some work. There was a distance between him and Tyler that had never been there before. He had his suspicions as to what was causing it, but he hadn't brought it up yet. Cole had never been afraid of tackling any challenge before. He'd jump right in the path of a charging bull if it meant getting the best shot, but he was afraid of the conversation he needed to have with his lover.

Tyler got up and went to the kitchen area for a drink. Cole took a deep breath and joined him. When he came up behind Tyler, his boyfriend stiffened rather than relaxing back into him like he used to. Cole forced himself to address the situation, rather than hiding from it like he had been. He kissed Tyler on the shoulder. "Talk to me."

Tyler turned to face him, but he didn't quite meet his eyes. "Talk about what?"

"About why you tense up whenever I approach you. About why I've been home for two weeks, but we still haven't made love."

Tyler looked at him for a moment before his eyes skittered away. "I..." He looked back at him. "You haven't exactly tried to be close to me."

"I know. And I know why I haven't. But I'd like to know what's holding *you* back."

Tyler shook his head. "No. You first."

"It's still surreal being back home. I honestly thought I would die there. When I was stuck in that hut, sitting on a dirt floor day after day with nothing to occupy my mind, all I thought about was you. I missed you so much. And I felt guilty. If I hadn't been determined to run off chasing the next great shot, that wouldn't have happened. I wouldn't have been in the situation I was in, with you at home grieving my death. And now that I'm back I'm so fucking happy. But I still feel guilty."

Tyler frowned. "I don't care about any of that. I told you from the beginning I would never stop you from doing what you loved. I never blamed you for any of this. I'm just happy to have you back. It's what I wanted more than anything. But while you were gone..." Tyler paused and took a deep breath. "While you were gone I was with Rob. As a couple."

Cole clenched his jaw, swallowing hard. He'd suspected as much when he found Tyler living with his best friend. It hurt to finally have it confirmed, but he forced himself to relax. "I know. And I understand. I was dead, Tyler. I never expected you to stop living because you thought I had. Rob is a good man, a good friend. If I could have chosen someone for you to be with, it would have been him."

Tyler looked away again. "I've been feeling so guilty. You were suffering in a goddamn prison while I moved—"

"Don't. Don't worry about that. Just be with me now." Tyler stared at him for a long moment before he nodded. Cole pulled Tyler close against him. He felt Tyler's heart racing between them, matching the rhythm of his own. He kissed Tyler deeply. Having his lover in his arms again really confirmed that he was home. Cole gripped Tyler tightly. He kissed his way down his neck, nipping at his skin. Tyler gasped, his head falling back. Cole looked at him, at his beautiful lover, letting it wash over him that Tyler was his again. He tucked his fingers into Tyler's jeans and pulled him around the screens to their bedroom.

Maybe their first time together after two years apart should have been tender, but it wasn't. Their hands frantically removed clothes. Fingers dug hard into muscles. Every kiss was rough and fast, their breathing harsh each time they broke apart. They fell naked on the bed together, Tyler's legs squeezing Cole tightly as he settled between them. They touched and kissed, rough and wild, finesse the furthest thing from their minds.

Cole pulled away from his lover to retrieve what he needed. He watched Tyler beneath him, hips curling up, his cock moving stiffly against his stomach. Cole cursed, quickly kissing Tyler before he moved down to take his lover into his mouth. Tyler's fingers tangled in his hair, his hips pumping up once, but then Tyler pulled him away.

"No. I want you inside me, Cole."

Cole groaned, sliding back on top of his lover. He reached down, slicking them both up with lube before pressing inside his lover. Cole began moving, stroking deep again and again. Tyler encouraged him in demanding whispers,

his hips rising to meet each of his thrusts. Later would be the time for slow, prolonged lovemaking. Right now their bodies moved together quickly, straining to reach the pinnacle of pleasure that had been denied to them for so long.

Tyler came first, crying out Cole's name, his body squeezing him tight. Cole watched Tyler as he came. His lips were parted on a gasp, his eyes closed and face flushed. He'd missed seeing this so much. Cole sped up his thrusts even more. When he went over the edge, it was with an exhilarating mix of physical and emotional pleasure. It felt amazing to be inside Tyler once more, and he was indescribably happy that he'd been granted the chance to do so. He gripped Tyler's shoulder, needing to be anchored to his lover in this moment. And when he came down, Tyler was there, holding him tighter than he ever had before.

Chapter 14

“I miss Sirius.”

Cole looked up from his computer. He was going through images of some test shots he'd taken with his new camera. “You should go and see him. Maybe bring him back for a few days. I don't think the landlord would pitch too much of a fit over that.”

Tyler got up from the couch. “That's a good idea. I'm gonna stop by the store and get him a chew toy. You need anything?”

Cole arched a brow. “My appetite might have changed after two years in captivity, but I don't think I'm ready to start eating kibble.”

Tyler laughed, coming over to kiss him goodbye. “Funny. I was planning to swing by the drug store. They carry dog toys too, you know.”

Cole laughed too, squeezing Tyler's hand. “I know. Bring me back some of those hot chips I like.”

Tyler drove down the two lane street that led to Rob's house. It had started raining while he was in the store, but he was still going to see Sirius. They'd just have to play inside instead of going for a walk like he'd planned. He didn't think Rob would mind. Looking at the clock, he realized Rob might not even be at home. That was fine, he still had a key. He kind of hoped that Rob wasn't home. They hadn't really talked since Cole had returned, and he wasn't sure if he was ready to have that conversation or how it should go.

But when Tyler turned into the crushed-shell driveway, he saw that Rob was indeed home. He was outside, shirtless while chopping wood. He didn't even stop when Tyler pulled in. He just kept going, swinging the axe, splitting piece after piece. Tyler grabbed the bag with the chew toys he'd bought for the dogs and got out of the truck.

He headed over to Rob instead of going inside the house. “Rob, what are you doing?” he called out over the rain and thudding of the axe. Rob didn't turn to look at him when he answered.

“Splitting logs for the fireplace. It needs to be done.”

“I don't think it needs to be done right now while it's raining. You're gonna have to let the wood dry out.” Rob swung the axe again, but this time he left it

embedded in the stump. He stood there with his back to Tyler. Rain trickled down his neck, making his dark hair stick to his skin. Tyler's heart pounded. His brain told him to get back in the truck and leave, to see Sirius another time, but he ignored it and stepped forward, putting a hand on Rob's arm. His skin was warm despite the cool rain that fell on them both. "Rob you should get inside."

Rob spun around, grabbing him by the upper arms. His grip was strong but not painful. Tyler looked up into gray eyes bright with intense emotion. Rob walked him backwards, pushing him up against a tree. He didn't say a word, he just leaned forward and pressed their lips together in the hottest kiss they'd ever exchanged.

Without thinking, Tyler kissed Rob back. He dropped the bag, wrapping his arms around Rob. Rob groaned, his grip tightening, pulling him even closer. There was desperation and hunger and passion in Rob's kiss and touch, and Tyler responded to all of it. When Tyler realized what he was doing he tore his face away. "What are you doing?"

"I miss you," Rob said as if that was answer enough.

Tyler had to look away. "Rob, I know we should talk about what happened between us."

Rob gripped his chin, forcing him to look at him again. "You're here now so let's talk. I miss you. And it's killing me that I want you so much when you're my best friend's lover. My best friend who just came back from the dead." Rob paused, a muscle clenching in his jaw. "But I can't help it. I miss you."

He leaned in, and Tyler's breath caught in his throat, thinking that Rob was going to kiss him again. But he didn't.

"The night Cole came back I was just about to tell you that I loved you. I still do." Rob trailed kisses down his neck, kissing his shoulder. "I had your body, Tyler, but I wanted more. Tell me you felt something more for me than just gratitude and friendship."

Tyler pushed Rob away. "Don't do this. I can't answer that question."

"Why not?"

"Because Cole is back and I love *him*. It doesn't matter what I felt before."

"It matters to me."

“Why? Are you going to try and take me away from him? Because I wouldn’t leave him. And that would make you a shitty friend.”

“You don’t have to tell me I’m a shitty friend!” Rob shouted. “Every time I reach out for you in the night or think about what it was like to kiss you, or even remember bringing you a goddamn sandwich while you worked, I’m reminded what a shitty friend I am! I love you but you belong to my best friend. I think that makes me just about the shittiest friend any guy could have.”

Tyler knew everything Rob felt. His sadness and guilt and longing were clear in his eyes and voice, but there was nothing he could do about that. He was with Cole. They would both have to move on from the relationship they’d shared.

“Rob, I’m sorry. But...” Tyler trailed off, he couldn’t think of what to say. He just looked at Rob. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, before he turned around and left.

Chapter 15

Cole looked up as the door opened. Tyler came in, completely drenched. “Whoa, did you play with Sirius out in the rain?” Tyler didn’t look at him as he answered.

“No. I didn’t see Sirius.”

Cole got up. “What’s wrong? What happened?” Tyler pulled away, refusing to look at him.

“Nothing. I’m going to take a shower and get cleaned up.”

Cole noticed Tyler’s empty hands. “Did you bring my chips?”

“Oh, I forgot. They’re in the truck. I’ll go down and get them later, okay?” Tyler left, heading into the bathroom without waiting for a response from Cole.

Cole stayed in the living room, listening to Tyler get in the shower. After the water had been on for a few minutes, he got up. He took the wet clothes Tyler dropped on the floor and put them in the washer. Then he went and sat on the bed to wait. Tyler came out with a towel around his waist. He stopped as soon as he saw Cole.

“You go off to see Sirius. You come back soaking wet from the rain and tell me you didn’t see your pup. And you didn’t bring my chips. I know you’re spacey, Tyler, but you’re not that bad. Tell me what happened.” Tyler pulled on a pair of sweats before he said anything.

“It’s Rob. He...”

“He what?”

“He told me he loved me.”

Cole sat silent at that. Of course it was something with Rob that had caused Tyler to react like this.

“Look, I know he’s your friend, and I don’t want to cause an end to your friendship. Maybe it would be best if you went to get Sirius, and I’ll just get another agent.”

“What did you say to him?”

Tyler’s brow creased in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“What did you say when he told you he loved you?”

“I told him that I loved you.”

“You didn’t tell him how you felt about him?”

“No, it doesn’t matter.” Tyler huffed out a clearly frustrated breath. “Why are you asking me this?”

“Do you love him?”

Tyler’s face turned red. He didn’t say anything, and that was answer enough. Cole stood. “You don’t need to worry about changing agents. I’ll go talk to Rob.” He stroked a thumb over Tyler’s lips. “It’ll be alright.”

Rob sat on the couch staring at a blank TV. He’d showered and changed into dry clothes after putting the wood he’d chopped under a tarp. He’d probably just made the biggest mistake of his life. Like Tyler had said, it didn’t matter what their feelings for each other were now that Cole was home. He could excuse the relationship he’d had with Tyler before, when they’d thought Cole was dead, but to do what he just had was inexcusable. He wouldn’t be surprised if he’d just lost the friendship of both Tyler and Cole.

It was a dumb move, one he knew he shouldn’t have made. But after sitting at home alone for weeks, going around and around in an endless cycle of grief at losing Tyler, guilt for being with him and happiness that Cole was back, he’d snapped. Things with him and Tyler had ended so abruptly he hadn’t yet processed it. One minute they were happy together and the next he was gone. He missed Tyler, and he was so damn frustrated he didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t have him because he was his best friend’s lover. He didn’t even *want* Tyler to leave Cole. But he didn’t want Tyler to leave him either.

Rob groaned. This was pointless. He wasn’t ever going to be with Tyler again, so he needed to just accept it. He should have handled things better when Tyler showed up in his driveway. Rob promised himself that if Tyler would speak to him again, he would apologize and let him know that they could go back to their friendship and working relationship from before.

When a knock came at the door he wasn’t even surprised. He got up and went over to open it, expecting to be greeted with Cole’s fist. Cole was standing there as expected. His hands were in his pockets, so at least he wasn’t about to be sucker punched. “Cole. I know why you’re here. And I want to say I’m sorry. I was way out of line.” Cole cut him off before he could go any further with his apology.

“We have a problem.”

He paused, and Rob waited with his stomach clenched in fear. This was it. His closest friend was about to tell him that Tyler loved Cole not him and to stay out of their lives.

“I love Tyler. You love Tyler.” Cole paused again, taking a deep breath. “And he loves us both.”

Chapter 16

“Maybe I should leave.”

Rob looked away from the coffee he was pouring. “Are you crazy? Tyler just got you back. Why the hell would you do something so stupid?”

“Crazy.” Cole laughed and scrubbed his hand over his face. “Sometimes I wonder if I am crazy for thinking I can just plug back into my old life. And sometimes I think I’m crazy when I lie awake at night, unable to sleep with all of the stuff in my head, lying there still so I don’t wake Tyler.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t want to burden him with that.”

Rob brought the coffee over to the kitchen table and sat down. “Tyler loves you, and it almost killed him to lose you. Literally.”

“What?”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“When he first got the news from the State Department, he holed up in your apartment alone for four days drinking. And he nearly overdosed on sleeping pills. That’s how he ended up here. I went over there and got him to the emergency room. Then I brought him back with me to keep an eye on him. It was months before he was anything like his former self.”

Cole scrubbed a hand over his face again, harder this time. “No. He didn’t tell me that. Guess we both have things we haven’t communicated to each other.”

“You guys need to talk. If you have problems readjusting to life here, that’s fine. Work on them, get counseling, do whatever you have to do. But don’t leave him. That would be the most selfish thing you could do.”

“He misses you.” Cole nodded at the three animals asleep on the floor. “And the dogs.”

“I... we miss him too. He’s welcome to come and visit anytime.” Rob cleared his throat. “And like I said I know I was out of line. What happened today won’t happen again. I know things are over between us.”

“They don’t have to be.”

Rob jerked in surprise. Coffee sloshed over the rim of his mug, burning his hand. He shook the hot liquid off and wiped his hand along his pants, uncaring that he was staining the material. “What do you mean, *they don't have to be?*” he asked.

Cole pushed his mug around. “When you're a prisoner, you don't have time to do anything but think. So that's what I did. I thought about life. A lot. How if I made it back home, I would live my life the way I wanted, without worrying about little things or what society might think of me. Life is too short and too precious for that.”

“That makes sense. I can see why those thoughts would be on your mind.” Rob laughed a little. “Not that you ever thought all that much on what people thought about you before. But what does that have to do with things not being over with Tyler and me?”

“Well Tyler loves us both. Why should he have to choose one of us to be with? Life is about being happy and being with the people you love. Why can't he be with us both?”

Cole looked at Rob as he sat there stunned. He knew he'd just dropped a massive bomb on his friend, but calm, steady Rob recovered and made up his mind quickly.

“He'll never go for it.”

“I think between the two of us, we can convince him.”

Tyler heard the door open, but it was the sound of clicking nails on concrete that brought him around the bedroom screens into the open living area. “Sirius?” His dog barked at the sound of his voice and ran over to him. Tyler knelt down to hug the black Lab, letting Sirius give him a few doggie kisses before he looked back at the front door. Cole hadn't just brought Sirius with him. Rob was there too, Nancy sitting quietly by his side. Rocket was sniffing around the furniture. Tyler slowly stood. “What's going on?”

“We need to talk. All three of us.”

Tyler tangled his fingers in the fur on the scruff of Sirius's neck. “Talk about what?”

Cole approached him, while Rob stayed standing in front of the door. “We need to talk about the relationships you have with me and with Rob.”

“I don’t have a relationship with Rob. That ended when you came home, Cole. You know that.” Tyler saw the hurt flash across Rob’s face, but what was he supposed to do?

“Would you have ended that relationship if I hadn’t come home?”

“No. But you did, so why are we discussing this?”

“I told you that I was beyond glad to be home and to be with you again. But that doesn’t mean that I’m happy about disrupting the life you built for yourself.” Cole took his hand. “So what I’m suggesting is that you stay with Rob.”

Tyler’s eyebrows shot up. “What? Are you dumping me?”

“No,” Cole answered quickly. “You’ll still be with me.”

Tyler yanked his hand away. “Are you crazy? I can’t be with you both.”

“Why not? Many cultures allow relationships with more than one partner.”

Tyler put his hand up to stop Cole. “Just stop. Spare me the lecture about the polyamorous societies you’ve seen in your world travels.”

“Open relationships and polyamorous relationships are more common here in the United States than you might think.”

Tyler cut his eyes at Cole. “Are you going to make me sit down and watch an episode of *Sister Wives* next?”

“No. I have a feeling that wouldn’t help.”

Tyler looked at Rob. “Are you on board with this craziness?”

Rob finally came forward, Nancy following. “I love you, Tyler. I told you that not three hours ago. I meant it, and I want to be with you. Just like we were before.”

Tyler gave a humorless laugh. “That’s not exactly possible.”

Rob smiled. “Maybe not exactly like before, but I know I don’t want to lose you or what we had together.”

Tyler looked back and forth between Rob and Cole. “I don’t understand what you’re suggesting. I stay with you Cole but go out on dates with Rob?”

“No. Rob and I are thinking that the two of us move in with Rob. That way we’d all be together. You wouldn’t have to be separated from either of us or from the dogs.”

Tyler crossed his arms over his chest. “Seriously? We move in with Rob and I get to date both of you.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Where would I sleep? Rob only has one spare bedroom, so someone is going to have to share. Won’t that be awkward?”

Rob cleared his throat. “At first, yes it will be awkward. But eventually we’ll get things settled and figure out what works for us all.”

“Eventually?”

“Give it three months, Tyler. If after three months you don’t feel like it’s working, you can choose who you want to be with.”

“What if I choose neither of you?”

Rob and Cole shared a glance. “If that’s your choice then we’d accept it. But I know that I hope you won’t decide that way. And I’m sure Cole feels the same.”

Cole wrapped an arm around him. “Tyler, do you love me?”

“Yes. You know I do.”

“And do you love Rob?”

Tyler didn’t answer for a moment. That was something he hadn’t admitted to himself, let alone Rob or Cole. Now he would have to do so in front of them both. He looked at Rob, seeing the tension in the hard line of his clenched jaw. Tyler knew that his answer meant a lot to the other man. “Yes. I love Rob.” Rob visibly relaxed, coming closer and taking Tyler’s other hand.

“Then give us a chance. All of us. You, Cole, me, and the dogs. The four of us miss you. Nancy most of all.”

The Aussie shuffled around a bit when she heard her name. Tyler looked down into the dog’s sweet eyes. She came over, nuzzling under his hand. He stroked her head then looked back up at Rob. “That’s really low, using the dogs to try and convince me.”

Rob smiled. “I know. But I’m willing to do whatever it takes. Come on, Tyler, give us a chance. What do you have to lose?”

Chapter 17

Tyler couldn't believe it. He was back at Rob's, this time sharing the spare bedroom with Cole. When they'd told him of their plan to all live together, he'd looked at them like they'd lost their minds, but Rob and Cole had managed to convince him. Now he was all moved in. His workspace was set up again in Rob's garage. Cole was moved in too. The small half bath had been turned into a temporary dark room for him until they figured out something more permanent.

As far as sleeping arrangements, he was sharing the spare bedroom with Cole. He'd made that decision, and Rob hadn't said anything against it, but it was awkward. He and Cole hadn't been intimate since they'd moved in a week ago, and his interactions with Rob weren't even close to being lover-like. Tyler just felt... awkward. He felt like if he were with Cole, he'd be flaunting it in Rob's face, and if he were with Rob, Cole would think he was cheating on him. So he kept a distance from both men. He knew that wasn't helpful for the way he knew Rob and Cole were hoping things would develop.

Tyler heard a car pull into the driveway as he put everything away for the sandwich he'd just made. He looked outside and saw it was Rob. He was tempted to take his snack back to his bedroom, but avoidance wouldn't help either of them. Tyler stayed put. When Rob came in through the kitchen door, he'd just finished eating. "Hey, how was work?"

"Good. I arranged a collaborative exhibit for three artists. How was your day? Did you make much progress on that commissioned piece?"

"Yeah, it's coming together."

Rob smiled. "I like this."

"What?"

"I like coming home to you, talking about our days in the kitchen like any other couple."

"But we're not like any other couple. We're in an odd threesome where you share me with another man."

"Not exactly. I wouldn't say that I share you, since you haven't let me touch you since you've been back."

“Rob, you know what I mean.”

“I do. But that doesn't mean I don't want to kiss you.”

Rob moved in, trapping him against the counter. Tyler could have moved, but he didn't. He let Rob lean down and kiss him. Rob's fingers slid into his hair, holding him still as he deepened the kiss. Tyler moaned as Rob pressed against him. After several soft, delicious kisses, they separated. Tyler ran his tongue over his lip as he looked at Rob.

“I missed this Tyler. Missed having you in my arms. Missed the way you moan so softly when I kiss you.”

Tyler didn't protest at all when Rob pulled him back for another kiss. Until he heard the kitchen door opening for a second time. It was Cole, back from his run. Tyler abruptly ended the kiss, pushing Rob away from him. He turned to face the sink, listening as Rob and Cole calmly greeted each other. But he couldn't be calm about being caught kissing one boyfriend by another. He was shaking, unable to look at either man. Cole finally spoke to him, asking if he was alright.

“Yeah. I'm just going to take the dogs for a walk.” He stepped around Rob and left the room, still refusing to make eye contact.

Cole watched Tyler grab the leashes and leave the room. “He is wound so tight.”

Rob sighed, running a hand through his dark hair. “He is. We all are actually. That's the first time he's let me touch him since we decided on this.”

“He's put up a wall between us too.” Cole sighed himself. “This won't work if we can't make him comfortable enough to really give it a chance.”

“If it doesn't work out, he might decide he doesn't want to be with either of us. Are you willing to take that risk?”

“I'd risk anything to make Tyler happy.” Cole looked at Rob. “Are you committed to this? This is really what you want?”

“Yes. As long as all three of us are happy with the arrangement. From the way Tyler reacted to you walking in on us kissing, I'd say he feels guilty about being with either of us.”

“He shouldn't. I don't feel any jealousy. Do you?” Cole asked.

“No. But Tyler doesn't know that.”

Cole looked out the window at Tyler's figure in the distance. "I'll figure out a way to make him see."

A few nights later, Tyler and Cole were preparing to go to bed. Cole was already lying down. Tyler joined him, and after kissing Cole good night he went to turn on his side, but Cole pulled him back.

"That's all I get—one kiss?" he asked with a smile.

"I can't. Not with Rob just down the hall."

"We can't put our sex life completely aside, Tyler."

Tyler looked at Cole for a moment, lying there calm, while he was tense and unsure of what life held for them. Cole reached for him again and he snapped. "Well, you should have thought of that before you came up with the brilliant plan for us all to live together! I don't know what the hell my place is with you two. Am I with you, with Rob, or both? Are you guys going to make a calendar to see who gets me on Tuesdays and Thursdays and who gets me on the weekend? This is ridiculous!"

"I just want you to be happy, Tyler. And if that means I share you with someone that you love, then that's what I'll do."

"I'm not happy! I'm confused and uncomfortable."

Cole threw the covers back and got out of bed. "Fine then. Let's go."

"Are you kidding me? We're going back to our apartment in the middle of the night?" Cole tugged him up.

"No, we're not going back to our apartment. That's not our home anymore."

"So then where are we going?"

"To Rob's room."

"Why?"

"Because his bed is bigger."

Tyler let Cole pull him along, completely confused and frustrated with the whole situation. Cole knocked on the door, pushing it open after Rob immediately answered. Rob was sitting up in the bed.

"I heard you guys coming down the hall. What's going on?"

“Tyler is confused as to who he’s with. So I figured the best way to show him that he’s with both of us, is for him to sleep with both of us.”

Tyler jerked his hand away. “What?”

“Relax, I don’t mean like that. Just for us to share a bed. If we sleep together, maybe that’ll help us grow a little closer.”

“Makes sense to me,” Rob said as he lifted the covers, but Tyler didn’t move. Cole stroked his back.

“You know, most guys would jump at the chance to have two lovers.”

Tyler snorted. “Stop watching so much porn.”

Cole laughed softly. “All I’m asking you to do is lie down and sleep with us. That’s it. But if you really don’t want to, you can take the bed in the spare room, and I’ll sleep on the couch.”

Tyler stared at Cole in the near dark. He didn’t need to clearly see his boyfriend’s face to know he meant what he said. He could hear the sincerity in Cole’s voice. If it really bothered him, Cole would let him sleep alone.

Tyler thought about it. He wasn’t really bothered by sleeping with the both of them, as long as all they did was *sleep*. Taking a deep breath, he crossed the room to Rob’s bed. He crawled onto the mattress, Cole following him. Rob rearranged the pillows so they each had one while Cole pulled the covers back up.

Neither Rob nor Cole touched him. Still, after he settled down, Tyler admitted to himself that it felt good to be between his two loves. If he wanted, he could reach out and touch either of them, and he knew they would take him into their arms. Tyler didn’t make that move, but just knowing he could, that both of them were there for him felt good. He took another deep breath, released it slowly, and let himself fall asleep.

Chapter 18

“Do you really think this can work?”

It was late at night. Cole had left the bed so he wouldn't disturb the other two with his tossing and turning. Rob had come out and joined him on the couch a few minutes ago. “I don't know. But I don't know what else to do.”

“Tyler does seem a little more relaxed now that we've been sharing a bed these past few days.”

“Good. I was really hoping that would help him see there won't be any jealousy from either side.”

“Looks like it's working. But what about you?”

Cole looked at his friend in the low light. “What about me?”

“You still seem pretty tense. And sometimes you look like you're a million miles away.”

“Maybe I am. Or at least, however far it is to North Korea.”

“Still thinking about what happened,” Rob asked.

“Yeah. Two years of captivity won't be easy to forget.”

“Maybe it'd be good for you to talk about it with someone. That might help you move past whatever is weighing on your mind.”

Cole made a noncommittal noise. He didn't really want to *go see someone*, but he did want to talk. “You've got two working ears.”

Rob smiled. “I'm not a licensed listener, but I'm here for you, if that's what you want.”

Cole thought for a long moment. “You know when I was a captive, I thought about Tyler every day. Like I said, there wasn't really anything to do but think. But he wasn't the only person I thought about.”

Rob looked at him, his brow raised.

“I thought about my friend, who I've known for a long time. Who's been there for me as a friend and helped me with my career. And I couldn't help but wonder if the feelings I thought I'd picked up on from my friend were real or just in my head.”

“I assume the friend you’re referring to is me.”

“Might be kind of awkward if it wasn’t,” Cole answered.

“And I assume the feelings you’re talking about are the ones I had for you in college.”

“Yes.” Cole looked into Rob’s gray eyes. They’d been close for a long time. Could they grow closer? “You never said anything.”

“You know why I didn’t. I wasn’t ready to come out. But I always appreciated the way you were there for me through it all when I did.”

Cole nodded. “Are those feelings still there? Or is it just appreciation and friendship now?”

Rob had to laugh at Cole asking if he didn’t feel anything but appreciation and friendship. That was a change from the way things had been previously. “I definitely still appreciate your support. And of course you know you have my friendship.” He paused. “There might be more.”

Cole smiled. “Might?”

Rob looked at his friend. His face had filled in again, though there were a few more lines than there were before. But the green eyes still sparkled with mischievous humor, the shaggy blond hair falling across his forehead making him look just as carefree as ever. Rob was glad that Cole was back and even happier to share his home with him. Could he even hope that Cole would be interested in something more? That would be something that would majorly change the dynamics of the relationship they were already trying to build. He finally answered Cole. “Yes. Might. That’d be something we’d need to talk about.”

Cole smiled again. “So then let’s talk.”

Chapter 19

Tyler turned off his blow torch. He'd been at it for hours, working right through lunch. Now he was starving. He flipped up the visor to his welding mask and looked at the clock. Not yet five o'clock. Rob wouldn't be home from the office yet, and Cole was out of the house too. Tyler couldn't wait for one of them to get home and make dinner.

He took off his leather workman's apron and headed into the house to order a pizza. Sirius padded after him. The dog had matured enough that he was able to settle down and nap in the garage while Tyler worked.

Tyler ordered two large pizzas then went to shower while he waited. He was dressed, toweling off his hair when all three dogs barked at the ringing doorbell. Tyler went to answer it. He smiled at the delivery guy's greeting, but it was what he held in his hands that really made him happy. The lanky young man opened the insulated case, and the smell of tomato sauce and melted cheese drifted to his nose, making his stomach rumble loudly. Tyler paid the pizza man quickly, who laughed as he counted back his change. Rob pulled up just as the delivery guy was heading down the walk.

Rob came in and put his briefcase and keys down on the entry table. "Pizza? I had chicken breasts thawing in the fridge."

Tyler scrunched up his nose, carrying the boxes to the kitchen. "I wasn't going to cook it. At least not without burning it. And I was too hungry to wait. I worked through lunch."

"Again?"

Tyler smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, again."

"Where's Cole?"

"He went to the hardware store to get what he needed to close off his section of the garage for his dark room." Cole did most of his work digitally, but he still liked to develop some of his prints.

Rob slid an arm around Tyler's waist. He accepted it, leaning into his embrace. When Rob dropped a kiss on his cheek, Tyler turned his head and kissed Rob on the mouth. Tyler smiled at Rob's surprised expression, but he didn't say anything. He just took the pizza boxes to the counter and got out

plates. By the time he got drinks and napkins on the table, and Rob got the dogs fed, Cole was home. He came in, saw the pizza, and asked if Tyler burned the chicken. Rob laughed while Tyler just rolled his eyes.

Tyler looked around the kitchen as they ate. The three of them conversed with ease, going over their respective projects. The dogs were at their feet, hoping for scraps to fall to the floor. Tyler had to admit that it was nice being there with Rob, Cole and the dogs.

All three of them still slept together, but Tyler hadn't been intimate with either of them. He wasn't sure how they were going to handle that, but in other ways he was adjusting. An easy balance had been established between the three of them, and Tyler no longer jerked away when one of them touched him. He hadn't thought that this arrangement would work, but it was starting to look like it might.

Later that night, Cole lay in the bed he shared with Tyler and Rob. It was a big bed, but a California King would be even better. Or maybe something custom. He could build the frame, but a mattress would have to be ordered. He wondered if that were possible. Tyler sighed and turned from one side to the other, so that he was facing Cole. "Are you okay?"

Tyler sighed again. "Just can't fall asleep tonight. Don't know why."

Cole pulled Tyler into his arms. Cupping his face, he brushed his lips against his lover's. "You should be in a carb-induced coma after all that pizza you ate." Tyler laughed softly, and Cole leaned forward to kiss him again.

They were in the middle of a soft, quiet kiss when Tyler jerked slightly. Cole opened his eyes to see what was wrong. He saw Rob behind Tyler, propped up on one elbow, his head resting on his hand. His other hand was on Tyler's hip, slowly stroking back and forth. Tyler pulled back and looked over his shoulder at Rob.

"Sorry."

"For what?"

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"I was already up."

"Oh."

“You don’t have to stop,” Rob said as he looked at Cole. Tyler looked back at him too. He shifted on the bed, clearly uncomfortable. The comment had been directed at Cole, but Tyler answered.

“No, we were just going to sleep.”

Cole arched a brow. “Were we?” He locked eyes with Rob as he pulled Tyler into another kiss. Tyler gasped sharply, and Cole paused for a moment. He would stop if it really made Tyler uncomfortable to kiss in front of Rob, but Tyler didn’t pull away or ask him to stop. So Cole kept going, running his tongue over Tyler’s bottom lip before stroking inside. Cole’s eyes were still locked on Rob’s. He didn’t miss the way Rob’s jaw clenched as Tyler moaned into Cole’s kiss.

Rob lowered his head and dropped a kiss on Tyler’s shoulder. Cole saw him hesitate just as he had, waiting for any protest from Tyler. When he didn’t, Rob kissed his way along Tyler’s shoulder, up his neck, to the sensitive spot behind his ear. Tyler shivered, and Cole finally closed his eyes. He reached down, smoothing his hand along Tyler’s body until his fingers met Rob’s. Tangling them together, he pulled Rob closer. The balance on the mattress changed slightly as Rob scooted in tighter behind Tyler. But things didn’t go any further. Tyler pulled away from their kiss.

“I think I can sleep now,” he said breathlessly.

Cole let him go without complaint, and Rob scooted back again. Obviously Tyler wasn’t ready to be any more intimate than a couple of kisses and caresses. He looked at Rob for a moment before he lay back down. Both of them respected Tyler’s decision, but he didn’t think any of them would be getting much sleep.

Chapter 20

“I hope this has been helpful. Maybe therapy would have been better.”

It was another late night. Cole and Rob were again talking things over in the living room. They'd snuck out a few times over the past two weeks. Cole had told the entire story of his captivity, with Rob listening patiently to every word. Now Cole's story had come to an end.

“No, this was good.” Cole looked at his friend. Thoughts of his long friendship with Rob and his calm steady demeanor had helped him get through several rough patches during his two years in that hut. A small part of him had loved Rob for a long time, but that love had been one of friendship. Now he wanted to take those feelings to a deeper level. So as was his nature, he went after what he wanted. “Besides, you can't kiss your therapist when you're done with your sessions.”

Rob looked surprised. True, he'd admitted that he had feelings for Cole, but they hadn't discussed it too much after that first conversation. Cole figured he'd moved a little faster than Rob expected, but like he'd said, he no longer believed in putting off what he wanted. Life was too short and fragile to take those types of risks.

Rob cleared his throat. “We've been friends for a long time.”

“And I can't think of a better way to build a family,” Cole answered. “We all care about each other. I don't see why there should be a boundary between us. I don't want to just be your friend, I want to love you too, if you'll give me that chance.” He reached out for Rob, tangling their fingers together.

Rob cleared his throat. “I've been thinking about this a lot.”

“And?”

“And I think it sounds pretty amazing.” He smiled, squeezing Cole's fingers. “We just have to convince Tyler—”

“Why are you two always trying to convince me of something?”

Chapter 21

They both turned around at the sound of Tyler's voice. Cole spoke up first. "What are you doing up?"

Tyler came around to stand in front of the couch. "Do you guys really think I would sleep through both of you leaving the bed night after night?"

Rob held his hand out. When Tyler took it, he pulled him onto the couch between them. Tyler looked at Cole.

"I understand that you needed to talk to someone, Cole. I just don't get why you didn't talk to me."

Cole stroked a palm over Tyler's thigh. "I wasn't trying to exclude you. It's just that a lot of what I wanted to discuss was about you. That makes it a little hard to have an objective conversation. But I promise that I will share my experiences with you, if you want to help me bear that burden."

"I do. You know I do. But right now I want to know what you two were just talking about. Don't try to convince me of anything. I can make up my own mind about what I want."

Cole cleared his throat. "I don't want two separate relationships. Mine with you and Rob's with you and never the two shall meet. I want us all to be together. No separation, no jealousy. Just the three of us, loving each other, in one equal relationship."

Tyler looked at Rob. "And is this what you want too?"

"You know I love you, Tyler. And Cole, I've had feelings for him for a long time. But I pushed them aside, first because I wasn't ready to come out, and then because he was with you." Rob grasped Tyler's hand, brushing his thumb along his wrist. "But you're the center piece in all this, Tyler. The one bringing us together. What do *you* want?"

Tyler took a deep breath. He needed to commit and make a decision. He'd been lying there in bed, thinking how he had a golden opportunity dropped into his lap. He loved Cole. He loved Rob. And crazily enough, they were willing to be in a serious polyamorous relationship, so he could have them both. It would be foolish of him to pass this up. He just had to be brave enough to take what he wanted and trust that the three of them could make this work. Tyler looked into their eyes, first Rob's then Cole's. Gray and green, both filled with hope and love, for him.

“I know that I don’t want to lose either of you. Both of you have my heart. Cole, your passion for life inspires me. Even when I thought you weren’t with me. It was thinking of you pushing me to create that helped get me working again. And Rob, you brought me out of the darkest spot in my life. You *saved* my life. I’ll be forever grateful to you for that. But it’s not just gratitude I feel for you. I love you, Rob and as much as I love Cole, it hurt me when I had to leave you. Having you both feels a lot like I’m having my cake and eating it too, but I don’t care. I’d be crazy to pass up the chance to share my life with two men who both mean the world to me.”

Cole grinned. “Good. I’ve never understood the point of having cake if you aren’t going to eat it.”

Tyler laughed. Shaking his head, he leaned in to kiss Cole. “You’re amazing.” He pulled away to kiss Rob next. “You both are.”

Rob’s fingers slid into his hair, keeping him close. “*You’re* amazing. You know this won’t be easy. We’ll fight and have awkward moments as we figure out how this is going to work. And people are going to talk and judge us.”

“I don’t care. I have both of my loves with me, and that’s all that matters.”

Rob smiled and kissed him again. Behind him, Cole’s fingers slid under Tyler’s T-shirt, caressing his side. Tyler shivered as Cole’s warm breath brushed the back of his neck. “Shouldn’t we figure things out first?”

“Like what? Who cooks and who cleans? We already know you’re not going to be doing the cooking.”

Rob and Tyler both laughed. Tyler’s laugh turned into a soft moan as Cole sucked a kiss onto his neck, his fingers dipping into the waistband of his pajama pants. The position he was in was slightly awkward. He shifted, trying to get more comfortable.

Rob took note and scooted back on the couch until he was against the armrest. He stretched one leg out along the couch and put the other foot on the floor. Then he pulled Tyler to sit between his spread legs, his ass cradled between Rob’s thighs. Rob grasped Tyler’s chin and tilted his head back, leaning down to kiss him. At the other end of the couch Cole slowly pulled his pajama pants off.

Tyler moaned into Rob’s kiss as the heat of Cole’s mouth slid down his shaft. He’d never felt anything like this. Two pairs of hands caressing him, two mouths kissing and pleasuring him. The pleasure was so intense Tyler found

himself gripping the hair of both of his lovers. His hips arched up, seeking more of the hot wet suction of Cole's mouth on his cock. He was open for all of Rob's kisses, letting him control the deep, slow tempo of licks and soft bites. He shuddered as Rob's hand smoothed across his chest, a thumb brushing over his nipples.

Cole released him with one last lick across his cockhead. He kissed his way up Tyler's body until he felt the roughness of his beard and the softness of his lips brush his cheek. Rob lightly grasped his chin, turning him away from his kiss and into Cole's. They kissed for a long moment before Cole stopped and went to kiss Rob.

Tyler watched the two faces above him as they came together in a soft kiss. He'd been with them both, so he wasn't surprised that it was Cole who first grew more aggressive, bringing a hand up to grip Rob's hair. But it was Rob who broke away first.

"As comfortable as this couch is, I don't think it's the right place for this."

Cole and Tyler both laughingly agreed. The three of them got up and went back to the bedroom. Tyler was already naked, so he stood there watching as Rob and Cole both stripped down. He was nervous, and both men sensed it. They came over to him, their warm palms stroking soothingly down his back.

"We're only doing this as long as everyone is comfortable. If you want to stop at any time, Tyler, just say so."

Tyler nodded. Taking a deep breath, he wrapped an arm around Cole, and tugged Rob down into another kiss. Cole moved behind him, kissing along his shoulder. His fingers lightly traced down his stomach and pelvis until he grasped his cock. Tyler gasped, rocking up on his toes. His cock pressed against Rob's belly, and he groaned and pulled him closer. Cole kept stroking him while Rob kissed him. Tyler moaned, circling his hips up against Rob's, then back onto Cole's. His skin tingled with so much stimulation that he was hovering on the edge of orgasm.

They soon ended up on the bed. This time, Cole sat with his back against the headboard. He pulled Tyler onto the bed, on his knees facing him. "This alright?"

Tyler nodded. It was definitely alright. He bent and took Cole into his mouth. Cole hissed, his fingers sliding into Tyler's hair and holding on tight. Tyler sucked him slowly, licking along the thickness of his shaft and closing his

lips over the head. He'd always loved pleasuring his man in this way. He looked up and saw Cole with his head pressed against the headboard. His eyes were open, looking at Rob who was behind Tyler.

Tyler felt Rob's hand on his ass, rubbing him softly. The bed dipped as Rob changed position. He bent to run his lips along Tyler's ass, pressing kisses to his skin. Tyler moaned around the thick shaft filling his mouth as he felt Rob's tongue teasing at his entrance. He didn't know if he would be able to survive where this was going. He was already about to explode.

After several long wonderful moments of Rob tonguing him everywhere on his ass and between his legs he shifted again. Rob rose up as Cole leaned over to the nightstand. He grabbed lube, but before he tossed it to Rob he took the time to check with everyone.

"Do you both want to do this? We don't have to go any further if someone wants to stop."

Tyler looked over his shoulder at Rob then at Cole. "No. I don't want to stop."

Cole tossed the bottle to Rob. Then he pulled Tyler into a kiss as Rob took care of the preparations. It wasn't long before Tyler's eyes were drifting shut, a moan escaping him as Rob eased inside. Cole cupped the side of his face, whispering against his mouth.

"Does that feel good, Tyler?"

Tyler nodded yes, biting his lip as Rob slowly stroked in and out of him.

"It looks beautiful." Cole kissed him again. "You're beautiful. You both are."

Again Tyler nodded, the sweet, drugging pleasure swirling through his body making it difficult for him to think, let alone form words and talk. Tyler opened his eyes and took in Cole sitting in front of him. He was still hard, his cock standing up against his belly. Tyler leaned back down, sucking him once more. He timed his movements to Rob's, moaning and moving his mouth in rhythm with Rob's slow thrusts. Cole caressed his face, telling him it felt good and encouraging him to keep going.

Rob's hand slipped around from where it gripped his thigh to take hold of Tyler's cock. A deep groan rose up from his chest as Rob pumped him. He was insanely hard, his sac tight and his cock throbbing. Tyler couldn't help it. He took his mouth away from Cole. "I'm about to come," he gasped.

Rob sped up both his strokes in him and on his cock, while Cole pulled him up into a wild kiss. Tyler's orgasm rushed up his shaft and he let go. He came in Rob's hand, crying out both of his lovers' names. Tyler shuddered and writhed, both of his men touching and kissing him everywhere until his body was so sensitive from all the stimulation he nearly screamed.

His lovers eased back on their touches. When he'd calmed some, Tyler reached for Cole's shaft. He pumped him swiftly, working him to the edge. Cole came with a deep groan, his head pressing back into the headboard, fingers tightly gripping Tyler. Before Cole was finished, Tyler felt Rob speed up his thrusts, pumping into him hard. A whispered curse came from him before he gripped Tyler just as tight as Cole, groaning his way through his own release.

Tyler lay there between them, his body still humming with arousal. It felt amazing, to give both of these men that he loved so much such deep pleasure. And the way they touched him, both with love and passion, while his name was on their lips, Tyler knew that his feelings were returned.

Tyler snuggled between Rob and Cole. He rested with his head on Cole's chest, Rob's leg tossed over his. "For our first threesome, we didn't do too shabbily," he said in a nonchalant tone.

Cole laughed, and Rob dropped a kiss on his hair. "We'll have plenty more time to practice our technique. We'll score a perfect ten in no time," Cole joked.

The three of them laughed again. When they quieted, Tyler reached for their hands, twining his fingers through theirs.

Tyler smiled softly at Cole. "I thought I lost you forever, Cole. I grieved for you for a long time. Then with Rob I figured out how to live again." He turned to look into the steady gray gaze of the man who had become his rock. "And Rob, it hurt, but I was ready to give up the life I'd made with you when Cole came back." He squeezed their fingers. "I never would have thought that I'd have a second chance with you both." He leaned up to kiss each of them. "But I'm very glad that I do."

The End

Author Bio

I love to write stories that are emotional and lovely, with sex that is integral to the characters' romantic arc. My stories involve straight couples, curvy couples, gay couples, interracial couples... I write them all. I feel the same as many others; love is love and everyone should have their story told.

Other Books by Christa Tomlinson

The Sergeant – available on Amazon, Barnes and Noble.com and All Romance ebooks.

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[Email](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Blog](#)

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THE SHOPPING MALL MASSACRE

By Erica Pike

Photo Description

Two college-aged guys stand in a hallway with their shirts tied at the back, revealing their stomachs. One has his hand on the wall, leaning over the second guy with his other elbow on the second guy's shoulder as if he's about to kiss him. The second guy's body is leaning toward the other's, but he's looking at the camera with "joke" written all over his face.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Here are the thoughts from the guy on the left about the guy on the right (facing camera):

He's just joking. I know he's just joking. But I'm not. I want to shove him into this wall and stick my tongue down his throat. Then I want him to turn us around and shove me into this wall, hard. I want his hands, his mouth, something on my body. Now.

Holding myself back is killing me. So is wanting him.

Here are the other details on what I would like to read:

1. I know you'll think contemporary because of the background of the image, which is okay, but I'd **really prefer futuristic, post-apocalyptic, alternate universe, or sci-fi.** (Not historical or steampunk, though.)

2. I'd like for the image to be inspiration for the characters, but not the setting. **Be creative with the setting. Please choose a setting other than some sort of academy or university.**

3. These two are not best friends from growing up together, nor enemies/competitors toying with each other; **they met within the past year or so, somehow, so they're still relatively new to each other.**

4. **No insta-love, please,** even if you decide there's some sort of soulmate principle in play. (I'm totally good with soulmate setups, if you want to go that way. Just make them work for it. It's not a required element, though.)

5. Plot and characters are more important than sex. **Sex is not required; romance is.**

6. If you want to add paranormal, fantasy, or magical elements, I'd prefer it be something other than vampires, shapeshifters, or elves. Think outside the box. (Alien is good.)

7. Anything else is fine. You don't have to ask me about BDSM, dub-con, non-con (or other trigger warnings), HFN instead of HEA, tentacle sex, ménage, etc. Just go for it. =)

Thank you!

Adara

Story Info

Genre: post-apocalyptic

Tags: zombies, sweet/no sex, survival, young adult characters, coming out, coming of age, HFN

Content Warnings: graphic violence, blood and gore

Word Count: 15,430

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THE SHOPPING MALL MASSACRE

By Erica Pike

Chapter 1

Massacre

I wasn't alone when the zombie apocalypse began. I was in a fucking mall on a Saturday afternoon. Granted, the mall wasn't very big, but with Fairview Falls being a small town, there wasn't much else to do on weekends.

The day had been uneventful. My roommate was stuck in bed with a nasty flu. His coughing kept waking me up, so I got dressed before dawn to go for a run on the campus grounds. I ate a bowl of cereal while some of the other dorm residents crawled out of their rooms, and then checked for emails on my phone. There was one from Dad saying that yet another co-worker from the auto shop had been taken to the hospital because of the flu and was I okay. Dad only ever sent a short line once a month to see if I was alive. He wasn't exactly the chatty type, but having a single son as his only living family, I supposed he needed to make sure I was still breathing.

I shrugged it off with a quick answer. My roommate had been coughing nonstop for twenty-four hours, just like half the campus, but I felt fine. I made sure to stay out of his way so I wouldn't catch it. Still, it wasn't anything to worry about. A little cold wasn't going to kill anyone.

Man, was I ever wrong.

You'd think I would have avoided crowded places to evade the flu, but it hadn't even crossed my mind. The main thing on my agenda that day was to stay away from my roommate. The old mall was a nice place to hang out in. It only contained locally owned businesses, a small food court on the second floor and various recreation on the first floor like an arcade, a bowling alley and a small movie theatre.

The plan was to get a haircut and then meet up with a couple of buddies from the lacrosse team for a movie. I'd only managed to get my wild curls under semi-control with the haircut when the lacrosse captain, Oliver, caught up with me. He was a year older, and I'd only known him for a couple of months, but he was one of those people who gets along with everyone.

He slung his arm around me as he frequently did, and started making a silly joke about a farmer, a goose and a hedgehog. I never got to hear the punch line because as we got on the escalator to reach the downstairs rendezvous, a horde

of people stormed the doors and started attacking shoppers with sick, manic frenzy. The shoppers screamed and howled as their necks were mauled and limbs got ripped off. The blood sprayed everywhere and the floor was soon littered with intestines and sickening gore. I still get flashbacks of it.

You know in the movies when someone trips their best friend to save themselves? Now, I'm not saying I'd trip Oliver to get away, but I witnessed right there that real-life zombies—or crazies—didn't stop to eat the fallen; they kept on killing whomever they could reach. Their goal didn't seem to be to feed, but to satiate some primal urge to maim and destroy everything that moved.

Their quick, but erratic movements were the stuff of nightmares. Their limbs jerked as they walked. Some grabbed their heads and screamed as they tore at their own flesh. Whatever was going on in their brains, I prayed I'd never find out.

The people on the ground floor scattered in every direction. A few even forgot to grab their kids in the hurry to get away. The smallest ones got lucky, because the crazies didn't seem to notice anyone below their line of sight. How long those kids' luck lasted was beyond me, because I didn't stick around to find out.

All this seemed to happen over the course of minutes, but it was only a few seconds. Oliver and I were heading toward the massacre, but neither of us seemed to realize it. I didn't snap out of it until a group of crazies followed some people to the escalators. They were running up toward me. Under different circumstances, watching us all run up a downward-moving escalator would have been funny, but there was nothing funny about the bloodcurdling screams at my back. The people behind me pushed me upward so my feet barely touched the steps. I made the mistake of looking over my shoulder to see a crazy, not ten steps below me, dig its teeth into a man's neck. The teenagers next in line of attack screamed and jumped down, only to be attacked by the crazies below.

Once I reached the top, I acted no more rationally than the rest of the people running around like headless chickens. First, I ran in a small circle while I tried to decide where to go, and then I fell into a couple of abandoned strollers, sending them spinning toward a crazy. Her bloodshot eyes were locked onto me as she went down, but that didn't stop her. My veins turned to ice as she crawled jerkily toward me, her bony elbows sticking out. A bloodthirsty spider

was what came to mind. She didn't even try to grab the feet that pelted the ground in front of her; she was out to get *me*. It was then that I noticed that it was Brenda from the dorm. For the past two months, I'd made it my mission to avoid her as she refused to accept my subtle hints of non-interest every time. By the way she snapped her teeth as she crawled, she looked more determined than ever to get her hands—or teeth—on me.

The polished floor beneath me was like an ice skating rink as I tried to get a foothold in my scramble to get up. Brenda's hand was by my foot, when someone grabbed me off the floor and pushed me into the toy store. I knew immediately that it was a bad choice. It was a trap with only the door to escape through. I shook off my saviour and ran for the door—toward crazy Brenda, figuring I'd jump over her or something—but just as I reached it I was yanked back, and watched in dismay as my only way of escape was closed.

“Good,” a guy's voice boomed over the panicked cries. I had seen him once in the bowling alley. He was hard to miss with his dark, bulging muscles under his red bowling shirt that had “Leon” written on the back in white. He wasn't wearing it now, though. He was wearing camouflage army pants and a brown T-shirt so light, it made his skin seem darker. Hell, he even wore combat boots. It was as if he'd just run into the mall to get something for the little girl who clung to him, before being shipped off to battle.

“The glass will break,” another guy said, just as Brenda's bloody palm landed with a thud on the door. Her bloodshot eyes were glued on me and she bared her teeth with a growl.

“Nah, it's impact glass. Me and my crew changed it out last year after those kids broke in,” a Hispanic guy replied. He had grease on his fingers as well as a nametag that said “Raul Sanchez” attached to his blue overalls. “It might not hold if they all push against it, so let's cover the glass up with something.”

All around me people started emptying shelves to use them to block out the horrid massacre on the other side of the windows. My body was shaking too much to do anything, until the guy still holding onto me cleared his throat.

“You okay?” he asked.

It was Oliver. His slender jawline was dotted with blood spray, and his dark brown hair under his stupid yellow smiley hat was drenched in sweat. The whole scenario taking place outside the store still seemed unreal to me, and I'm pretty sure I looked like a deer caught in headlights. He gave me a quick smile that had my insides doing little flip-flops—not for the first time—and took my hand gingerly into his.

“It’s gonna be okay, Bastian.”

A thud resounded on one of the windows that were still uncovered. Automatically, I jumped, and regrettably, looked. A hairless crazy lodged his teeth into a woman’s neck and tore out a piece. The woman cried out as her veins sprayed the glass red, leaving a messy silhouette of her body as she slid down.

My voice shook as violently as my body when I spoke, “*Okay? You’ve gotta be fuckin’ kidding me. How are we going to be okay? There are friggin’ zombies out there.*”

Oliver pulled my hand and led me away from the windows.

“Well, they’re not typical zombies. They look more like infecteds. Hollywood’s been predicting this for years. I’ve watched every single zombie-slash-infected movie ever made, and read every single book. We’ll survive this.”

I couldn’t believe how calm he was. Did he not see what I saw out there? Did he not realize that we were locked up in a toy store of all places, unable to get out?

But taking a closer look at him as he started emptying shelves, his jaws were clenched tight and his hands were shaking. He knew we were screwed, he was just being his annoyingly optimistic self.

The windows were now covered up with freestanding shelves that provided no additional protection. All they did was keep the crazies from seeing us. The crazies, however, hadn’t even tried breaking in after the shelves went up, as if operating by the “out of sight, out of mind” principle. Every once in a while something would bang against the windows, but it sounded more like people trying to get away than crazies trying to get in. Needless to say, I felt horrible not being out there helping, but the mental image of Brenda’s sick insistence on trying to get to me kept me from doing it. Besides, I was scared shitless. I could try to ignore the poor souls outside since the glass was covered, but “out of sight, out of mind” wasn’t working so well for me. The shelves did a poor job of keeping the sounds from reaching my ears.

Oliver sat hunched in a corner next to me. He rubbed a hand over his face and sighed. It seemed the gravity of the situation had finally kicked in. He was always—*always*—the one telling jokes and making others laugh. He could

come up with funny stories and comic sketches on the spot, which made him the perfect drama student.

“You think the other guys made it?” I asked him in the unnatural stillness in the room.

“I don’t know. Let’s not think about it. Try to get some sleep or something in case we have to make a run for it.”

As if I could sleep. The adrenaline was still pumping techno beats in my veins.

“Be quiet,” a guy in a black trench coat whispered. It was the same guy who’d been questioning Leon’s every move.

Leon had automatically taken charge of the situation. Maybe it was because he was in the army, or maybe because he had this calm, rational attitude. Whatever it was, people automatically followed his commands. That is, all except for the trench-coat guy.

I shifted on my other side, away from Oliver, to try to get comfortable. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement to keep quiet, so the crazies wouldn’t hear us, but the silence was uncomfortable. The air was so full of tension, almost like people holding their breath while watching an airplane crash.

Instead of sleeping, I opened a small packet of M&M’s someone had distributed earlier. Everyone had received a stash. You’d think the kids would be stuffing their faces, but all they did was cling onto the candies, melting the chocolates inside. The very sad truth was that only half of those kids had their parents with them. The missing parents must have run out to check what was going on. Aside from the nine kids of varying ages, there were three people wearing shirts and hats with the store’s logo, seven adults or older teens, and then Oliver and I. All, except Leon and his little daughter, were sitting with our backs against a wall at the far end of the store.

“We need to conserve the food and water we have,” Leon said quietly, continuing an earlier conversation I had lost track of every time someone outside the store screamed, or a crazy shrieked.

“Candy, not food,” the trench-coat guy said.

Leon ignored him. “Someone will come rescue us.”

“How do you know anyone’s coming?” Trench Coat asked, his voice tense.

“They’ll send someone, if not the police then the special forces.”

“What the fuck can they do? Those things out there just keep killing. No bullets will stop them,” the man continued.

A number of kids let out wails of terror.

“You don’t know that,” a woman replied in hushed irritation, over the cries.

“They have some sort of superhuman strength. I mean, did you see how they ripped off that—”

“Okay,” Leon interrupted. “Yes, they’re strong, but I don’t think they can get in here. We need to assess the situation and decide if we’re waiting for rescue or if we’re gonna try to make it out. At the moment, I say we wait until we know more. Does anyone have a radio, or a phone? I can’t get through on mine and the landlines are busy.”

A teen tucked under her father’s arm, dug out an iPod and slid it over to Leon.

He nodded at the girl. “Okay, good. I’m going to see if anyone’s reporting this. Everyone else try to get someone on the phone. Try 911 or anyone else you think can help.”

About twenty phones punctured the air, one of which was mine. I had already tried to reach Dad, but without luck. By the huffs and whines from the others, they didn’t get ahold of anyone either.

“Lines are overloaded,” someone said.

Leon stared down at the floor as he listened through the earbuds. Then he scooted his girl toward us and stood up. The group sat and watched as he paced about, crossed his arms in front of him, and finally hung his head.

“What?” Trench Coat asked, as he, too, got up off the floor.

Leon leaned against a cooler and pulled the earbuds out. “We need to stay here. It’s not safe out on the streets.”

“Are the police coming?” the man continued.

Leon rubbed his eyes as he exhaled. “They’re doing what they can.”

“This is happening elsewhere too, isn’t it?” an employee with a nametag that said “Lela” asked.

“Yes,” Leon answered. “It’s happening all over.”

I held my breath for a moment while I tried to understand what he was saying. There were more? In this town? In the country? In the world? The others seemed to be digesting the news as well, but no one said a thing. Until the lights went out.

Chapter 2

Crawlspace

“I’m so sick of people arguing,” I muttered to Oliver, three days after the attack. I hadn’t been sleeping much and from the shadows under Oliver’s eyes, he hadn’t gotten much either.

Oliver turned his cap in circles between his knees as he watched Leon and Donald—Trench Coat—argue about whether or not to stay.

“He should just leave. Would save us a lot of drama,” Oliver said.

“He’d die,” I replied. It went without saying. Donald was an all-bark-no-bite kind of guy. He’d never survive on his own.

His need to get away was understandable. We were barricaded in a small store on the second floor of a mall with no way to reach the outside world. We were trapped like chickens in a coop, and on the outside were wolves ready to strike. The candy and drinks were in limited supply, and the only place we could use for a toilet was a toy box from the store. To top it off, our only source of light came from the hallway skylights that shone through the topmost part of the store windows, and small flashlights with superhero figures on the handles. Supposedly the mall had a backup generator, but it never kicked in. There was no way in or out, and we had nothing to defend ourselves with. If push came to shove, we might be able to smack the crazies over the head with a toy dinosaur, or make traps by placing a bunch of cars and marbles on the floor—*Home Alone* style. The situation was nothing if not claustrophobic.

A high-pitched shriek came from a crazy on the first floor to remind us why we were so thoroughly barricaded. Not that I could forget. Leon had figured that they would leave, but it didn’t sound like it. Oliver had suggested that they didn’t know where the exits were, or couldn’t open the doors because they’d have to pull. After having witnessed their one-track-minded killing, I thought he was right.

Oliver pointed a flashlight at me. “So, Donald dies. Not much loss there.”

I chuckled to myself as I shielded my eyes from the piercing brightness.

Oliver brought the cone of light under his jaw, casting eerie shadows on his face. He smirked and then spoke in a deep, movie-trailer voice:

“He walked out the door to flee the plague but ran into a zombie feasting on fingers. He wanted her heart. She wanted his brains. One man. One zombie. *The Love That Didn't Last.*”

I barked out a laugh. It sounded strange in the heavy atmosphere, but I couldn't help myself. After all that had happened, I thought I'd never laugh again.

Oliver's face lit up, still under the dark shadows. Then he went on again in that deep voice:

“They had a child. A girl. A half-zombie aberration with no place in this world. Until she met Fluffy the Zombie Slayer at the mall. One child. One slayer. One *epic* massacre. *The Shopping Mall Massacre.*”

Again, I laughed, and received glances from other people.

Leon's daughter Marissa wailed and ran to her father.

“Daddy, Oliver's saying ugly things, and I have to pee.”

Leon looked up from his heated discussion with Donald, and fixed Oliver with a stern look.

“Sorry,” Oliver muttered, and clicked off his flashlight.

“We're not opening that door, and that's final,” Leon said, before he picked up Marissa to take her to the bathroom. A few minutes later he walked back with a grimace on his face. “Phe-ew. Anyone got ideas on how to improve the bathroom situation?”

The employee restroom was pretty useless since, as of yesterday, there was no running water. Raul, who worked as a handyman all over town, said that the pumps were powered by electricity with a backup generator that only ran for two days before needing a refill. Apparently there was no one around to refill it, which resulted in a discussion about what things must be like on the outside.

Lela, the teenage store employee, plopped herself on a colorful puzzle mat in the spot she'd claimed as her own. We each had such a spot, trying to make the best of things. “We've got more LEGO boxes. Then we can empty some paper boxes.”

“Or build a toilet out of LEGO blocks,” muttered Oliver. He had kept the kids and teens busy for two whole days by overseeing the construction of a massive LEGO castle.

“Boxes, yeah,” Leon muttered as he stalked toward the barricades, carefully removed a small plush clown and peeked out. Then he turned around and stared up at the ceiling. “Then there’s air conditioning.”

And that’s how I found myself crawling through the tight tunnel of a ventilation shaft, to scout out the store next to ours. It was a small electronics store called Tronix. Leon gave us a list of things to find, like walkie-talkies, batteries, screwdrivers and stuff. He’d have gone himself, but he was too bulky to fit through the air duct. When Oliver volunteered, I said I’d go too. I could have kicked myself as soon as the words were out, but figured I had to restore my manhood after that headless chicken run out in the hall. Oliver hadn’t done that—he’d kept a level head and looked for safety, rescuing me on the way. Another team took the duct in the other direction, to check if there was any way to get food from the food court.

I can’t say we were a stealthy team, Oliver and I. Oliver, in the lead, cursed and sneezed as he stirred up the dust, while our elbows and knees banged against the steel walls. It was unbelievable how clean air could travel through such dust-filled, spider-infested ventilation shafts. Leon gave Oliver the lid of a paper box to push ahead of him so he wouldn’t drown in lint, but it only took the brunt of it. The worst part wasn’t the dust though, it was the smell of cooking oil and the hardened grease. No doubt I’d light up like a match if the Spiderman flashlight in my mouth somehow broke and miraculously made a spark.

“We’re here,” Oliver said around his flashlight.

He pushed against the grille first, and then banged on it as quietly as possible to try to get it open.

“Fuck,” he growled.

“Who’s there?” a trembling female voice asked from below.

“Hello?” Oliver said. “How many are you? Are you safe?”

“Yes, we’re safe,” the woman replied. “There’s two of us. Elizabeth’s hurt. Are you the rescue? Do you know what’s happening? What are those things?”

Oliver stayed quiet for a moment before answering, “Was she bit?”

Of course. If they were zombies or infected by some crazy virus, she could turn. I hadn’t watched as many zombie movies as Oliver, but I’d seen enough. However, three days had passed since Elizabeth would’ve been bitten, and Hollywood-zombies usually turned in minutes.

“No, she hurt herself while we were blocking the door.”

“Okay. Can you get the grille off?”

There was rustling, and within minutes we were being pulled out by two sets of hands.

There was more light in the electronics store than in the toy store. The women hadn't covered the top of the windows, possibly because there weren't as many shelves here to cover the windows with, or because the women were too short. Either way, it didn't feel as gloomy in here. I might even move out of the toy store and stay here, but only if Oliver would stay with me.

A woman wearing a white doctor's robe and a tag that said “Maria Gonzalez” took one look at us, and sagged against a wall. “You're not the rescue.”

“No, sorry,” I said. We certainly weren't wearing cool special forces outfits. We were wearing jeans and T-shirts covered in grime and dust. “We're with a group in the toy store.”

“We don't really know anything,” Oliver added. “Except that this isn't just happening here, and Leon, our leader, thinks that we shouldn't expect rescue anytime soon.”

“Oh God,” Elizabeth said. She brushed away curly hair from her wire-rimmed glasses. Her knee was bandaged up with a torn bit of the hem of her skirt. “My kids are at home. Oh God, oh God, oh God. I have to get to them. They're sick. I just came here to get some cough medicine but never reached the pharmacy.”

Maria kneeled down by Elizabeth and embraced her. “We already know.” She gestured with her chin toward a small radio. “Elizabeth's been having a tough time with it.” She rocked Elizabeth and shushed gently as if she'd already done this many times before.

“They could be safe,” I said, although it had already occurred to me that maybe the flu was the cause of this. “I mean, *we're* safe, so you never know.”

Oliver was already gathering stuff for us to take back, but then he stopped and pressed his hand against the adjoining wall of the toy store.

“Think we can knock it down? Then we won't have to crawl back here if Leon decides he needs something else.”

With Elizabeth unhinged, the two women probably shouldn't be alone either. Maria was slim enough to crawl back with us, but Elizabeth would never fit in the small space.

"Won't the crazies hear the noise?" I asked, but pushed against the wall as well. There were rods on it with stuff hanging on them, so the wall obviously had strength, but with a hammer we might be able to break through.

"We'll be careful," said Oliver. "We can do this. The wall isn't concrete. I'll find tools."

He brought back a pair of sharp pliers and started hacking at the wall whenever a crazy shrieked outside.

A series of yells and squeals came from the other side of the wall, as well as Leon's voice: "Oliver?"

Oliver cupped his hands around his mouth and spoke against the wall. "Yeah, it's us. There are two women here, but the place is locked up, no crazies. One of them is a doctor. Help us break through?"

"I'm a pharmacist," said Maria, but it didn't matter. Within minutes, there was hacking and banging from the other side as well. The noise made me nervous, and I kept darting my eyes to the door, but either the crazies didn't hear us or they were busy munching on blood and bones. Before long, there was a human-sized hole in the wall.

Leon helped the women get through.

"What's that?" Donald asked. I didn't have to see him to know he was pointing at Elizabeth's bandage.

"She wasn't bitten," I said.

"How do you know?"

"Because they said so."

"Besides," Oliver added, "we don't know how the infection spreads or even *if* it spreads. Maybe the crazies were a part of a secret military experimentation gone wrong."

They weren't, and Oliver knew it. He had seen Brenda when he dragged me off into the toy store. It was highly unlikely that she was a part of some military experimentation. She did, however, have the flu, or so her roommate had complained over my last meal before the outbreak.

“I don’t believe it,” Donald continued. “She looks like she has a fever.”

He did have a point. Elizabeth’s lower lip trembled on her pasty face. She hugged herself as sweat slithered down her temple.

Maria unwrapped the wound to reveal a red and swollen gash.

“We need some supplies from the pharmacy.”

“That’s on the other side of Tronix, right?” Oliver asked, already crawling back through the hole to knock down the next wall.

“Wait,” Leon said. “We don’t know if the other side is secure.”

I had already foreseen that, and was up on a chair to get back into the ventilation shaft.

“Wait just a minute, guys,” Leon repeated. “Let me find some tools for you first.”

Half an hour later, Oliver and I were dragging ourselves through the shaft again, armed with a Swiss army knife to get the grille off from the inside, and a makeshift weapon made from a long rod and a sharp screwdriver heavily taped to the end. Oliver was behind me with a walkie-talkie and a pocketknife we found in one of the drawers.

“Wish we could’ve poked a little peeping hole to see if the pharmacy was secure. I hate crawling through this vent,” Oliver complained.

The constant tickling in my nose overwhelmed me, and I sneezed. “Yeah, the crazies would tear through that hole faster than we could barricade ourselves back in the toy store. Didn’t you see how they ripped off people’s arms? They must have super strength.”

Oliver sneezed, sucked in air through his nose, and sneezed again. “I don’t think they have superhuman strength. They use teeth and nails to dig through the skin and muscle first. They’re just driven by this sick need to kill. I mean, if mothers can lift cars off their kids from pure adrenaline, the crazies don’t need superhuman strength if they’re wired only to kill.”

I glanced over my shoulder to look at him. “So you’re saying that they’re on some sort of adrenaline rush?”

“They look like long-term meth users, times ten.”

“You think they’re meth users?”

Sure, there were meth users in Fairview, but not this many. Brenda was one of those goodie-goodie girls who walked with her books clamped to her chest. Okay, that might be a slight exaggeration, but she was not your typical meth user.

Oliver shook his head. “No, I’m just saying that they’re all pumped up on aggressiveness and probably adrenaline, and that’s enough to make them strong. They don’t care about anything else.”

I didn’t reply because I was at the grille and could peer through it. The shelves were aligned toward the door, so that would give us some cover, but...

“Shit, the door’s open, but I don’t see any crazies.”

“Anything moving outside?”

I watched for about a minute before answering, “No.” There were only crazy shrieks from far away, but Oliver could already hear those. There was no movement in, or outside the pharmacy.

“Kind of feels like a suicide mission.”

“I know,” Oliver said, “but we’re all dead if we don’t have food and water, and Elizabeth needs those meds before Donald goes postal.”

“What if she’s infected?”

If the flu was the culprit, she could infect us all... after she tore our limbs off.

“What if she isn’t?”

“But what if she is? She said her kids were sick. Normally, I’d be the last person to agree with Donald. I hate to say this, but he sometimes has a point. We won’t survive by taking risks.”

“We’ll tie her up or something. I’m sure she’ll understand. But look, if you don’t want to go down there, I’ll switch places with you so you can stay up here to take whatever I give you. Just crawl a bit farther from the grille so I can lower myself down.”

“No, I’m fine,” I answered abruptly. I was scared as shit, but I didn’t want to look weak in front of Oliver. “At least we have weapons now.”

“Yeah,” Oliver said hesitantly. “Just, if we run into crazies, aim for the head.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s how zombies are killed in the movies.”

“Fine.” It was probably easier said than done. I mean, skulls are made of hard stuff. Besides, we weren’t on a movie set.

“Okay,” I said on a sigh. “I can’t see anyone down there, so I’m gonna get the grille off and sneak down. I’ll crouch behind the counter until you’re down as well. Just stay low, and keep your knife ready.”

“Will do, sir,” Oliver replied, with a smirk in his voice. Idiot.

With the Swiss army knife and sheer stubbornness, I began demolishing the grille. It was made of thin plastic so it wasn’t really hard. After a few stabs and knocks, it fell to the floor. The sound reverberated through the quiet store. Oliver grabbed my ankle and pulled me back. We stayed silent for a while to see if the noise had generated attention.

Our first two days and nights in the mall had been filled with constant shrieks from the crazies, but the sounds were lessening. You’d hear the occasional footsteps of people scurrying by, but it had to be non-crazies, because the crazies didn’t scurry. Oliver thought that people barricaded in the other shops must be running out of food and were trying to make a run for it. Sometimes we’d hear them scream as they were undoubtedly attacked, and sometimes we heard nothing and assumed they must have made it out. Most of the crazy shrieks seemed to come from the first floor, so making a break for it was a popular topic back at the toy store. The electricity had been out since the first day, so the escalators probably weren’t working. Maybe the crazies didn’t know how to work stairs when they weren’t compelled to chase people up them.

When we didn’t hear anyone approach, I risked a glance.

“Here I go.”

My hands shook violently as I pulled myself toward the opening. Just then I noticed streaks of blood on the floor in between scattered candy and broken shelves. Someone had been killed in here and dragged out.

Oliver’s voice jerked me out of my panicked freeze. “You really don’t have to go. I can get what we need.”

I swallowed hard and tried to get my breathing under control. “It’ll be faster if we both go.”

No more stalling. The faster we got this done, the better.

Before I could play chicken any longer, I put my feet through the opening and lowered myself down, landing with a semi-silent thump on the floor. I quickly grabbed an overturned chair and placed it below the grille opening. Better prepare the exit in case we needed to bolt. Then, I ducked behind the counter, and waved for Oliver to join me, but just as he was about to worm himself out of the shaft, a massive shriek cut through the silence.

Oliver and I stared at each other as the shrieking moved closer. Cold dread crawled down my back when I realized that I'd left my weapon in the ventilation shaft. I searched around wildly, trying to find something to defend myself with. Plastic bags, sheets of paper, painkillers, and small tubs of perfume samples. There were probably scissors in the drawer, but I couldn't risk opening one. A rainbow of long stick lollipops lay just out of reach. If I could get them, I could use them to wedge them in the crazy's eyes. That should do something, although I'm pretty sure I'd get mauled right after.

Oliver shook his head at me, signalling me with his hand to stay low. Otherwise, he stayed very still, watching the crazy as my heart pounded rapidly. Something crashed nearby, and then there was a series of glass breaking.

The crazy was inside the pharmacy.

Oliver eased his Ben Ten flashlight from his side and carefully took aim. Then he hurled it across the room. It made a loud noise as it landed, and the crazy shrieked again. Oliver watched for a few moments, and then shook his head at me while pointing at his ears. What did it mean? The crazy couldn't hear? Were they deaf?

Oliver waited some more, and then quickly reached for my spear. I just managed to catch it before it hit the floor. I didn't fully trust the crazy to be deaf.

While I was busy getting ready to lunge from my hiding place, Oliver lowered himself out of the crawlspace.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I whispered as quietly as I could.

"Too late now," he replied equally quietly, as he landed on the chair and made a dash for a display rack to hide behind. He hardened and loosened his hold on the knife and waited. That's when it dawned on me that the idiot was actually going to attack.

"Oliver, no," I whispered louder than I should have. "Let's just wait it out."

Oliver peeked around the corner of the display rack and quickly jerked back, gripping his knife with both hands.

“She’s turned this way again, and she’s coming toward you. I’m gonna jump on her back the first chance I get. I’ll saw her friggin’ head off if I have to. Just make sure she doesn’t get ahold of you.”

Chapter 3

Who's Crazy Now?

My legs shook as much as my hands did as I listened to the shuffle of feet grazing the white marble linoleum. With every step, the crazy moved closer until it stopped on the other side of the counter. If the crazy leaned over, it would see me.

Oliver was gone from his spot, and I'd never felt more alone in my entire life. Not even when Mom died or when Dad dropped me off on campus and drove back to the boonies. Oliver was my only true companion in this mess, and I couldn't imagine being here without him. Of course, I knew that he hadn't left me, but I was still terrified that something bad would happen to him. I didn't think I could bear it if it did. We had never seen a crazy killed before. What if they couldn't die? What if they just kept coming?

He was out there risking his life to save mine, without any thought for his own life, and here I was, huddled like a terrified rabbit. If I didn't want to lose him, I needed to do something about it.

"I'm going to stand up," I said in a hushed voice, grabbing my spear in both hands.

"No, stay down. I don't want you hurt."

"I'm standing up in three... two..."

"Bas! Goddammit."

"...one..."

I sprang up from my hiding place and faced the red-eyed beast in front of me. She wasn't very tall. Actually, she was a tiny thing with reddish-brown muck in her once blond hair, but my heart was pumping regardless. Pure madness gleamed in her eyes as she growled.

That's when I recognized Brenda through the same reddish-brown mess on her face. She opened her mouth to reveal chipped teeth as she nearly pierced my eardrums with a shriek. All I could think of in that moment was that I couldn't kill her. What if there was a cure?

I kept my spear pointed at her face as I retreated, but with the medical cabinet at my back there was nowhere to go. Brenda, on the other hand, didn't

hesitate at all. She let out another shriek as she lunged at me with her broken fingers. It was time for fight or flight, and although a wave of weakness crashed over my body, I managed to hold the spear steady. In her rush to get over the counter, she stumbled onto the spear and it sank through her eye. At the same time, Oliver came jumping through the air with a growl and buried his knife in her neck. Brenda went limp, and I lost my hold on the spear as she fell forward and landed at my feet. Blood gushed out of her neck as Oliver kept hacking, growling and grunting like a mad man.

“Oliver, stop!” I said as loudly as I dared over his noise. He didn’t stop until I ran around the counter and restrained his arms. I was all too aware that we were exposed to the store windows and needed to take cover, but Oliver was too worked up to move.

He panted heavily against my chest. Then he whimpered and cried as I dragged him off behind a long display case where I held him closely. His body shook as he tried to get himself under control.

“Sorry,” he said on a sob. “Didn’t mean to lose it like that.”

“Everybody but Leon has lost it so far, it was only a matter of time before you did.”

“You haven’t lost it.”

“I would be dead right now if you hadn’t pulled me into the toy store. I lost it. Then I lost it again last night when I cried like a baby. I was worried about my dad. You didn’t hear me sobbing?”

“No,” he said on a chuckle, and put his arms around me. It felt nice—natural, like he belonged there, but then that was just my wishful thinking. He was the type who always had to touch the people around him—not in a sexual way, it was just something he automatically did. It used to give me mixed signals, but he was like this with everyone.

“At least you have someone to worry about,” he said.

“You don’t have any family?”

“Foster homes since I was eight.”

“Sorry.”

Oliver shrugged. “Most of them were okay.”

I paused briefly before glancing at Brenda’s bloodied hand and gnarly fingers. She wasn’t moving.

“That was Bren—”

“I know. But it was either her or you, and I’d choose you even if she wasn’t a crazy.”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t even know what it meant, so instead of replying, I said nothing. Only once had I told a guy that I liked him, and that ended up with me in an arm cast with two black eyes and a split lip. After that, I didn’t dare to even look at a guy too long. There was no way I was going to read too much into Oliver’s words.

Still, I didn’t let him go. If he wanted a hug, then I wasn’t going to deny him, even though I was a little concerned he might find it too gay afterward, and would either turn on me, or distance himself. Regardless, we stayed there until Oliver stopped shaking, despite the risk of another crazy wandering in.

“Look, a granola bar,” Oliver said and reached for something on the shelf behind me.

“Hands off, it’s mine,” I teased.

Oliver lifted his head off my shoulder. His lips curled at the corners in an amused smile, and a glimpse of tease flashed in his eyes.

“Can I keep my hands on you, instead?”

The question was followed up by him puckering his lips and kissing the air. I must have looked like a guppy fish, staring, with my mouth opening and closing as a swirl of heat danced wildly through my body. Did he really mean it? Or was this Oliver teasing me, yet again.

He laughed and fist-bumped my shoulder. “Dude, I’m just kidding. But I’ll let you have this granola bar. There’s plenty to go around.”

Figures. My headrush quickly ended, and I came back down to earth as he stuck the bar into a bloodied pocket on my T-shirt. Then he got up on the balls on his feet, and grabbed boxes of food and other nutrients from the shelf.

“Right,” I said just above a whisper, as sharp stings prickled in my chest. Of course, he was joking; this was Oliver.

Together, we collected the stuff from Maria’s list and whatever else we found useful, before we stuffed it all into the ventilation shaft, and made ready to leave.

A short scratch from the walkie-talkie cut the silence.

“Yeah?” Oliver replied, while he took one last look around the pharmacy.

“Phew, you guys okay? We heard the noise,” said Leon. “We thought you were...”

“Yeah, just had a run-in with a crazy,” Oliver said, as if we did it every day. “It’s been taken care of.”

“Can we break down the wall?”

“No. The doors are wide open. I don’t think we can barricade them.”

“Found anything useful?”

“Yeah, loads. Could you send Lela through to haul some of it back?”

Against my better judgement, I duck-walked as close to the windows as I could, to peer outside while Oliver and Leon talked. Mangled bodies lay everywhere, but there was no other movement.

However, at a closer inspection, a man from the store opposite the pharmacy was staring at me with a wild look in his eyes. He seemed to be locked in, but the face staring at me was covered in blood and grime. He banged his fists against the impact glass and bared his teeth. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that any other people in that store were dead.

Not long after, we were back in Tronix dividing up the food and water we’d found. The group that had gone to check out the food court hadn’t managed to get through since that area had a separate ventilation system. Our ventilation tunnel ended above a utility closet, next to a sandwich bar.

Maria treated Elizabeth’s wound under Donald’s watchful eye. You didn’t have to be a mind reader to know what he was thinking. I was kind of thinking the same thing: what if she was infected? What if she would turn, like the man in the other store, and kill us all?

It took forever to fall asleep that night. It wasn’t until Oliver heaved a big sigh and scooted himself closer to me, that I managed to close my eyes without seeing blood. One nightmare after another kept me restless. There was one where Dad was being chased by his crazified best friend, Roger, and another where I was walking the school corridors and everything was so eerily quiet that I kept waiting for something to happen. I knew there was something behind the closed doors, but I had to open one to get out. Then I dreamt that Brenda’s eyes popped open, she got to her feet, and clawed her way through the wall. A woman screamed as Brenda attacked Oliver and ripped into his throat with her teeth. I jerked awake, but the woman was still screaming—for real.

A group of people were gathered in the LEGO area, all talking loudly and pushing each other. When I went to see what was going on, Leon tackled Donald to the ground while Lela ran to him with zip ties. Elizabeth lay in the middle of the crowd, eyes open, mouth frozen in a silent scream, while blood oozed around the screwdriver stuck in her heart.

Maria sat on the floor with Elizabeth's head in her lap, and yelled at Donald, "You killed her!"

"She was infected!" Donald yelled back. No one was concerned about being heard anymore now that we knew the crazies didn't hear so well.

Leon pushed his knee harder into Donald's back. "You don't know that."

Donald struggled to get free, but the soldier had him pinned.

"I wasn't going to take that risk! Seemed like you people didn't care if she turned and ate the children."

"Throw him out," said one of the mothers in the group. Her five-year-old son clung to her from behind her skirt.

"We can't do that," said Leon. "He won't make it alone."

"You'd rather have him kill someone else in here?" said a man called Lenny. "You know he's gonna do it when we start running out of food and water. I know sons of bitches like him. They'll do anything to save their own asses."

"He's been wanting to leave anyway," another person said. "So let him leave."

"He didn't mean alone," Leon said. "He meant we should try to leave as a group. I can't send him out there alone."

"Then I'll do it," Lenny said, and strode over to Leon.

"No, please," Donald pleaded.

A couple of people were already removing the barricades from the door.

"Let's at least wait until daylight," Leon tried as he struggled against many hands trying to pull him off Donald.

I didn't know what to do. If Elizabeth had been infected then Donald had saved us by killing her. I could understand his reasoning—I had wondered the same myself. However, if she wasn't infected he'd just killed a person in cold blood. He should have waited longer to see if she really was infected... but

then, we knew nothing about the infection and how long it took to turn its victims.

Donald tried to scramble away, but there was nowhere for him to go. I never thought I'd feel sorry for the scumbag, but the look of terror on his face stirred something inside me and prompted me into action.

However, just as I took a step forward, Oliver's hand landed on my shoulder. "Don't. What if they throw you out too?"

"They won't. We brought them food and water. That must count for something, right?"

"Yeah, but..." He hung his head and sighed. "What if Lenny's right? We'll run out of food eventually, and Donald might kill again. If this were a movie, that's what he'd do. He's that type of character."

"This isn't a goddamned movie, Oliver," I said in a low hiss. "He's gonna die!"

I said it, but I stayed rooted in place. Oliver was right: the man would kill again if we let him stay. There was no way I wanted the lives of the other people on my conscience, so I did nothing.

Donald's pleas for mercy haunted me for a long time after they threw him out. My only consolation was that before the mob managed to close the door, I'd snagged one of the makeshift weapons off the weapon's shelf, along with a bottle of water and a couple of granola bars, to slide out the door. Oliver rolled a little flashlight after the supplies.

Chapter 4

The Others

After three weeks of being locked up, the stench was overwhelming. Not only the smell of decomposing bodies outside and the boxed up human waste in the electronics shop—which admittedly was the worst—but the stench of a group of people who hadn't showered in what smelled like forever. I was no better than the others, and frankly, I was embarrassed to be near Oliver because I reeked. Oliver did too, but somehow he didn't seem as self-conscious about it. We had risked another scavenging mission to the pharmacy to get toothpaste, deodorants, perfumes, hand sanitizers, wet wipes and such. I used my packet of wet wipes to clean only the most vital parts, but with the work Oliver and I were doing for the group, a pirate bath just wasn't enough. We needed a decent scrubbing.

Our job was to crawl through the ventilation system to find and secure stores to scavenge. If the stores were open, but no crazy was in sight, we were to quickly close the door and cover the windows. We had done it so many times now, that we didn't even need to communicate about how to do it. Oliver would go down first and close the door. I would search the counters for a key to lock it, and if there was none, I found some other way to secure the door. Then we moved stuff in front of the windows, like shelves, clothes racks, or whatever. It didn't have to be perfect since we were only there to get whatever we thought was useful.

We were even stealthier, now, in the tunnels. No more banging, cursing or sneezing. It had become a game to see who could be quieter on each trip. Our discreetness had come in handy two weeks after the outbreak, when we heard people yelling in one of the stores close to one of our newly secured ones. When we found the grille to an Asian speciality store called Yin's, we stayed quiet and listened. There were six people in the store. Oliver crawled back a couple of stores to talk to Leon over the walkie-talkie, while I watched two of the heavily tattooed guys go at each other. From what I could gather, they were fighting over one of the women who was yelling loudly at both of them. The other three people sat on the sidelines and rooted them on.

Before the outbreak, I probably wouldn't have worried too much about passing by, but the last thing I wanted to do right here, in the duct, was to make myself known. Maybe the tattoos made them seem dangerous now, when they

wouldn't have before. Or maybe it was the fact that they were actually fist fighting. That was one thing the people in our group hadn't done—yet.

By Leon's order, we ended up not making ourselves known to them, and I heaved a mental sigh of relief. Our group was far from perfect, but at least we knew what we had. The only problem was that there were a couple of stores on the other side of Yin's, but we couldn't risk going there in case these strangers would hear us. They were all too buffed or heavy to travel through the vents, but you never knew what they'd do if they knew about us. They definitely wouldn't share any of their food or water, and would probably see us as a threat.

There were no more stores on this side, after that, and Raul, who had worked at the mall as a handyman a couple of years back, said that the ventilation shaft probably ended there, that there was a separate tunnel for the other side. It was bad, because we were running out of food. We had risked a trip to the food court and picked it clean. It was the most nerve-wracking mission I had done yet. Raul had engineered a sort of moving sidewalk out of cables and other things, that was hand operated by Lela, who stayed on the other side of the grille opening. Her coworker, Jason, who frequently disappeared on missions with Lela, stayed in the utility closet as a lookout. Oliver and I dashed behind counters and gathered whatever we could find, then waited for Jason's all-clear whistle. When it came, we darted into the closet, tossed the food to Jason who threw it to Lela. I think at least half of the stink on my body was because of that day, but we'd kept the group fed.

Back at the toy store, people were going stir crazy. Part of it was because of hunger, part because although some of them were slim enough to fit through the vents now, most of them were confined to the toy store. A big part, though, was guilt because of what we'd done to Donald.

I'd noticed the change the day after Donald got kicked out. People didn't talk the entire morning. We each sat in our spots until Joy, the woman who had insisted we throw Donald out, started crying. Some children joined her, but their grief may have been for our dire situation instead of us having sent a man out to face his death. I could have believed Joy was mourning Elizabeth, because she'd been crying on and off since, but it hadn't seemed like Joy had known Elizabeth. Maria took it upon herself to take care of Joy's son, because when Joy wasn't crying, she was lying in her spot and staring up at the ceiling.

"What do we do?" I asked Leon, when Joy, yet again, started wailing. We sat in the stench of Tronix with the waste boxes piled up in the back. I felt more than a little lucky to be on the secure-and-scavenge missions, because Lela and

Jason had been assigned the task of moving these boxes into one of the secured shoe shops. The people who had secured it the day of the outbreak were already decomposing all over the store, so what difference could a few boxes of human waste make? Still, there were plenty of boxes left in Tronix and people rarely came in here, so it was perfect to hold meetings.

Leon sighed and scratched his head. “I don’t know. The best thing to do would be to get people out of here. I don’t know how long they’ll last before fists start flying. Yesterday, when you went back to the clothing store, I stopped Raul and Lenny just before they jumped each other. Even the kids are arguing all the time. People are going nuts.”

Yeah... Oliver and I disappeared to the clothes store a lot these days. It’s where we kept our food and water supply after we started noticing some of it going missing after each mission. No one owned up to the theft, but some people mumbled about us probably having a stack of supplies we’d kept to ourselves since we were the ones finding it. None of it was true—we always took everything back—but Oliver and I promptly packed up our things and moved them five stores away. We still stayed with the group, mostly, we just didn’t eat with them. Or sleep with them, because the stench in the store was too much. We’d even made up our own bathroom in a little camera kiosk that contained nothing useful, except for paper.

We weren’t the only ones discreetly abandoning headquarters. Whoever could crawl the tunnels did, taking advantage of our earlier jobs of securing stores. It was becoming intrusive to my and Oliver’s quiet retreat at the clothes store, because people kept popping up for visits. None of our food had gone missing though, so we couldn’t really complain.

“I wish we could fit everyone through the vents,” Leon continued. “I’ve lost so much muscle weight that I’ll be able to fit soon, but some of the people are still too big.”

“Will you stop crying for one second?” Lenny shouted at Joy in the toy store.

“Shut up!” Raul yelled back.

Joy’s wails got louder, and some of the kids started crying too.

“Maybe we should risk leaving,” Oliver said over the noise. “I mean, there aren’t that many crazies. The ones they killed stayed dead.”

I twirled a piece of wire around my finger and tightened it hard when Lenny shouted back to Raul.

“Not many on this floor, but we have no idea what it’s like downstairs.”

“Yeah,” Oliver agreed. “But we’re close to the escalators and the escalators are close to the doors. Or we could try for the emergency exit from the second floor.”

Leon brought his nails to his teeth and gnawed on the corners. “We don’t know what’s on the outside.”

Oliver huffed and crossed his arms.

“Look,” Leon continued, “I want to get out of here, trust me, but we can’t just wander off into the unknown.”

“Bas and I can do a little recon mission. We can go through the utility closet, that way we won’t have to open the door.”

I laughed and dug my elbow into Oliver’s side. “Stop volunteering me, you dick.”

“Sorry,” he chuckled and prodded me back. “I just really want to leave this place.”

“Maybe he’s right,” said Leon. “But I’ll go.”

He’d be perfect for it with his army training. We had a nice pile of weapons now, but none of them were projectile like we needed if we wanted to avoid contact with the crazies. I wasn’t going to trust my life to a spear against a group of crazies. Oliver and I could maybe take out a crazy between the two of us, but Leon could undoubtedly kill one by himself. However, boxed in by a group of crazies, and we were screwed.

“You can’t crawl through the vent yet,” Oliver pointed out.

“So we wait a little longer,” Leon said.

I straightened the piece of wire and tossed it away. “There’s no food left. People will starve before we get out.”

“Take out Yin’s?” Oliver suggested.

We all went quiet. We needed the food, but the people there weren’t going to give it up willingly.

Leon rested his head against the wall. “Maybe they’ll trade?”

“For what? They have food and that’s all they need,” said Oliver.

“We’ve got weapons.” I gestured with my head toward the toy store.

“I’m not comfortable giving them weapons,” said Leon.

Oliver rubbed his chin for a moment before saying, “How about some of the medical supplies? They’re useless to us if we die of hunger.”

Leon nodded. “Yeah, that might work.”

Half an hour later, Oliver and I were by the grille to Yin’s, armed with weapons—just in case—and a couple of bottles of painkillers, to prove we had some. This was one encounter I was *not* looking forward to. If we were this nervous about a group of six strangers, how would they react to a group of twenty-one?

Oliver looked through the grille and gasped.

“What?” I whispered as softly as I could. Things were too quiet in the store. Maybe they were sleeping.

“The door’s open,” he whispered back. “The floor’s splattered and I can’t see anyone alive.”

“No crazies?”

“One dead on the floor,” he said. “I’ll get the door.”

We worked together quickly and efficiently. Oliver smashed the grille in and swiftly exited the vent. I followed but didn’t have to look for a key since it was already in the lock. When I came to the front of the store where Oliver was locking up, I saw that the idiots hadn’t barricaded the windows well. They must have hid in the back this whole time. There were bloody handprints on the windows, and one area where you could barely see out from the blood and grime. Maybe someone in the group panicked and opened the door, or maybe they’d had enough and made a run for it, like our group was considering. Yin’s was at the other end and there was an emergency exit close by. Technically, Oliver and I, along with a couple of others, could make a break for the exit now that the Yin people were gone, but I didn’t think I could leave the others.

Then there was the case of the dead crazy and all the blood that was too much to belong to it alone. There had obviously been a confrontation, and by the bloody trails and footsteps going out of the store, at least two of the humans were bleeding, which could mean that there were at least two new crazies in the making inside the mall, if they hadn’t died from blood loss first.

“Let’s hurry and check for food,” said Oliver.

We tiptoed around the blood that was still semi-wet and hurried to the food racks.

“Shit,” Oliver said on a sigh.

He didn't need to tell me. The place had been ransacked. Empty snack bags lay on the floor, the shelves and cabinets were empty and the doors on the coolers were wide open, empty of all merchandise.

“They've taken anything edible. We're screwed.”

Chapter 5

Rain Me a River

“You know, you kind of look like a frog from this angle,” I teased, as Oliver pushed himself up a vertical ventilation shaft. Unlike the boxy horizontal tunnels, this one was round and wide. Oliver used his palms and bare soles to frog-jump upward. The utility belt around his middle weighed him down, as well as the small hacksaw dangling between his legs. After discovering the empty Yin’s two days before, and the two useless stores next to it, we decided to try the roof as either a place to find access to food, maybe by entering the ventilation shaft on the other side, or as a means of escape.

Oliver’s laugh resounded in the hollow steel tube. “Shut up. You can start climbing any day now. I won’t fall on you.”

“I won’t make a nice cushion if you do. Feels like my body’s eating itself inside out.”

I meant it, too. There was a huge black hole inside me where my stomach used to be and it was growing by the hour, eating up my intestines. I hadn’t had anything to eat in almost two days, or since Oliver and I split the last granola bar in the clothes store. As a result, my feet shook as soon as I lifted myself from the ground. Even crawling through the vents had become a strain because we’d run out of water as well. We should’ve attempted the roof ages ago, and definitely before the water ran out, but the climb upward wasn’t exactly easy and had been left as a last resort.

“I’m hungry too, Bas. Just try not to think about it.”

I grunted as I lifted myself another inch upward. I’d chosen the chimney method with my back against the tube and feet on the other wall to help push myself upward. “It’s all I can think about.”

“Well, me too. Seriously, you’re starting to look good to me in a whole different way.” He followed it up with a laugh.

He’d been teasing me like this ever since our first trip to the pharmacy. Actually, he’d been teasing me like this even before the apocalypse, always throwing his arm around me and nuzzling my neck. However, he never meant anything by it. It was just him being him.

“Not if I eat you first,” I shot back.

Oliver barked out a laugh, but stopped just as abruptly. “Holy fuck, Bas. It’s *raining* outside.”

“What?”

The tunnel was curved at the top like a telescope in a submarine, Raul had said, but right then I wished it opened straight down so I could have a drink. It sounded too good to be true. Not only that the duct lead to clean air, but that I might be able to get my fill of water once Oliver broke through the grille.

A new spurt of energy rushed through my body and before I knew it I was staring up at Oliver’s crotch as he hacked at the grill.

“Hang on, almost there.”

You’d think I would have been too hungry and thirsty to get a physical reaction. Maybe it was the adrenaline that came of being so close to water, but Oliver’s manly grunts weren’t doing me any favours. The sinewy outlines of the muscles in his strained legs weren’t helping either.

I had to stop fantasizing about him. It had gotten worse since we’d decided to hole up in the clothes store where there was little else to focus our attention on but each other. That’s why I always got annoyed whenever someone came for a visit—I was becoming overly possessive of Oliver, afraid that he might go off with one of the girls one day.

With a loud hoot, Oliver sprang upward, crawled over the bend and disappeared.

“Fuck! Bas! Get up here! Oh my God!” he shouted with whooping laughter.

The rush in his voice spurred me on, and as soon as my hands touched the edge of the opening, he pulled me up the rest of the way.

Water, precious water pelted my face as I gazed up at the grey sky. I opened my mouth wide to drink, and it filled up in no time. The cold stream ran down my throat and settled in my belly, lighting up every vein on the way. And the fresh water in my hair and on my skin...

A piece of wet cloth smacked against my torso, bringing me back to reality. Oliver’s dark hair was glued to his face as he laughed and struck me again with his soaking T-shirt.

“You’re so in for it,” I said with a laugh, as I ripped off my T-shirt and ran after him on the flat roof. He shrieked with laughter as our feet splashed through the deep puddles, and like a monkey on the run, he bent down to splash water at me without stopping.

When I finally managed to corner him against a brick wall, we were both labouring for breath. With a huge grin on my face, I twirled my T-shirt and struck, but he grabbed it and pulled. There was no way I was letting go of my weapon, so I clung hard and we played tug of war for a moment until my muscles couldn't take it anymore and I fell into his arms.

“Whoa, easy,” he said with a laugh, as he secured an arm around the small of my back, the other grabbing my shoulder blade. His lips went slack for a moment before they twisted at the corners into a smirk. “Come on, give us a kiss.”

When I didn't reply, he let go of me. As much as I wanted him, I was beginning to feel a certain frustration with his jokes. It wasn't his fault, he didn't know I was gay, but to be continually invited to be close to him when he didn't mean it, was doing my head in. Snuggling close as we slept, him feeding me bits of his food with his fingers, wrestling on the floor for sport, him stripping off my T-shirt to make me try on another, back at the clothes store, him telling dirty jokes about two guys...

He was just joking. I knew he was just joking. But I wasn't. I wanted to shove him into the wall and stick my tongue down his throat. Then I wanted him to turn us around and shove *me* into the wall, hard. I wanted his hands and mouth, something on my body. Now.

Holding myself back was killing me, and so was wanting him. Someday I was going to snap, tackle him to the ground and kiss him hard.

“You okay?” he asked, all play gone from his voice.

I wasn't. Far from it. If I told him about how I felt I might lose him... or I might not. Oliver was cool like that. He was a drama student after all, and drama people are known for being open-minded and liberal, right? Still, he might end up pushing me away... or he might not. Maybe he was as desperate for a human touch as I was. But still, there were girls our age in the group, and I hadn't seen him cozy up to anyone. With all the time we spent together, I would have known. He seemed as romantically interested in Lela as I was—which was not at all.

“Bas?” His voice was soft and gentle. He cupped my face with both hands. The pupils in his brown eyes were enormous as he looked at me, his gaze intense. Then his face lit up with recognition and he *knew*. He knew I wanted him. My silence must have given it away, or maybe I had some guilty look on my face.

I tried to look away to conceal at least a part of this need I had for him, but he held my face in a vice. Then he quickly swooped down and covered my mouth with his soft, *soft* lips. And tongue. And then our positions were reversed, and I was pinned against the wall as I kissed him back just as passionately.

My heart pulsed as he pressed his body against mine. My knees buckled under the intense feelings and steamy kisses, and I thanked the heavens for the solid wall at my back.

Oliver left my lips quivering as he pulled away. I grabbed the back of his head to kiss him, but he resisted.

“Wait,” he said through his panting.

Just then I heard the crackle of the walkie-talkie.

“You guys okay?” said Leon.

Oliver brought the device to his lips, not taking his eyes off me for a second. “It’s raining.”

“Yeah?” said Leon.

Lela whooped in the background and apparently tackled Leon for the walkie. “Raining? For real? Fuck, I’m coming up there. I’ll bring soap!”

Oliver and I looked at each other with regret.

“It’s gonna take them some time to get here,” he said. Then he brought his lips back to mine, and we got lost in each other all over again, only breaking apart to get in vital conversation.

“I’ve been wanting to do this since before the outbreak,” he said, before kissing me again.

“Yeah?” I asked, short on breath.

“Fuck, yeah.”

“Me too.”

“So why didn’t you?”

“I didn’t know you were into guys.”

“It’s not like I haven’t been hinting it over and over. You can be so thickheaded.”

“Shut up,” I said with a laugh, and thumped him on the shoulder.
Oliver grinned and kissed me.

Chapter 6

The Final Hours

“This is fucking unbelievable!” Lela shouted, as she twirled on the rooftop in the nude. Everybody who could crawl through the vent had come—even the kids. Raul, who was too big to make it, had quickly made a ladder of sorts with cables to make the ascent easier. It was touching to see them as they climbed out one by one. Some laughed, some gaped in wonder and some cried. One after another they all stripped with total disregard for the others, only wanting to cleanse their bodies in the rain.

“We should get them some clean clothes,” I said to Oliver as I kicked off my jeans. This was Florida, and you never knew when you’d get rain like this again in the middle of November.

“I really don’t want to go back down there,” Oliver replied.

“You won’t have to,” said Lela. “You guys have done enough. I’ll go.”

“Thanks,” Oliver and I said at the same time and then laughed.

“What did you see on the street?” I asked Oliver. He had gone to check while I was helping everyone out onto the roof.

“Nothing to the north and west, but a couple of crazies on the other sides. Two were going at each other in the distance. My best bet would be to find a place to hide and wait for them to kill each other.”

“Anyone alive?”

Oliver looked down as he shook his head. “I didn’t see any. No cars driving—nothing.”

“The rain is stopping!” shouted Marissa. Only moments before, she’d been running in circles with the other kids.

I looked at the sky, and she was right. The rain turned into a light drizzle as the sun broke through. “Shit, we need to get some of this water to the others. It’s gonna dry up in no time.”

“PVC pipes,” said Jason, as he hurriedly scrubbed his body free of soap before the rain ended entirely.

There were abandoned PVC pipes along the edge of the rooftop as well as other discarded building materials. I'd been so busy with Oliver and the rain that I hadn't noticed.

While Oliver and I worked together to make a pipeline, Lela, Jason and Maria disappeared back into the mall to get containers and something to shovel the water out of the puddles on the roof. Thankfully, the building was old and it was beginning to sag in places.

Once the water started running, we all laughed as Leon contacted us, and we heard the joy on the other end.

"I'm not going back down there," said Oliver, as Lela came crawling back up with a pile of clean clothes.

I took the pile and started distributing. "Me neither."

"Same here," said Lela, Jason and just about anyone who didn't have a parent downstairs.

"There's still the issue of food, though," said Jason.

"We can live three weeks without food as long as we have water," Oliver pointed out.

"But we don't have that kind of water," I said as I pulled a T-shirt over my head. The edges of the puddles had already started to dry. The kids and others were busy shovelling it into buckets, containers, and the pipeline.

"What about that roof access?" Jason asked, and gestured with his chin to where Oliver and I had made out. That was another thing I hadn't noticed.

The joy of being outside quickly evaporated with the prospect of going inside. Jason was right, we were screwed without food, but to go back inside into the stench and the crazies wasn't exactly at the top of my bucket list. Hell, it wasn't even on it.

Oliver sighed and picked up a piece of wood, weighing it in his hand like a bat. "We should go now while we still have the energy."

Lela picked up another piece of wood. "We'll go with you."

"We will?" Jason asked, but then met Lela's raised eyebrow. "I mean, we will."

I huffed out as I picked my weapon—a short steel tube I'd used to nail a stubborn piece of pipe into a PVC elbow earlier.

The door looked pretty solid, so it should keep the crazies inside and the people on the roof safe. As long as the crazies didn't know how to open doors. But before we went inside, Marissa called out, "Look, cars!"

We ran to where she pointed a chubby finger down to the parking lot. She was right. Two black pickups rolled in with a couple of bad-ass-looking people in the back equipped with shotguns and rifles. I ducked just as they raised their gazes to the roof, praying to God they hadn't seen me.

"Ssh!" Oliver hushed as he pulled the kid out of sight. "Stay down and keep quiet."

"But why? Maybe they have food."

"We have to be more careful now, Marissa. The crazies aren't the only ones we need to watch out for. Humans can be dangerous as well."

"Like Donald?"

Oliver swallowed hard. "Yes, like Donald, but these guys have guns so they might hurt us even if they're all the way down there."

Marissa curled herself into a ball and went quiet. We had no idea what the outside world was like, if people were helping each other, or if it was every man for himself. Leon was convinced it was the latter and with what I'd witnessed at Yin's, I agreed. It wouldn't hurt to be cautious.

Oliver turned around and spoke quietly to the people on the roof. "Look, you need to get the kids back into the stores. Those who don't want to go to the toy store can go into the clothes store Bas and I have been hanging out in. It's secure. We just need a couple of people on the roof to keep watch." He turned to Maria. "Take the walkie."

"But then you won't have a way to communicate when you go inside."

"I have mine," whispered Lela and waved a second. "I never leave without it."

"Anyone up there?" a man yelled from the parking lot.

A new hush spread over our group.

"We don't want any trouble," said the man. "A couple of guys here are just looking for their kids. We came across a guy named Donald Witmore who said we might be able to find one of 'em here."

"Shit. He sold us out," Oliver mouthed.

“Bastian Grey?”

It took a moment to register that he'd said my name. Oliver watched me, wide-eyed, but my body was frozen with doubt, so I didn't move. Trap, it had to be. Oliver was right: Donald wouldn't hesitate to sell-out the group that had sent him to die.

“Bas, are you there?”

I choked as I heard my father's voice, and tears threatened to flood my eyes. The tears also stole into my voice. “Dad?” Was I hearing things?

“Bas!”

“Dad!” I called, and raised myself to see over the two-foot wall.

It was him, standing with his hand on the driver's side door. I thought I was going to faint for a minute as the blood rushed to my head. I'd never been so happy to see him. And he looked good, well fed, in his usual jeans and greased-up T-shirt, his black, curly hair standing out from under his cap. He just stood there, grinning from ear to ear, just like me.

“Hang on, we'll get you out of there,” said Roger, who stood on the other side of the vehicle.

Oliver and the rest stood up as well.

“There are crazies inside, and a group of people,” said Oliver.

“Hostiles?” asked a guy dressed like a soldier, who stepped out of the other pickup.

“No, they're with us. They're on the second floor to the left, in the toy store. It's by the escalators.”

“Any other survivors?”

“We don't know,” Oliver said. “There aren't many crazies on the second floor, but we have no idea about the first floor.”

Lela stood on the other side of Oliver, relaying everything back to Leon.

“There can't be many infected left after three weeks,” a woman in the bed of the truck said to the army guy. “Not in an enclosed space like this.”

“Okay, don't worry about it,” the soldier called to us. “We'll do a recon and get you out of there. Is that young woman communicating with the rest of your group?”

“Yeah,” said Oliver.

“Okay, tell them to wait until we tell them it’s safe to come out.”

“You want us to go back to them?”

“If you can, yes.”

“See you in a bit, Bas,” said Roger, as he cocked his shotgun.

“Be careful,” I called back, and smiled at Dad once more before leaving.

I practically jumped back into the vent in my hurry to get back to the toy store. My heart sped so fast it felt like it was racing me to the finish line. Loud shots came from somewhere within the mall, and when we finally lowered ourselves back into the toy store, I almost couldn’t detect the stench that hovered in the air. People were bathing with rags and towels while others were getting ready to leave. There wasn’t much to take with us, just a few weapons and equipment Leon and Maria were gathering.

When the knock and “All clear!” came, everyone just stood still for a moment before people started ripping away the barricades and pushing out the door. Their blood must have been coursing as fast as mine, but mine was doing it for a different reason. I couldn’t see Dad anywhere. What if he’d been attacked downstairs? What if—

“Right here, son,” said Dad, as he and Roger came jogging up the escalators.

I ran and tackled Dad into a hug so hard, we would’ve tumbled back down the stairs if it hadn’t been for Roger.

“Oh my God,” I whimpered as I crushed my dad to me for the first time in my life. My dad wasn’t much of a talker, but he was even less of a hugger.

“Good to see you, kid,” said Roger, and smacked a hand on my back. “We couldn’t find you at the college or dorms and thought the worst. But then we rescued a guy from a group of infected and he told us there was a group in here, along with a ‘wiry teen with dark, curly hair named Bastian’.”

I laughed into Dad’s neck and thanked my conscience for having slid that care pack after Donald, or he might not have told anyone about us.

“Okay,” said Dad as he released me. “Let’s go get you something to eat. You’re nothing but skin and bones.”

“What about the rest?” I gestured at the other people, and Oliver, who had appeared next to me. “I’m not leaving without Oliver.”

Dad gave Oliver a quick once-over. "I just came here for you, Bas."

"What? No, Dad, I'm not leaving without him."

This was a new side of my dad I hadn't seen before. He wasn't much of a people person, but deep down he was a softie who always gave passing beggars a dollar or two.

"Why?" he asked, sparing Oliver a second glance.

"Cause he's my... my..."

Shit. I hadn't come out to my dad before he dropped me off at college. I hadn't even told him after I got beat up by that guy I liked back in the day. Could I tell him Oliver was my boyfriend, especially when Oliver and I hadn't even discussed if we were boyfriends or not? But then, maybe this was the perfect time to come out. Dad would hardly leave me after spending so much time trying to find me.

"Because he's my boy... friend," I finished quietly, partly because I didn't want to out Oliver in front of the other people at the mall, and partly because I was hoping Oliver hadn't heard me. Maybe I was being too forward with the whole "boyfriend" thing.

My dad's left eye honest-to-God twitched. Then he turned his back to us, put a hand on his hip and shook his head. For a moment I thought he was going to grab that shotgun with both hands and shoot us. I mean, what did I know about his opinions on homosexuality? The only conversation we'd ever had about sex was his "Don't go knocking up girls, you hear?" and my reply of "Okay, Dad." That was extremely uncomfortable for the both of us. I'd never heard him talk about homosexuality, but that was one conversation I always figured he wouldn't be caught dead having with me.

Dad sighed, but didn't turn around. Just in case, I pushed Oliver behind me. Surely he was less likely to shoot his own son rather than his son's maybe-boyfriend?

Oliver took my hand and squeezed it gently.

"I was hoping I hadn't passed it on to you," Dad finally said. "I hoped if I just stayed away from you, you wouldn't be affected. Guess it didn't work."

"Passed... What do you mean?"

"I mean... Roger's not just my best friend."

"You mean... you mean he's your... Since when?"

No friggin' way. There was just no friggin' way my dad was gay. If he was, he was the straightest gay I'd ever met—if such a thing existed.

“Since before you were born.”

“Wait... so you *cheated* on Mom?”

I jerked back when Dad let out a quick laugh and turned around.

“Yeah, I did, but only with Roger. Your mom knew about me before we were married, and she knew about Roger. She was okay with it as long as I wasn't with other women. But really, this is a conversation we don't need to have right here, right now, so let's get going.”

Wow, so much information in so little time. So much *conversation* in so little time.

“Oliver's coming with.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

Dad took one step down the escalators before he stopped. “You guys are using condoms, right?”

“Oh my God, Dad.”

He turned around. “Even though this might be the apocalypse, you don't want to catch a STD.”

“We're not even doing stuff like that.”

“Not even oral?”

“Oh my God, we're so not having this conversation.”

“Mr. Grey,” Oliver quipped in. “Male or female, Bastian is my first. I don't think I have a STD.”

Dad eyed Oliver for a minute before he nodded in approval. Then he turned to me. “And you?”

I covered my face with my hand. “This is *so* embarrassing.”

Oliver snickered from behind me.

“Oliver's also my first.”

Dad nodded again, and turned toward the escalators. “We'll stock up on condoms just in case. And lube, you'll need lots of it.”

Roger cracked up.

“Dad!”

By then, I knew he was deliberately teasing me as his shoulders shook in silent laughter. This was a whole new side of my dad, a side that Roger probably knew well. They used to sit downstairs watching football and laughing like Dad never laughed with me. I never understood why we couldn't be bonded like that. I figured it was because I wasn't interested in football, or because we had completely different personalities, or because he somehow sensed I was gay. Still, I always felt cheated that he didn't even seem to try. He said he'd tried to stay away so I wouldn't be affected. Obviously he needed some reeducation about how he can't *make* anyone gay by hanging out with them. I had liked guys as far back as I could remember.

“I'm going to be scarred for life,” I muttered, as Oliver gave my hand another gentle squeeze and walked me down the escalators.

“You just survived the zombie apocalypse and *this* is what's going to scar you for life?”

“You try having a conversation with your parents about sex and see if it won't scar you.”

Oliver laughed, but it sounded forced. Shit. I'd forgotten he didn't have a family.

“Sorry. I'm such an idiot.”

“It's okay,” he said, and gave me a sideways hug. “You're my new family.”

In the end, Leon and Dad's group leader decided it was best to find safety together, so we piled everyone into cars after checking every single store at the mall for supplies and survivors. Turned out we'd been the only ones alive. There were some stores we couldn't get into because they were barricaded, but from look of things and lack of response, the people must have died.

Nothing could have given me greater pleasure than watching the Fairview Falls Mall disappear into nothingness after being holed up in it for over three weeks. It was a bittersweet moment though, because I was leaving for the unknown. My only comfort was having my dad and Roger with me, along with a group of capable men and women, a stockpile of weapons, and Oliver sitting snugly by my side.

The End

Author Bio

Erica lives in Iceland with her adorable little twin boys. She often says that her real name sounds like Klingon to foreigners. If “Eyjafjallajokull” looks like someone fell asleep at the keyboard, Erica’s real name could leave a non-Icelander in a zombie-like stupor for days.

*She’s been writing for several years, or ever since reading became an obsession. Aside from a business degree, Erica has taken English courses at the University of Iceland and gulped down anything that might help her in her career as an author. She takes great interest in English, but will break every single grammar rule for the sake of *The Voice*.*

Erica loves hearing from her readers. She’s a friendly, easygoing (if a bit silly) person who doesn’t mind talking about herself in third person.

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SILVER EMBERS

By Becca Finn

Photo Description

A man lies on his back, sun streaming onto his burnished skin and through his curly brown hair. He looks like he should be comfortable in his red toga and on his soft white sheet. Yet the man reaches beside him, the heartbreak almost palpable around him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“Where you used to be, there is a hole in the world, which I find myself constantly walking around in the daytime, and falling in at night. I miss you like hell.”

—Edna St. Vincent Millay

I miss him like hell. Our first meeting nearly ended with bloodshed. He was arrogant and cold and so infuriatingly self-righteous that I damned him a thousand times for the power he held over me. I didn't want to trust him, didn't want to need him, and certainly never thought I might grow to love him. Now, I miss him so badly I can hardly bear it.

Tell me the story of this man and his lost lover. How did they get separated? What will it take to bring them together again? I'd love HEA with this story. Fantasy or SF preferred! No incest, rape or BDSM please!

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Tiffany

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, fantasy

Tags: switch/versatile, magic users, enemies to lovers, mage/sorcerer, humorous

Word Count: 40,161

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SILVER EMBERS

By Becca Finn

Chapter 1

Present day

As I lay basking in the light of the high summer sun, I can't help but hurt. Deep down in my soul, I ache. Outside my home, through the open windows, I hear my people, the Elementals, enjoying life unhindered. Knowing they are one with nature, as we have evolved to be. That used to make me so happy. The joyful laugh of children running down the streets, the yip of a playing dog.

Yet I can't enjoy it.

The white sheet is so soft under my hand—I caress the spot where he would have lain. Where he'd laid in the past, even if just one night. I close my eyes and remember the feel of his fingers over my arm, my chest. His breath whispering over my cheek.

Is it sad that I have yet to wash this sheet? It still smells faintly like him, and I just want one thing left that was his. He is no longer with me, and I can't even begin to guess what happened to him. If he is even still alive at all.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to hold back the thoughts before they consume me. A sharp rap on the door to my room breaks me from my melancholy.

I would ignore whoever it is, but the merest idea that one of my people could be in need has me jumping to my feet, careful not to disturb the sheet.

As soon as I slide the locks on the door, my only sister storms in. My friend Kiren follows, an apologetic look on his face.

I am her junior by nearly ten years, but we look so very similar. We are both deeply tanned, with a bronze sheen from enjoying the outdoors. Our eyes are a fiery orange that flash with red and yellow. Our hair is dark brown and curly, though mine is kept cropped short and hers cascades over her slender shoulders in a chaotic fashion. She dresses like me as well, in simple velvet togas that drape to our knees.

She sets herself gracefully upon my sheet, drawing her legs beneath her. Then she just stares at me. I lean against the wall beside the door and try not to look at her. Kiren pulls the chair out from my desk and sits on it, crossing his legs.

I'm sure she doesn't miss how much I am squirming under her gaze. She's always had that effect on me.

"I've been trying to get it out of you for over a week now. The whole story. You've told me enough to start the evacuation plans and for Kiren to increase defences. Yet you say nothing else. I need to know more in order to be most effective as a leader," she says calmly, but the flash of red in her eyes stands to betray her feelings.

"How are you, sister dear? How is your wonderful husband on this fine day?"

I try for a smile, but I must fail if the look of pity in Soline's face is anything to go by.

I slide down the wall and sit there, resting my head upon my knees.

"Please tell me what happened. What has made you so upset, Reynard? Why are you acting this way?"

Kiren smiles. "We're worried about you."

"I'm unsure if I can tell you without breaking," I whisper, the words like a curse.

A curse. I chuckle at my own morbid thoughts. Everything just seems to remind me of Sebastian.

Though a curse was how it all started.

"Why don't you write it down, like a story," says Sol, jumping up to summon a servant to bring a stack of papers for me.

Ever efficient, the papers and some pens are presented to me in only moments.

"Just write whatever comes to mind and I'll read each page as you finish it," says Sol, smiling.

Then, letting my mind wander back, I let go with a sigh that is almost like relief as my pen dances over the pages.

It all started when that psychotic mage took residence near the city. Mages are a race of beings that evolved to cast spells using power within themselves rather than nature. Our common ancestors, humans, are still around today but are not common. Magi inhabit pretty much the rest of the planet except for our city.

Eons ago, the Magi and Elementals were at war. Since the Great War was so long ago, nobody is certain as to the exact reasons that caused it. All I know now is that the relationship between our two races is still strained to this day.

Azmarine (where the majority of Elementals live) is a city that lies in a large vale surrounded by mountains. One side of the city is flanked by a jungle, a desert and a spring-fed lake. At the top of one of the peaks is a flat expanse of ice. It's like our holy place. The perfect place for all Elementals to live, without the vast amounts of technology used by the Mages. (I know that you know all of this Soline, just let me get the story out my own way.)

Me? I prefer to bask in the sand and sun, baking until the moon takes over the sky. Filling my entire being with the power of nature. That is how I spent much of my youth, so long ago.

Four weeks ago

That fateful day, I wouldn't have been able to do that, even if I hadn't had other responsibilities. The sun wasn't shining, the sky covered in a thick layer of a roiling green smog. The usual opalescent quality of the cobbled street stones had dulled to grey. Plants that usually grew abundantly along the streets and between buildings sat drooping, their life fading from their delicate leaves and petals.

A drizzle of rain sputtered down from the clouds, running in thin green rivulets down my skin. I preferred to feel the air on my skin, so I only wore a short-sleeved shirt and brown leather pants. The wind still carried a slight warmth to it, which kept me from being too chilled in the wet weather.

I stood outside the manor that I lived in with my sister (the Lord of Azmarine) and her husband. The city was quiet, which felt so unusual for such jovial people. Not even the sound of birds could be heard in the background. The lack of sun was depressing; everybody was huddled in their homes. I shivered out of discomfort with the situation.

I left from a back exit of the home, so I was standing around the corner when I heard the conversation. It was between Kiren (the general of the Azmarine army) and my sister. I was pretty sure they were sitting on her patio, which was secluded from the public.

“Where is he?” asked Kiren in a hushed voice.

I guess Kiren didn't know I was downwind. I could hear what he was saying, even if it was a bit quiet by the time the words reached me.

I assumed Kiren had been talking about the crazy mage that had been near the city until I heard my sister reply, “In his bedroom. I have him going over plans for the new playground in the west quarter.”

Shit! They were talking about me. I'd already finished those. The layout for the playground had been easy since I'd already spoken to many of the families in the area and received their input. I'd come out here for some fresh air.

“Good. I know he'd just want to come along with us if he knew the plan.”

I winced. That hurt. I was a good warrior, dammit. I had trained for years and honed my craft with the sword. I could send fireballs blazing flawlessly, avoiding comrades and hitting only the enemy.

In theory.

I hadn't actually fought in a battle of any kind. But that was beside the point.

It wasn't like Kiren had fought much before either. This was a time of peace.

“He means well. You know how much I love my brother.”

“I do know. But since he isn't around, let's talk about the mage.”

“Who is this man the Order put you in contact with? And what did he tell you?”

“The man is called Sebastian, the only necromancer known today. The Order sent him because he's been chasing the crazy mage across the country. We're going to meet him on the mountain and confer with him on how to deal with the problem. His target is near the ancient murals.”

“Why is the crazy mage doing this? It can't be that he is just psychotic.”

“It has to do with—”

The wind picked up, and as I peeked around the corner, I saw that Kiren and my sister were walking away so I could no longer hear them.

I gritted my teeth and resisted the urge to stomp my foot like a petulant child. I hated that they were trying to keep this from me.

I loved the work I did with the kids and the poor. Don't get me wrong. But just because I was one of the smallest fire Elementals born in centuries meant nothing. Compared to most Magi or humans, I was downright normal. Heck, some humans would think I was tall, being five foot nine and covered in sleek muscles.

To my people, however, I was a runt. Not that they would ever say anything. I'd had to work twice as hard to prove myself worthy. But I guess I still hadn't proven anything.

It never helped anything that I wasn't the brightest flame on the torch. If that makes sense?

I went back into my room and started to change into some light armour as I plotted what I would do. I needed to prove that I was capable to fight with the best of them.

Present day

Sol slams the last paper down in front of her and glares at me. Her eyes start to glow a bit. I avert my own gaze.

"I don't think you're an idiot. I just—"

She trails off and looks to a photograph of a man and woman who look so much like the two of us. It is framed and sits on a table beside my bed. She sighs deeply and works on smoothing the paper sitting in front of her.

We don't speak for a while, until I shuffle on my knees across the room and plunk myself down beside her.

"You're just my older sister, and you want to protect me."

She nods. "You're all I have left."

I don't bother to tell her that she doesn't need to go to such lengths to keep me from danger. Yet the story I am about to tell her almost proves all of her actions right.

She rests her head on my shoulder and takes a deep breath before saying, "Why don't we continue with the story? I will try not to interrupt, okay?"

I know better than to believe she will stay quiet. But I move back to my earlier position and continue to write anyway.

Okay. I am totally a people person, fair and just—it's what I am good at. However, I'm not really that great at planning things out. For once though, I wish I'd thought ahead a bit. Maybe if I had, I wouldn't have been climbing up the winding mountain trail, shivering. At least I was smart enough to wear pants and a thick tunic under my light armour.

But then, if I had stayed home, would I have met Sebastian?

A less stubborn man would have headed back down and trusted the soldiers. Actually, I do trust my people. Implicitly.

I just like doing things myself and seeing the results with my own eyes. Soline tells me that the only reason I haven't died due to my own stupidity is because of her. I know she loves me and worries for me. I should just be thankful that nobody else besides Soline ever brings up my occasional bouts of idiocy. (Yes Sol, I know you have never actually called me an idiot. I thought you were going to keep quiet?)

Anyway...

Four weeks ago

I drew my blade and squinted my eyes against the snow, which was falling ever more heavily in those sickly olive-hued flakes, as I came to the apex of the mountain. Now that I was closer to the source of all the trouble, I could see that the very tip of the mountain was radiating a barely visible pulse of energy, tainting everything around it. The large puffs of clouds, normally white, became dark green and spread like a virus.

The leather of my glove creaked on the hilt in my right hand as I gripped it tighter. The situation creped me out.

I approached the mouth of a cave, slipping in from the side when I saw that the coast was clear. The passageway was rather narrow and slick with ice, so I had to tread carefully. My eyes adjusted to the dark so I didn't need the light spell Magi or humans would have.

I walked for at least ten minutes through the passage, going deep down, not stopping until I heard voices in the distance.

The clash of metal against metal rang in my ears, propelling me further, forcing me to pick up my pace.

A fight was taking place in a massive cavern, the walls of which were covered in vast and detailed murals. Each picture carved into the stone depicted the evolution of some of the ancient humans into Elementals.

On one side of the room was a towering man with crazed-wide eyes and flowing red robes. This had to be the mage and the cause of the spell over the city. He was in a trance, standing by a tall pole that appeared to be carved by hand. It was glowing and surrounding the man with a jade aura of pulsing light. The pole itself was one with the stone ceiling above.

A dozen of Kiren's soldiers, as well as Kiren himself, were there, each of them fighting off a spectral form of the mage. The men and women there were mainly frost Elementals. I could see the icy ground under them pulse, and the air glittered around them with the cold. I understood, from experience, that the fighters were channeling the power into their sword. They could do it for quite some time without getting tired. At such a high elevation, the element of cold was everywhere, so the frost Elementals barely had to exert themselves to use such abilities.

Directly outside the aura the mage had set around himself was another person. This man was not one whom I had ever met, but must have been the one sent by the Order of Magi. The one named Sebastian. He was about my height, though that was where the similarities ended. His hair was a light brown and hung pin straight to fall around his ears. His ashen skin was covered with the glow from the demented mage's spell, and his silver eyes were focused intently in front of him. Around him, holding their own blades, were skeletons.

These undead creatures fought off the spectres, allowing him to concentrate—probably on getting through to the rogue mage.

I didn't have much time to think about it before I was attacked by a spectre as well. I allowed a surge of energy to roll from the lingering traces of fire element in the ground beneath my feet and cover the sword. Slashing in front of me in a wide arc, I took out my foe. The incorporeal form burst into flames before fading from existence.

Falling to my knees and sliding on a patch of ice, I managed to avoid another apparition, by slicing from the bottom as I passed it.

Gaining distance, I used all of my skills to power forward. I thought to myself that there was no real reason for everybody to keep me back from this mission. Being smaller than most males of my kind, I had trained twice as hard to be a warrior. Due to my smaller size, which was actually tall if I were a

human, I was pretty fast. My leather armour was also light enough to allow me the extra boost of speed I needed to get to the mage—

Just as Sebastian had taken him down.

At that point, a bunch of things happened at once.

The mage locked eyes with me, and immediately focused every bit of spell energy at me. At the same time, both Sebastian, and my friend Kiren called me a moron.

All right, so Soline and Kiren could call me moron and I wouldn't complain.

Probably because that had been a pretty boneheaded move, running up to a crazy man with powers that I didn't really fully understand.

But as I fell to my knees, I couldn't help but feel a deep pain within myself. I had failed. I'd proven everybody right in their assumptions about me. As darkness consumed me, I faintly wondered why it hurt to think I had failed in the eyes of Sebastian, a man I had never even met.

I woke up cold and on a hard surface. Where in the world could I be?

A sharp slap to my cheek forced me to open my eyes.

And a deep voice to the side of me made me focus. "I've been chasing that asshole over half the fucking globe since he came out from hiding. Then you come in, let him absorb your fucking energy and place a curse on you to prevent any kind of healing unless somebody tracks the bugger down. Perfect. Just perfect."

"That's the Lord of our city's brother you are talking to," said the voice of one of the soldiers.

Thank the Gods that at least one of my citizens still respected me. After this move, I would have to do another charity benefit to boost confidence in me. Maybe for orphans. Not that I needed a reason to help orphans.

I groaned and tried to sit up, brushing away Kiren's hand of help. Before I could make it, a foot planted itself on my chest and pushed me back down. Hard.

"Okay. I'm a decent guy. But if you don't let me up, I will have to get mad at you," I said, wanting so badly to glare down at that black boot. "And who are you anyway?"

Several of the soldiers rushed forward to help me, but Sebastian was still surrounded by skeletons. Each of the undead creatures had their swords raised, prepared to protect their creator.

“You can call me Sebastian. And I am the one who has been attempting to take out Jarcat, the psychotic asshole that was draining the life energy from your city. The same mage that drained your powers. Or didn't your feeble brain process the words I just said?”

At that, I pushed away the boot. Or tried at least.

I felt as if I was trying to push at a stone pillar. Shit. Maybe this guy was on to something with the whole lack of abilities thing.

I still had my swiftness. That had nothing to do with magical ability, and was all me.

I grabbed my sword, which had fallen to my side, and slashed out at Sebastian.

He just hopped away with a nimble grace that I had to admire.

Getting into a defensive stance, I was taken aback when his undead minions didn't move to attack me. They just stayed around their master. All eight of them.

“So, the Order sent you down to help us out? They weren't able to send somebody who isn't an asshole?”

Sebastian just crossed his arms over his chest. He looked to be as buff as me, and had no armour on to hide that fact.

“Jarcat is a rogue Order member who is trying to start his own resistance group. He is very powerful and I am the only Order mage strong enough to handle him. Besides that, I have nothing more to say to a member, let alone an aristocrat, of a race of untrustworthy, slutty and barbaric creatures such as yourself.”

Ready to strike first, and answer questions later, I summoned a fireball to blast him and his foul creatures away. I'd show this asshole who was a barbarian (which I admit would have been counterproductive, but I wasn't thinking). Yet as I lifted my hand, all that came out was a faint wisp of smoke.

I tried again.

Nothing.

Smirking, Sebastian walked past all of us and headed for the exit. He was not getting away so easily.

“How did that other mage, that Jarcat guy, get away? Is the city safe? And how do I get my powers back?” I asked as I followed him out.

Spinning around, his long black coat billowing as he moved, Sebastian glared at me, I didn't flinch.

“Number one, he got away because you were too damn close to him. Before you came into the area, I had warned the soldiers to stay away. They fucking listened, though they didn't exactly trust me. They understood what I was trying to do. Instead, the bastard managed to absorb your energy and use it to help him teleport away.”

Sebastian was ticking off the points with his slender, pale fingers. “Second of all, yes. The city is probably safe for now. Unless he comes back. Which he will if I don't catch him.”

I let out a breath of relief that the mage was gone, at least for now. The sigh was repeated behind me by Kiren's men.

“What about my powers?”

Sebastian ignored me. Just turned around and continued to walk.

“Excuse me? I insist that you respond this instant,” I said, putting every ounce of authority into my voice that I could muster.

More nothing. Not even the skeletons. Though they weren't alive, so I wasn't actually surprised at their lack of response.

Charging forward, I put all of my weight into knocking aside a skeleton and slamming right into Sebastian, causing him to fall to the ground.

I got on top of him, fist raised to punch when I found my position being reversed. Sebastian was now on top of me, pinning my wrists above my head. He brought his head down to my ear.

He whispered, “Beg me.”

“Huh?”

I actually didn't think I'd heard what he'd said correctly.

“If you want my help getting your powers back, you need to beg me.”

“Fuck that,” I snarled, bashing my head into the side of Sebastian's.

No way was I going to humiliate myself in front of so many people in such a way.

Sebastian growled and loosened his grip on my wrists long enough for me to wiggle free, right into the waiting arms of Kiren. Except that my traitor friend held my arms behind my back.

“Okay. We all need to take a breath,” said my friend, the strong-as-an-ox earth Elemental who had decided to not let up on me. “For what it’s worth, Rey, I’m a pretty good judge of people and I think he is telling the truth about his intentions. And I’ve spoken with him on the communicator, so I know who he is.”

At the time, all I could think of was how much of an ass this Sebastian guy was. I snorted in disbelief. The Order of the Magi wouldn’t send such an asshole. I’d spoken with the Order before, and all of the mages I had socialized with were very pleasant. But this fucker was like a little package topped with an ass-kicking instead of a bow.

Kiren held my arms with one hand, and with the other he flicked the tip of my ear. “Don’t be a stubborn mule for a moment.”

Pretty sure that was Kiren’s subtle way of calling me an ass.

“Fine. What makes you want to trust a word that he says?”

Sebastian didn’t even hold a hand to where I had slammed my head against his. It sort of bruised my ego to think that I hadn’t hurt him enough to warrant concern. The man just stood still again, with a smirk. A smirk!

I suppressed a growl. Possibly for the second or third time, I was too angry to remember.

Kiren sighed and then said, “Because I’ve not only heard of him before, as I’ve said his talent precedes him. But I know who he is because I’ve met him before.”

I stared skeptically at Sebastian. “You’ve met Kiren?”

“How would I remember that? You all look the same to me.”

I once again attempted to charge forward, but Kiren’s grip stopped me. Gah! How was I the only one who wanted to clock this ass upside the head?

“Seriously, Kiren. I’ll find a way to get my powers back by myself,” I said, gritting my teeth when my words received a snort from Sebastian.

“How do you get powers back from Jarcat, hmm?”

“I’m sure that I can think of a way,” I said, looking back at Kiren. “I’m not going to hit him so let me go.”

After scrutinizing my expression, Kiren let go, and I stood up straight. Sebastian’s eyes bored a hole into me.

“What’s it going to be? Are you coming with me?” asked Sebastian. “Or should I just use your body, here and now, to find out where Jarcat is? If I do that, I will not come back with your powers. I will let them die along with Jarcat.”

“Wait! Now I have to come with you to get my powers back?”

“That’s the way it always was.”

Throwing my arms into the air in exasperation because I was clearly the only sane person there, I said, “I have tasks to do. People depend on me.”

“I’m sure that all of your jobs will be better off without you. I’ve heard a number of rumours about the Lord of Azmarine’s idiot younger brother. You probably spend most of your time fucking anything that moves,” said Sebastian.

Deep breath. I would not hit him. Really. I was fairly certain that I could resist. Even though it would have felt damn good to have the bones in his face crack under my fist.

“Azmarine is more prosperous now than it has been in over a century. I have nearly eliminated poverty and implemented some of the most modern healthcare services in the world. My sister is a great leader, but I have my place as well.”

“Yet for all you have done, you still need to get on your knees in front of me to beg for my help. Funny, that.”

I looked over at Kiren for help. “Do you seriously know this guy? Could you be thinking of somebody else? Like, anybody else?”

Shaking his head, Kiren said, “His name is Sebastian Risdro. He is a necromancer who works for the Order of Magi. He’s kind of an enforcer for them. I’ve heard of him because I keep on top of any kind of military news.”

“I’m not military. The Magi pay me for each job I do,” said Sebastian, but I didn’t really care to listen at that point.

Okay. I could do this. I'd just get down to my knees. Now.

I looked down, and noticed that I'd still failed to move. This was harder than it looked. I didn't want to humble myself in front of my people like that, not after everything I had tried to do to prove myself worthy in their eyes.

I looked over to Kiren sheepishly and tried to give him a pleading look. Maybe, if I looked enough like some kind of cute puppy or kitten, he'd leave and take the soldiers with him. Then, if it was possible, I could beg with my dignity still intact.

Getting the message right away, Kiren led the soldiers to the outside of the cave. As if on a show of faith, Sebastian sent off his undead with a simple flick of his hand. I was fairly certain that he spoke some magical words under his breath, but my hearing had changed. Small sounds like whispers were now muffled like I had cotton in my ears.

Once we were alone, I breathed in deep. I cracked my knuckles by making fists. I narrowed my eyes.

"I don't have all day," said Sebastian.

"Fine," I said, and quickly fell to my knees.

Thankfully I was wearing the leather armour, because I went down hard. My joints had still felt a jolt of the pain. I could have sworn that I had tried to be more graceful than that.

Then, saying the words so quickly that I am sure they all slurred together, I said, "Please will you help me get back my powers?"

"Come again?" The ass was enjoying himself.

I repeated myself, still not enunciating, I was sure.

"You really don't want my help, do you?"

"Please. Will. You. Help. Me?" I said, biting out each word.

The smirk that covered those pale pink lips just grew larger. "There, now was that so hard?"

Yes. It actually had been difficult. But I said nothing in response, just ground my teeth.

"We leave now. Say goodbye to your friend at the mouth of the cave."

“Wait, what? I have to find somebody to do my job as minister of social services. After everything that’s been happening in the city, you can’t just expect me to abandon them. They need me now more than ever.”

“Not my problem.”

“You are a piece of work aren’t you?”

“I probably am and yet I couldn’t care less.”

The trip through the cavern corridors seemed much longer than it had been going in. Everything was pitch-black, and I stumbled quite a bit in my attempts to move. The only light that I had to go by was a faintly glowing dagger at Sebastian’s hip. I used it as my guide and managed to follow the other man.

I was sure that my skin would be bruised the next morning, which sucked, because my skin looked awful when it was bruised.

Seeing the quizzical lift to one of Kiren’s brows, I went over to him. “He expects me to leave with him now.”

“Shit,” said Kiren, running his hand through his wavy blond hair. “Your eyes aren’t even bright anymore. The bronzed sheen on your skin looks... human.”

“I realize. It will be demoralizing,” I said, pacing a bit while I felt Sebastian’s eyes on me like a brand. “Can you get Soline to take my stead until I can get back? You’ll help her right, since she’s doing twice the work as normal?”

A gleam flashed in Kiren’s eyes before, with a sly voice, he said, “I’ll help her as much as her husband will allow.”

I groaned. Sebastian lifted his chin and glared icy daggers at Kiren and me. “How quaint. And how fitting to my picture of your people.”

Choosing to ignore that jab was difficult, but I managed to speak only to Kiren. “Seriously. I don’t need to know about my sister’s sex life.”

“Sorry.” But I didn’t think he really was. “And I will help out as much as I can, though she won’t need much assistance. Before you ask, no I won’t give her all the details. I know that you’ll never hear the end of it otherwise.”

He and I both knew my sister well. I chose to forget just how well Kiren also knew my older sister.

“Thanks. I owe you one,” I said, giving my friend a one-armed man hug.

“Yes, yes. So touching. Can we head out now? I’m trying to be a nice person here, but my time is precious,” snapped Sebastian.

Nice person. Ha!

Giving my friend a wry smile, I walked over to Sebastian. He turned, his long black coat billowing out behind him. Not stumbling this time as I was able to see better, I followed along a path that wound around the mountain. I watched him take out his communicator and press a few buttons before speaking into it.

“He escaped. Yeah I know. I have a good way to find him again though. I’ll be there in a few days to brief you further.”

He pressed one last button before he stuffed the device into a pocket of his jacket.

It wasn’t far before we came across a travel pod.

Compared to the small oval-shaped vehicles in Azmarine that could hold two people, this was huge—I was certain that it could hold over ten people comfortably. I’d no idea how Sebastian had parked the vehicle along this ledge. This rocky outcropping didn’t seem large enough to fully contain the vehicle. I was sure a small breeze would knock it over the edge.

“How hasn’t the pod fallen?” I asked, because I didn’t see a reason not to.

Taking out a round device from a pocket of his coat, Sebastian pressed a button and a door on the travel pod slid open.

“I always forget how much your kind spurns the use of technology. It uses energy from the stream of magic around it to keep it where I settled it,” he said, as if he was musing to himself.

I saw his words as another insult and growled.

He ignored me.

“We do have travel pods,” I argued.

“Yes, and the technology that they use is ancient compared to the way life is over your mountains. We no longer need to use steam engines.”

Sebastian and I went through the door, followed by his skeletons. Moving his fingers in a way that appeared simple, but must have been intricate, the undead each took a separate seat in the twelve-seat pod. They sat there, lifeless and eerily still.

Creepy.

I went with Sebastian to the front of the pod, where he sat in the driver's seat.

I felt the need to defend my people. "We just don't need all that modern tech. Not only do we not want it, but we have everything we need provided to us by our ancestral home. Only certain professionals like Kiren need tech to help communicate with the outside world. Why seek another way when ours works for us?"

"Except when a psychotic spell caster cuts off the sun and starts a rain that kills all of your plants and therefore, food."

There was that. I plunked down in the bucket seat that was actually really soft. Oh... so comfy. Modern amenities did have comfort on their side. I tried not to show how much I enjoyed it.

If Sebastian noticed my near groan of ecstasy, he didn't say a word. He just appeared focused on initiating the engines.

Then, he took off and headed away from my home.

That had to have been the longest flight I'd ever been on. Sebastian said it took just under five hours of travel, but I was pretty sure I had been in that seat for an entire day. If I were to think logically about it all, I'd realize that the steam-power travel pods used by my kind would have made the trip take at least three times as long. But I wasn't thinking logically.

No, instead I kept finding my eyes drawn to Sebastian.

He was really hot, in that cold and indifferent way he seemed to have. I was always drawn to men who were more my size. Sometimes I would even find a woman attractive, but not often. I preferred men.

I found myself wondering if Sebastian had a big cock. Would it be as pale as the rest of his skin?

I didn't even realize that I had been reaching for the man in my thoughts until he snapped, "What the hell are you doing?"

I yanked my hand back into my lap and crossed my legs. It wouldn't do for him to see my hard-on.

"Nothing," I said, deciding that I needed to move so I'd stop feeling so stiff.

Really, I did try to get up to stretch my legs. But as soon as I got to my feet and turned around, there were the skeletons just staring at me. I mean, if they had eyes. I tried to be glad that Sebastian didn't have zombies with him, but I couldn't.

I didn't make it far before I just went back into my seat. At least my erection had deflated.

When I shuddered, Sebastian just snorted.

I decided to break the silence. "What? Should everybody love the animated bones of former living creatures? I happen to find the things creepy as hell."

One of those elegantly shaped brows rose on Sebastian's face, though he didn't look over to me. He stayed focused on staring out the windshield

"I'm a powerful mage. I could have zombies or even ghouls. I'm sure that even one such as yourself would know what a ghoul is."

"Yes. I do know what that is. The foul eaters of flesh. Back during the great war, when necromancers were more common, they raised armies of ghouls to fight for them," I said, crossing my legs. "Still doesn't change how I feel about the skeletons."

"Does it look like I care about your feelings?"

Do not hit the man driving the vehicle. I do not want to crash while hundreds of feet in the air.

I said these in my head like a mantra.

So, like I said before, it was a long trip.

Eventually though, we arrived at the nearest city, which had taken the entire five hours to fly to. The mountains that Azmarine was nestled in were in the midst of the great forest. We didn't get many visitors, even once faster modes of transportation were created.

The city ahead of us was full of towering metallic buildings, gleaming in the light of the newly risen moon. Lights from thousands of travel pods glittered in the streets below us, and zipped around the skyscrapers. We joined one of the large roads. I stared, rapt, out of the pod at the bright colours and the absorbing view.

Large screens stood sporadically through the city, advertising everything from drinks to cosmetic products. The sounds of horns honking, and flashes from streetlights dazzled me.

I had been to a city before. My people live much longer than humans or Magi. I just hadn't been in one in over a decade. Probably longer. There was never a need, and everybody generally left us alone.

By the time we arrived at the edge of town, I was leaning back in my seat with my eyes closed, sure there was a dumb smile on my face. If Soline were here, she'd be making some kind of joke about me being able to sleep well that night. (No Sol, those jokes don't offend me. They're funny. Really, I think they are.)

Sebastian's building was tall like the rest of them, but seemed somehow swankier. Its windows were tinted, and I was unable to see into the homes they concealed. The parking garage required a pass-card to enter and was three levels high. Sebastian parked near the top where there were only a couple of other pods around.

Making another of his flicking hand gestures, the undead followed him. I kept my distance. Yet in the quiet of the apartment building, I could hear the clacking of the skeleton bones.

We all went through a door that was marked with the word "private". It was written in the common tongue, as most things in this city would be. Growing up, my father had insisted I learn how to speak, read, and write in the language. Not many Elementals could do so. It had rarely been useful for me as it was. I didn't mind though, reading and writing was one of the things that I did well.

The elevator took us up to the very top of the building.

"Why don't you just use stairs?" I asked.

Giving me a look as if I was stupid, Sebastian said, "Do you know how hard it would be to get this many skeletons to walk up twenty flights of stairs? Gods, but you're stupid."

Well, I had been right about the meaning of the look that he had given me.

Still... "You got them to fight for you. Or, in theory, since I guess I didn't actually see them fight."

I knew that you couldn't actually hear eyes roll. I realized that, but I was pretty sure I heard Sebastian's eyes as they rolled. Maybe it was just me. Or maybe he just has noisy eyes.

"That is because I raised them to do that. They can still climb stairs; they'd just stumble a lot and are unorganized. You really don't know anything, do you?" he said as we got out of the elevator and walked down a hallway.

“I know plenty. I’m not stupid. I just don’t understand how you can get them to do complete fighting manoeuvres but not command them to climb some stairs.”

No response. Ha! I had finally made that asshole shut up—

When I looked over though, I saw him opening a door and ushering the skeletons in. He was focused, not rendered speechless.

The room he was putting his minions in was dark, and looked just like some kind of storage room.

Sebastian uttered a few arcane words and the skeletons sat and went slack. But their bones managed to still stay together, like they were glued or something. Then he shut and locked the door.

We went down the hall a bit more to what I guessed was Sebastian’s place. When I got inside, my jaw dropped.

As a member of what would probably pass as Elemental royalty (without the title of prince) I had a fairly large home. But it turned out that this home at the top of the apartment building was bigger. The ceiling was vaulted on one sharp angle. The sitting room was connected to the dining room and the kitchen. Everything was dark or shiny, with modern amenities casting their artificial glow over the darkened room.

Dark, until Sebastian flicked on a light fixture that hung overhead.

I stood in the entrance hallway and removed my boots. I hadn’t noticed Sebastian do the same, but it was habit.

From across the room, I heard my host mumble something. I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me, since we weren’t being very chatty with one another. He wasn’t facing me, instead he was disarming himself onto his dining table. That trench coat sure could hold a vast array of weapons.

Several moments later, he spoke up, “I probably have food to eat in the fridge.”

My stomach chose that moment to growl loudly. With all the events of the day, I had forgotten to eat.

I slid off the chain armour that covered me and left it near my boots, then I jogged to find some food.

Gods, there was so much room in that kitchen. Did the man feed armies?

That thought left almost right away when I saw the contents of his icebox. Sorry, “fridge”, I was not used to that word.

There was hardly anything to eat. I opened one package that had plastic over it and sniffed. I curled my lips in disgust.

The contents consisted of a bunch of brown saucy lumps with a side of small yellow lumps that may have started their lives as corn. Pretty sure that wasn't food, even my newly dulled senses could tell that.

I found some dried fruits. That was it.

“You barely have anything to eat here,” I called out to Sebastian, who was sharpening one of his blades slowly and methodically.

“Don't really need much,” he said, and continued his task, the *shick shick shick* of the metal against the whetstone echoed in the room.

I got the feeling that Sebastian didn't entertain very many guests.

“It's been a while for me,” I said to prompt him to his duties.

It was, after all, a point of pride among my people to host guests. Regardless of status, we were all proud to offer the food and comforts of our homes. There was nothing I enjoyed more than providing for those who visit the home I share with my sister. Perhaps more than was necessary, as my reputation as a merry-maker was known throughout the city.

Sighing, like I was being a huge inconvenience, Sebastian grabbed a communication device. He pressed a few of the glowing silver buttons and put it up to his ear.

“Yeah, hi. I need a full order for Sebastian Risdro. Should be on my file. Add extra fruits and veggies. And there will be a substantial tip if you get it all here in under an hour,” he said, and then hung up the phone.

Scratching the top of my head, I said, “Thanks. I don't eat meat often, so I'm glad—”

Sebastian interrupted me. “I know your people don't eat meat. All vegetarians in your happy land of peace and obliviousness.”

My jaw dropped again, it was happening a lot that day. “Where the hell did you get all of that out of ‘I don't eat meat often’? I'm not a vegetarian anyway, since I do eat it sometimes.”

“Because I know your kind.” Sebastian gently placed down the dagger he’d been working on and strolled to face me. “I saw how you stared at me in wonder over using a phone. You live in the past, the age of the ancients.”

Huh? I felt like this man was speaking a language that I didn’t understand. I was seriously confused and felt like I was missing something big.

“I’ve seen those devices being used before—” not often, but I didn’t add that, I just kept talking—“We just don’t need technology. Our connection to nature and resilient bodies are enough for us.”

Sebastian brushed passed me and opened a cupboard. He pulled out a plastic bottle and twisted off the cap. After taking deep draws of the water, he said, “Do you realize that won’t be enough? Magic has been the weapon of choice for a long time. But magitechicians are discovering ways to combine metal and tech with magic. Weapons that can shoot bullets of energy faster than you could see or dodge.”

I cringed, though I didn’t know whether to believe him or not. He continued, while pointing a finger at me.

“One shot at your heart. You’d fall down dead. Each clip of energy bullets could take down ten of your people from a long distance. A fresh clip can be changed in only moments. Each of your enemies can be armed. Do you understand what I mean now?”

My hands had fisted at that point and my jaw was getting sore from clenching.

“I do. But we take up only a small part of the world, and in a remote location. Humans and Magi don’t like to enter the great forest. They’d need an awful lot of travel pods to bring in enough people to overtake us. Why bother?”

“Less pods than you’d think. And why bother? Naive idiot.” He rolled his eyes and just leaned against the counter.

Despite his cocky demeanour, I still noticed his body. He’d taken his coat off, revealing a short-sleeved shirt stretched over his chest. Sebastian was roughly my height, but more slender than myself. He still had a decent set of muscles on him. His black pants were also tight, and cradled his bulge nicely. If only he wasn’t such an ass.

“Oh Gods! See this is what I mean! Here I am, telling you of the perils of your lack of adjusting to the modern world, and you are ogling my cock, just like you were on the ride here.”

Huh? Oh, right.

I got myself back on topic with a shake of my head. “Look, I’m sure you are aware of the fact that Azmarine has peace treaties with all of the Magi cities. My ancestors set them into place, and because of my grandfather, the world leaders regularly come to visit and discuss diplomacy with my sister. We do export some of the goods that only we produce. We’re in good political standing.”

“Great. But none of them will help you when an uprising happens. Why do you think Jarcat came to Azmarine in the first place?”

I felt like I should remember that name. He’d said it before. I was pretty sure he had anyway. Why now, of all times, did I have to be absent-minded? My mind kept wandering back to Sebastian’s fantastic muscles.

Sebastian rubbed his nose a bit before saying, “You don’t remember who I’m talking about do you?”

My mind cleared long enough to remember and I snapped, “Jarcat was the guy who stole my powers.”

Despite how much I willed myself not to, my face flushed.

Clapping slowly, with a single raised brow, Sebastian said, “Good for you. You’re so clever.”

About to open my mouth once more, a sharp ringing filled the air. Sebastian grabbed a coin purse (okay, wallet, whatever) from his pocket and went to the entrance of his home.

I sighed and filled a cup with water from a tap, not needing water from a plastic bottle. As I drank, I thought that this experience couldn’t be over soon enough. Hopefully, before I was forced to murder the self-righteous asshole.

Chapter 2

Aside from me making a new friend in Reynard Junior, the climbing ivy (I will explain that in a moment), there were some things that I wanted to know.

Number one: How many knives did Sebastian really need to sharpen? There had to have been close to one hundred of the things (I may be exaggerating a tad, by one hundred I may actually mean five).

Number two: Why in the world did Sebastian sleep so much? When he wasn't, y'know, sharpening knives, he was sleeping. The man rarely even ate, a fact that brought up enough questions all on its own.

Number four (and the most important one in my book): Why were we not doing anything to get my powers back?

Er, did I maybe miss number three? Crap, I did and I am writing this in pen. How about this? Number three can be: Why does Sebastian sometimes bring his skeletons into his home just to sit them on various pieces of furniture? I think he does it to creep me out.

There. That's a good one. Also, I didn't like how I woke up to one of the things by my face while it was sitting on the ground near the couch. I pretty much screamed like a little girl (of which I most assuredly am not).

Anyway, I should probably get back to the story (when I said before that I screamed like a girl, I meant that I screamed like a man. Big burly man screams).

Three weeks and four days ago

Three days. I spent three days in that apartment without a single useful task to do. Every attempt at conversation was quickly shut down (when Sebastian wasn't insulting me and all of Elemental kind).

I was happy to find that Sebastian's apartment did have one thing I enjoyed: a potted vine plant.

It looked sad; its green leaves fading and the stems drooping just over the terra cotta pot's edge. The dying plant needed some love, and I was the one who needed to give it.

I spent a good while giving the ivy some water, in just the right locations around its base. Then, I prowled around the entirety of Sebastian's home to find the best source of light. When I failed to find enough, I propped open a window with a book I found and put the plant on the windowsill.

"What are you doing?" asked Sebastian on one of my many passes by him.

"Trying to save the life of this poor soul."

He blinked a couple times. "It's a plant."

"It's alive," I pointed out while I constructed a makeshift trellis for the sweet little plant to climb.

"Whatever," said Sebastian, standing up and heading to his bedroom.

I smirked and called out to him, "Its name is Reynard Junior. Just so you know."

I think I imagined the laugh I heard before Sebastian's bedroom door snicked closed.

I was a reasonable guy. *I still am*. But I get frustrated when not provided any sort of explanation at all. Maybe if Sebastian was doing some kind of spell to locate the psycho mage I'd understand.

Nothing though. Nada. Zilch.

This was probably why, on the fourth day, I snapped.

For each of those days, I had slept on the sofa. It was sort of comfortable, in its own unique way. A bit on the lumpy side though.

Which is all to say that I'd had a crap sleep.

So I didn't appreciate Sebastian slapping the back of my head and saying, "Get up. You've had enough time to laze around."

Blink. I probably blinked several times before a response squeaked out of me. "Laze around? Me?"

I ran a hand over my face before I went back to staring at Sebastian. I could not believe the nerve.

"I am ready to start the ritual."

More blinking. “Uh... what?”

His response was a roll of the eyes.

“No, seriously. You tell me nothing. Why should I even trust you?”

A sharp burst of wry laughter came from Sebastian as he turned and walked to the large window in his sitting room. “Because it is trust me or be forever a shame to your lineage. An Elemental with no power. Think of the horror.”

I made a loud war cry, possibly a banshee-esque wail, as I leapt from the sofa towards Sebastian.

Catching him unawares, I shoved the man. He fell forward, onto his hands and knees before rolling to the side and away from my body slam, which made me hit the floor with a thud.

I quickly got back to my feet and ran for one of those knives. Too bad he got there first, the slippery fucker.

Then I was body slammed into a wall, a blade against my throat. Those silver eyes were narrowed to slits, his lips tightened to thin white lines. The edge dug deeper into the skin of my neck, and I felt a drop of blood slide downwards. From the corner of my eyes I saw that all of the undead were in the room but Sebastian hadn't bothered to order them to come near me.

“I'll warn you one last time: do not fuck with me. I will not help you if you attack me again. Say it!”

I resisted the urge to gulp or tremble and in a firm voice, I said, “I will not attack you again, unless you attack me first. Then it's on.”

Those eyes remained on me, expression unchanging. Until, a moment later, I saw the barest hint of a smile before it was hidden again.

Sebastian shoved off me and turned once more, heading towards the hallway to his bedroom. I saw him slip the knife into the back of his pants.

I followed him, using the back of my hand to wipe at the small bit of blood that was drawn. Normally the door to the bedroom was kept locked, whether or not Sebastian was in it. I knew. I'd tried to open it.

I couldn't tell you what the rest of the room looked like because that wasn't what caught my attention. Set up in the corner of the rather spacious room was a circular slab of onyx stone, wide enough for somebody to sit on. Beside it, closest to the wall, was a pedestal made of the same stone as the slab in front of

it. On it sat a bowl of clear liquid (I guessed water), a holder of incense and—oh Gods—a pile of bones.

“Take off your clothes,” Sebastian said, while placing small red candles around the outside of the slab. He lit each one with a long stick-like flame device that he’d crack along the middle to activate a flame at one end.

“Sorry... what? Is this punishment for attacking you?” I asked slowly. My traitorous fingers had already undone the top button of my shirt before my brain told them to stop.

Sebastian sighed, deeply and with great dramatic effect. “You cannot be clothed for the ritual. All outside influences need to be removed from your body in order for me to use your body to scry for the mage who took your powers.”

He sounded so matter-of-fact. Doing this, being naked, would mean such vulnerability. It would require trusting this man. Gods but I didn’t want to. I hated it. I wanted to scream.

But instead, refusing to allow my fingers to shake, I removed each piece of clothing. Folding them each neatly, I placed them on top of Sebastian’s bed. Then, I stood, with my hands in front of my cock and waited.

Since I’m a chatterer when I’m nervous, I said, “So what necromancer abilities do you have that make you the one who can track Jarcat? There are plenty of mages. Couldn’t they just send a bunch of guys instead of you and your skeletons?”

“I can track down specific life forces. It is in that way that I can bring back the dead. Any mage could technically animate a corpse, but they’d have to control every action it took by themselves. My skill with life forces enables me to track down souls in the afterlife and request they inhabit their former body in a sort of half-life state. I have one of Jarcat’s personal items, so I technically could have used it to track his whereabouts right after he disappeared.”

I shifted on my feet a bit, still covering my bits and pieces and decided to ask nicely since I had no idea how long this rare forthcomingness would last. “So why didn’t you?”

Done lighting the candles, and holy crap how long did that even need to take anyway, Sebastian faced me. For a moment or two, the man just stared at me with those frosty eyes, moving up and down my body. I couldn’t help but feel a pang of arousal that I hurriedly shoved away in my mind.

“Because life forces are like flames. They flicker and ebb and sway in the natural stream of magic on the planet. The closer I can get to him, the more accurate my scrying will be.”

“Huh?” I felt my nose and forehead crinkle as I cocked my head to the side.

Sebastian slid a hand over his face. “He had absorbed your powers, correct?”

I nodded.

“And you are right here. So all I need to do is look within you and find where your powers are. You and he are tied in that way, so I will be able to find him. The object I have only carries minute traces of life force since he’d only touched the thing. Understand?”

I grinned. “That actually made sense. Yeah.”

“Great, I’m glad because I need you to concentrate and not be rattling off incessant questions to me. Now kneel on the platform,” said Sebastian.

I did as he asked without argument since he did finally take the time to explain something to me.

“Face the pedestal and place your hands on either side of the top.”

Okay. Easy so far.

I heard the snick of a bottle being opened and then felt cold oil being dribbled over my shoulder blades.

“Ah-ha. Chilly. Still a fire Elemental at heart, power or not,” I said.

“Sorry, but this needs to be done. The oil is purified and is a good conduit for the scrying.”

I wanted to answer but I couldn’t once I felt his hands on me. Sebastian was surprisingly gentle, kneading my muscles and slipping over my skin.

He liberally applied the oil to me, sliding over my legs in the front and back. He ran some down my chest, neck and even on my face. Then, just when I thought he was done, his hand cupped my balls.

Rolling them in his hand, he slowly dragged his touch over my rapidly hardening shaft and liberally coated the entire length. Those hands felt so skilled on my flesh, stroking up and down my cock. Despite myself, I began to pant heavily. Then two fingers trailed down my perineum and then circled my

hole over and over. The bastard had the nerve to chuckle before smoothing the slick over the cheeks of my ass.

“Well, I suppose this tells me how much I turn you on,” he said, in an infuriatingly smug voice.

Trying to control my breathing, I said, “Anybody would react to their penis being stimulated. It’s normal.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Reynard,” drawled Sebastian, saying my name for the first time instead of calling me idiot or moron.

I shivered, and not because I was naked.

“All right. You will now lift both of your hands over the bowl of purified water. Clasp your hands with your wrists facing inward. And don’t jerk your body,” he said, voice turning steely once more.

I did as he said and wasn’t very surprised when I saw a dagger edge towards me. One of the blades he had sharpened to perfection. It was silver and had a hilt covered in opals. With one strike, he scored slashes in both of my wrists at the same time.

I didn’t flinch. But I wasn’t sure how much I liked seeing my blood dripping into the water. Though I suppose not many people would.

“Now bring your hands to the slab of stone below you and press them down,” said Sebastian, taking one of the bones and stirring the bloody water.

When the blood from my wrists touched the place where I knelt, intricate runes that had been etched into the surface lit up with a crimson glow. I hadn’t even noticed them there before. I suppose I’d been too distracted by Sebastian’s hands.

Chanting in some arcane language, one that only a necromancer must be privy to, Sebastian stared into the water. I felt power from the stone seep into my skin and heal the wounds, but I didn’t move.

My body had started to get stiff when Sebastian’s eyes grew glassy and the words stopped pouring from his lips. His head jerked back to face the ceiling, and his muscles shuddered.

He heaved out a gasp of air, bringing his hands to his chest.

“He is in the capital city,” he rasped out, seemingly desperate for breath. It sounded like he had been running for hours. There was also a slight pallor to his skin that I hadn’t noticed before.

“What is he doing there?”

I sat up and stretched my arms and my back.

“I saw him enter a large warehouse. Inside was something that looked like a travel pod but much more sleek and with guns on each side of them.”

“Wait—Weapons? What the hell for?”

Sebastian stood, his eyes unfocused for a moment, and said, “For war.”

As soon as Sebastian laid that news on me, he stood up and headed right to the bathroom. I heard the water rush as he washed his hands of oil and products of the ritual before he came back out to me.

“Clean up fast. I have somewhere I need to be.”

When he came out of the bathroom, I saw that under his eyes were dark circles. His skin seemed pale and his shoulders slumped ever so slightly.

I stood up and plodded to the attached bathroom, which didn't have a tub but a shower stall. His other bathroom in the apartment did have a rather large tub. I still didn't know why he needed all of this space for just himself.

“So go without me. I can deal with not seeing your face for a while.”

As he walked out of the bedroom and into the hallway, he said, “Except that I don't trust you in my house by yourself.”

My lips curled in disgust, and I slammed the bathroom door behind me. I was already naked (as you know), so I just stepped into the shower and started the hot water pouring down onto me. It was a nice experience, being in this apartment. Azmarine has plumbing, but it is very basic. This showerhead was elaborate and had over ten different spray settings. There was a secondary showerhead, behind me, that could be changed as well. The water also came out piping hot, which I appreciated. Hot water didn't always last very long in Azmarine since we primarily use wells for individual residences. Only hospitals had access to scalding hot water directly out of the pipes. When I wanted super-hot water, I went to the hot springs near the eastern mountains.

Regardless of how much I enjoyed myself, I finished swiftly. I wanted to know where Sebastian had to be. And truth be told, I didn't want to be cooped up in the apartment for any longer. I just resented that he didn't trust me.

Though I didn't trust him either, so I guess it made sense.

I dressed in some of Sebastian's clothes. There wasn't much in the way of options in what to wear. Everything in his wardrobe was various shades of grey or black. Pretty boring to tell you the truth. I longed for the comfort of a simple toga, since I could have one in any colour I chose.

Sebastian waited for me by the door, leaning against the wall and tapping one of his feet with impatience. He'd donned his long black coat and had swept all of his hair back from his face. He sighed dramatically when he saw me and opened the door.

"Boots and let's go."

I scowled. "Are you ever not bossy?"

"No," he said, gesturing for me to get out the door.

"Frick, I'm going as fast as I can."

"In that case, try to go even faster. Don't you realize that a war could be coming to your city?"

I finished lacing my combat boots and stomped out in front of Sebastian, who locked the door behind me. We went towards the closet full of skeletons. (Is that ironic? Maybe it is sort of amusing, even if Sebastian having skeletons in his closet isn't ironic.) He touched the foreheads of four of them and they snapped to life, standing up. Without a thought (Which is obvious actually, since they aren't alive. Of course, they don't have a thought. I'm not very bright, am I?), the undead surrounded Sebastian as best as they could.

We got to the first floor, and the elevator stopped in a different spot. The doors slid open, and we were in a lobby that was almost as large as Sebastian's apartment. A man at the front desk near the entrance to the building snapped to attention and looked over at us with wary eyes. A woman in uniform near the double doors of the exit startled and jogged away from us to a back room, where the door was promptly slammed shut.

"They seem to love you here," I said, smirking as I trailed behind the swiftly walking Sebastian.

"They fear what they don't understand," he said, not taking care to not be heard by the various people around him.

My brows creased, and I said, "How do they not understand it? Sure it's creepy, but it's magic. Most of you guys use magic, don't you?"

The fresh air hit me and enveloped me. I breathed in deeply and stopped for a few moments. The quality of air wasn't the greatest in this modern city, but much better than the stale oxygen of Sebastian's home.

I didn't know how long he'd been turned around staring at me. I kind of thought Sebastian would have either walked ahead without me or he would have complained at my lack of forward movement.

But instead, the man was staring at me like I was some kind of unknown specimen. I felt like he was trying to peer into my soul and was a bit unnerved.

"What? What'd I say?"

"Come on," he said, returning to the Sebastian I had known for the past few days. "I need to report to the Order headquarters."

Ah. Finally, I was being told something. I wonder if his forthcomingness with information was a slip on his part.

Regardless, I was glad to know where we were going.

The walk to our destination was quite long. I actually relished it, and enjoyed our stroll through a park along the way. I wondered if Sebastian didn't take his travel pod for my sake. Did he know this was what I really needed?

In any case, I doubted that he did this often. He was a mage after all. They loved technology.

Part way through the park, near a small copse of trees, was a bench and a small lake. I saw Sebastian's head turn and stare before he went to stand beside the wooden seat. His lithe fingers skimmed over the back of the bench, and his eyes were fixed on the water.

The pond had a small school of fish swimming around, perhaps looking for chunks of food to be thrown in. Cattails and long sweet grass made up the perimeter of the water, and on the surface floated lily pads with their elegant white flowers.

"Even in the middle of a city like this, nature peeks through," said Sebastian quietly.

I didn't expect what he'd just said, so I went to stand next to him. I looked at him from the corner of my eyes and then eventually I spoke, "Do you come here often?"

He nodded.

“It’s pretty. Calming as well. Serene enough that a water Elemental friend of mind would love it here.”

I smiled and looked at him just in time to see his face darken. He bared his teeth at me and snarled, “Let’s just get going. I don’t need to hear about your sexual conquests.”

Huh? “Who brought up sex? I was just trying to explore common ground.”

He ignored me, so I shook my head and did the same.

I just held my head high and followed Sebastian as he stormed towards his destination.

The building that the Order of the Magi was situated in was tall and long. It nearly spanned an entire city block in both directions. Also, it had to have been over twenty floors tall. Each entrance and exit looked to be heavily guarded by mages. Some of the men and women twirled balls of energy back and forth in their hands and some just had their hands on various forms of blade weapons.

Finally, Sebastian picked a door after walking around almost the entire building. The doors were both twice the size of regular doors and made of glass. This entrance led to a parking lot where over a hundred travel pods were settled. Most of them were designed for two people, so they didn’t take up much room.

Sebastian still appeared slouched, with apparent dark circles under his eyes. He seemed tired, until he started going towards the guards near the door. Once he was in eyesight, he straightened his spine and put a smirk on his face. The transformation from fatigued to snarky was actually pretty fascinating, though most assuredly no less irritating.

From the corner of his mouth, he said, “Keep your lips sealed and just follow me. If you say anything at all, I will kick your ass.”

This, of course, was my cue to say something. “Why the hell can’t I?”

Sebastian flew towards me, his skeletons staying in the place where he had been. He wrapped a hand around my throat and snarled in my face.

“Because I fucking said so. You need to learn when to listen.”

I grasped at his wrists and found them to be immovable. How the hell did he have such a strong grasp?

“I listen when I am given reasons. Just tell me why I can't talk.”

His fingers slid from my neck and he said, “You'll find out.”

By then, we had attracted attention. Two of the five guards came over to us, hands poised to throw an attack at me. They didn't get too close though, and I noticed them eyeing the skeletons warily.

“Is anything wrong, sir?”

The way they looked at Sebastian made it clear they weren't talking to me. Why would they have been? They didn't know me.

Sebastian brushed invisible pieces of lint off his shirt and pants before being flanked by his undead minions once more. He shook his head and said, “Everything is fine. This is just my servant and he was lipping off.”

Even under the careful scrutinizing from the guards, I really wanted to tell Sebastian a thing or two. I was nobody's damn slave. I kept my mouth shut by imagining getting my powers back. How great it would be to fling a fireball right into Sebastian and wipe that smug look off his face. I then had to fight to keep myself from laughing.

One of the male guards slid his eyes all over my body, toes to head. The lecherous bastard lingered on the dick that was hiding in my pants, then he grinned and said, “Hmm, I've heard that Elementals are really good at sex. A buddy of mine says there is one in the red light district who sleeps with anybody rich enough to afford him. Where did you get this one?”

Moving quick as a whip, Sebastian's hands shot out and wrapped around the creep's throat and he let gravelly words fall from his lips. “Not that kind of servant, you pig.”

The guard's buddies looked at each other, obviously conflicted. I could tell they wanted to help their friend out. But Sebastian seemed to have rank in this place. Instead, they just backed away a few steps.

In Sebastian's grasp, the guard squeaked, “But they are known for their sexual talents. Why wouldn't you?”

With words so low that I could barely make them out, he replied, “Because I don't just stick my dick in everything that moves. That's why.”

At that, Sebastian flung the man down to the ground in front of him, and then stepped over him gracefully.

I just followed Sebastian as the other guards stepped out of his way, staying several paces away. We went into the large building.

And massive it truly was. Not just in size, but in the obvious purpose it held. There were all kinds of people wandering around. I saw some mages being followed by mechanical creatures of all sorts (dogs, humanoids, birds, you name it). Other magic users displayed their talents less obviously, but they were adorned with all kinds of glowing objects. Most commonly, I saw amulets with huge glowing pendants hanging off of them. Other glowing objects were bracelets, headbands or armour, and I even saw one woman with five little star-shaped rocks spinning around her waist.

It was all pretty fascinating. I wondered why I didn't see any other people with undead. And why did all of these men and women avoid us. Just creeped out I guessed?

Soon though, Sebastian had ushered me into an elevator. Once in, he pressed the button for the twentieth floor. For a moment, that smirk slid from his face and he closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

I stared at him without shame. I felt like I had the right to, since not too long previously, he did have his finger up my ass.

“What?” he said, tapping one of his boots on the metal floor.

“You look exhausted.”

“I'm fine. And didn't I tell you to shut your mouth?”

“Fine. Fuck you.”

I mimed locking my lips and then dramatically hurling away the key.

As I did that, the invisible key would have flown right through the elevator doors that slid open to expose a sterile-looking grey and white office/reception area. A slender man sat behind a large computer screen and tapped away at a keyboard that was no thicker than a piece of paper. Every now and then he would swipe at the screen as well. He didn't even look up at us as Sebastian walked to the desk and waited.

Sebastian coughed.

No response.

Sebastian growled.

The man just curled a lip up in obvious distaste but didn't turn his attention away from his tasks.

I saw that Sebastian had moved his hand to a knife on his belt when an office to the side of us opened suddenly. A tall man came out and leisurely walked to Sebastian. His hair had an occasional streak of grey, and slight lines were around his eyes. He was one of the glowing objects mages (I planned to learn more about the Magi at a later date, because my knowledge seemed sorely lacking). His robes were golden, the significance of which I was aware. That colour of robes meant that this was a Mage of the highest possible rank.

“Now, now Sebastian, there is no need to resort to violence. How may I help you?” asked the man whose body seemed to be cool and composed. One hand was behind his back and the other gestured towards the office he’d just come from.

Sebastian followed, and when I made to go sit in the small waiting room that I’d spied to the right of me, he tugged viciously on my arm.

The office door was shut behind us and the golden-robed man leaned one hip against his desk, which was so neat and tidy that I wondered if he worked here at all.

“So what brings you here today, and with such a guest? Reynard Taje from Azmarine, I presume?”

I nodded and was about to confirm what he said when Sebastian sharply elbowed me in the side. Right, I’d locked my mouth, key lost to the ether of make-believe objects.

“It doesn’t matter who he is, Phil. Just let me have it,” said Sebastian, sitting down in a chair in front of the desk.

Phil had been in the middle of sitting down in his own seat when Sebastian had spoken those words. The ageing man slammed the palms of both hands on the desk in front of him, rattling a container of pens.

“How the hell did he get away from you? The situation practically served him to you on a silver platter.”

Ah, that was why Sebastian wanted me here. He intended to throw me to the boss to chew out so that he didn’t get in trouble. I winced but no verbal lashing ever came. Only my practice with keeping my cool stopped my jaw from dropping in shock.

“A mistake on my part. I miscalculated the spell I was going to cast to trap him. He got away,” said Sebastian, not dropping his gaze from Phil’s.

“Is that so?” asked Phil, looking at me for a few agonizing moments before sitting back down.

“It is,” said Sebastian, crossing one of his legs to rest his ankle on a knee.

“And I am to assume that you are going to be on your way to find him again. We need you to get back what he took. Who knows what he is doing? Rallying more young mages to believe in his cause, I would assume,” said Phil reaching into his desk for a bottle of amber liquid and three tumblers.

He set them down on the desk and poured a finger in each. Then he handed one to each of us.

I sniffed the drink before taking a sip. I looked at Sebastian and he had taken a large gulp of his. How he could take such a large drink of such strong whiskey I didn't know.

“Yes. I am going to follow him. It brings me to my second reason for being here. I scryed on him.”

Phil waited more patiently for Sebastian to continue than I would have. The infuriating man just uncrossed and recrossed his legs and drank for a few moments.

Then, finally, he said, “I think he is preparing for war.”

“I didn't think he had enough supporters,” said Phil, looking hard at his whiskey.

“There are enough mages who think that the planet should be ours alone who would follow him. Despite how batshit crazy Jarcat is.”

My eyes widened. “Fuck keeping my mouth shut. My city is still in danger?”

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “Yes. But if you weren't stupid you'd know that. Your *friend* Kiren and your sister were informed long ago and have been planning for the potential coming war.”

“Bullshit, I'd know about that. They'd tell me that much.”

I am pretty sure that I saw a grin on Phil's face as he watched Sebastian and me. I didn't care because right then I was up in Sebastian's face, who was also standing up and glaring at me.

“Maybe there is a reason why they didn't tell a moron like you who can't keep his big yap closed,” spat Sebastian.

“Maybe you’re lying to me. And besides, if you knew this, why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

He put up a hand and ticked points off on his fingers. “One, I am not beholden to you, so I don’t need to tell you anything. And two, I thought that you would know about such an important thing. How could you not notice that the general of the armies was preparing for an attack? A man that you claim is your friend.”

“I—” I started to say but then trailed off, clenching my fists before continuing, “I have other tasks.”

My voice didn’t waver, though I felt like I was spouting excuses. Shit.

“Regardless of this, Sebastian, Mr. Taje, there are more important matters at hand.”

As much as I wanted to disagree, that would be selfish. Azmarine’s safety had to come first, even if it may or may not be my city. And even if my family and friends were keeping me in the dark about what they were doing.

I flung back the whiskey and let the burn course down my throat, almost bringing tears to my eyes.

Then I met Phil’s eyes straight on and said, “Whatever I need to do in order to help, I will. I promise.”

He looked at me shrewdly and said, “Perfect. Let’s shake on it.”

I smiled, this was great. This guy was proof that most Magi were good people. I reached out and shook Phil’s hand. As soon as my hand was grasped, Phil leaned quickly to the side and touched Sebastian as well.

For the second time in too short a period, Sebastian called me a moron before groaning and pressing a fist to his temple.

I felt a tingle up my arm before I felt weak and needed to sit down. What had just happened?

“I couldn’t help it,” I said in protest as Sebastian and I walked back into his apartment after taking a taxi pod back. “I thought he was on our side.”

Sebastian tossed his coat onto the back of a chair in the sitting room and turned to me with a look of exasperation in his eyes. “Yes. He is. But he’s also a devil in disguise.”

“Huh,” I said, looking up from untying the laces on my boots.

“By on our side, I refer to the fact that he had no desire or will to destroy Azmarine. He would rather keep Elementals out of his way. He is unhappy with Jarcat for stirring up dissension and will do anything to stop him from taking more followers away from himself.”

“Oh,” I said, setting my boots to the side and walking in to where Sebastian was. I sat across from him.

“Which is why I told you to shut your fucking mouth.”

“Okay. I get that. But it’s not like I signed a blood oath or something. He isn’t going to hurt us or anything.”

“No, not physically,” said Sebastian, going over to a chest in the corner of the room and opening it to reveal a hoard of supplies for going into battle. “But by saying those words to Phil and then shaking his hand, you have damned us both for his ultimate goals and plans. He has bound you and I. Phil can manipulate the souls of the still living. He has entwined ours. Our lives are forever bound.”

Since I’d already said “oh” once, I changed things up and said, “I see.”

“So hence my calling you a moron.”

“Will you stop calling me that!”

“Why should I when it’s true,” said Sebastian, though I could tell that he was getting distracted by packing.

I scratched my head. “What does being bound mean exactly?”

“It means that I need you with me now, even if I want to ditch you later. I need you to gain energy from.”

“How exactly do I do that?” I asked, with calm curiosity. Though I felt as if I should have been angry at Phil, I wasn’t.

“It’s not important right now. We need to focus on other tasks, like leaving,” said Sebastian, holding up his index finger in my face before he added, “I’ll tell you later, when it’s important. I don’t want to think about it anymore, lest I kill you out of sheer frustration.”

Leaving Sebastian’s home only took a few hours. He got clothes for me, and we packed some supplies into his travel pod. I wasn’t thrilled to see the skeletons again, but there wasn’t much that I could do about it.

Since Sebastian's apartment was on the outskirts of the city, we were flying over the forests once more. The quiet didn't seem to feel as oppressive as the last time we travelled, but perhaps that was because I had been getting used to him.

Not long after we were in flight, Sebastian's communicator started to bleep out a tune. He answered.

"Risdro," a pause, "Uh-huh. No, I haven't yet. We are on our way. Fine, talk to him."

With a quick move of his arm, the phone was in front of me. I took it from his hand with two fingers and gingerly put it up to my ear. I wasn't used to holding these things.

"Um, hello?"

"Rey! Oh man, it's Kiren."

"How are you? How are the war plans going?"

"Crap. So you've found out have you?"

"Yeah, I have. Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, trying to relax myself in my seat as I waited for the response.

On the other end of the line I heard him huff and then say, "Because Soline didn't want you to worry. She knows how good you are at your job and she didn't want to distract you."

"But she wouldn't have. It actually would have helped me do my job better. At least I think that it would have."

"I'm so sorry, Rey. If it helps, I was conflicted about her decision to keep this from you."

I nodded before I remembered that he wouldn't be able to see me. "I know. I can tell from your voice that you are."

"See that's the kind of thing we need you in Azmarine for. You are so kind, forgiving and intuitive. You need to hurry up and get your powers back so you can be here."

"So why did you call anyway?"

"Aside from seeing how your task was going, I need to know what to tell your sister."

I couldn't help it. I laughed a bit. Sebastian glanced over at me with his frosty eyes, but I somehow got the impression that he wasn't upset at me for breaking the silence. Don't know how I knew that.

"It's not funny," said Kiren, and I just then noticed the hush to his voice. "She is doing a good job of running both your job and hers. Not as good with the social affairs as you are, but adequate, don't you dare let her know I said that though."

"My lips are sealed."

I glared over at Sebastian when I distinctly heard him mutter about that being a joke. I didn't respond to his words and waited for Kiren to say more.

"But she is also going out of her mind with worry for you."

I frowned. "I know. She worries so much since our parents both went to the great beyond. Though I'm younger than her, I should be the one worrying, not Soline."

His response to my words was a desperately whispered, "Oh shit."

"What?" I was pretty sure I had an idea of what though.

In the background on Kiren's side, I heard a shrill female voice. It sounded far away at first and continued to get closer. I heard a shuffling come from Kiren, and he swore.

Then, "Reynard Taje! I will hurt you if you don't come back. Or if you come back injured. Don't you dare—"

At the same time, Kiren whispered, "Gotta go, bye."

And he hung up.

I had a wide grin on my face. I knew it because my cheeks hurt a bit. I looked at Sebastian as I gave him back his device, and my smile grew wider when I saw one of his own grins creeping over his lips.

"You're smiling." I felt triumphant to discover that this man wasn't quite as cold as he seemed.

Sebastian frowned deeply and scowled at me. "I am not. Necromancers do not smile."

"They dooo," I sing-songed like a small child. "You thought Kiren and my sister were funny."

He ignored me, but I noticed that the travel pod picked up speed, his hands white knuckled on the steering wheel.

“I don’t mind if you do that near me. I’m not going to judge.”

He snorted. “You just want to get me comfortable around you so that you can fuck me or something.”

Huh? Where in the world did that come from?

“I’m confused.”

In a patronizing tone of voice, he narrowed his eyes and said, “Of course you are.”

Fuck it all. I turned in my seat as much as I could with my seat strap still on and looked out the window at my side. But I was more upset at Soline for not trusting my ability. Everybody treated me like a child. I wished that I got more credit for being capable of taking care of myself.

Though in the back of my mind, I started to wonder if the actions of my family were of my own doing. Was my attitude so bad?

I wish I had some kind of clue.

After a couple hours, I had resumed looking out the front windshield. My neck had started to get a bit of a crick in it, and we still had a while to go before we got to the capital where Jarcat had set up base.

I looked down at the various knobs, dials, and screens on the panel under the window. One screen caught my eye as it flashed a red dot behind what I thought looked like a diagram of our pod.

“What does that mean?” I asked, too curious to keep up the silent treatment.

“Shit! Shit, shit, shit!”

Okay, so the red dot was bad. If I had any clue about how to drive one of the damnable travel pods, I would have tried to help. Instead, I just had to relegate myself to watch. Maybe Sebastian was onto something when he chastised me about my people’s general dislike for technology.

Before I could brace myself, the entire vehicle swerved to the right just as a cylindrical ray of purple energy whizzed by. He veered left when another ray shot on that side. On the screen, another red dot appeared in front of us all of a

sudden. Just as I saw it, I looked up. Outside the window was another travel pod.

This pod seemed different though. It was sleek and had an eerie sheen over it. I thought that perhaps I could see through it, just barely.

Sebastian pulled the pod upwards, and I had the sense to hold onto the armrests. Not that I thought that would do me any real good, but it was instinct.

Below, I could see a long metal tube poke out from the ship that had been in front of us. Now that we were nearly above it, I saw a buildup of violet strands and glowing swirls before it shot.

The entire pod made a shrieking groan before the metal started to twist near the back of the vehicle. Rips across the backend started appearing first, getting closer and closer to the front where we were.

The cargo hold was in the back, and our bags as well as weapons started to fall down to crash into the forest far below us. Seats were wrenched out in a burst of squealing speed and skeletons were also sent airborne.

Sebastian yelled at me over the horrible sound of metal tearing, "All right. When I tell you to unbuckle your seat belt, do it. No questions asked."

I nodded, though I knew that Sebastian was paying attention to steering. He had very little control left, but he tried to aim for a lake.

The blue grew closer and closer and I was thankful that our seats were still intact. My breathing grew rapid and Sebastian yelled, "Be calm. Take a deep breath."

When I think back, I wonder how he could have heard me over all of the other noise. But then, I just nodded once more.

Just as our ship hit the water, Sebastian yelled, "Now!"

And I let loose the clasp.

Water hit my skin like a thousand needles. Everything was dark as if a curtain was pulled over my eyes. I had no idea which was up or down, so deep in the lake. My lungs felt like they were on fire, and every fibre of my being screamed to take a breath.

I swam furiously in a direction that I thought was toward the surface when I felt a hand on the back of my jacket. The grip tugged me in the opposite direction, and I let myself follow.

Slowly I made it to the surface, the dim light get closer and closer. Once I reached the surface, I gasped for air with hungry draws, treading water.

Sebastian's tugging continued. "Breathe while you swim."

My teeth started chattering as soon as we fully emerged from the water. While it was still autumn, winter was close on its heels, and the wind was letting me know with its sharp sting. Sebastian didn't stop until we were in a thicket of bushes.

Overhead, one of the travel pods that shot at us swooped down, but I just barely saw it through the bushes and trees above us.

My shivering grew worse, and I wrapped my arms around my knees, curling myself tight. I peeked over at Sebastian, who wasn't trembling in the slightest.

"A-aren't y-you c-cold?" I asked, whispering the words in case there was somebody nearby, though I had my doubts.

Sebastian shook his head; his brow was creased from the frown on his lips. "A perk of being a necromancer."

I barely felt room for shock when the man's arms wrapped around my shoulders tightly and his body pressed behind me. He moved his hands over my arms in an attempt to warm me up. It started to work, even if just slightly.

I tried to smile. "D-drawback o-of b-being a f-fire E-Elemental."

"We need to get you moving. Stay close to me; we'll stick to crawling through where we will have cover. I think they are gone, but I don't want to risk being shot at. We need to find whatever supplies we can salvage."

I nodded, not feeling like dealing with getting out words between my chattering teeth.

The forest here was so very thick, untouched by civilization. I could feel the element of nature all around me, flowing around me but not into me. I desperately wished I was near a desert or a fire so I could feel its power, even if I still couldn't use any of it. I missed my home.

Eventually, after about two hours of walking around, we'd found less than half of our supplies. At least we found some of the clothes so that I could put on something warm and dry. Thanks to Sebastian's seeming obsession with blades, we found a number of different sizes of daggers. There were a bunch of other useful supplies and one bag to carry them in.

None of the skeletons survived the fall, which I couldn't find it in myself to be upset about. When we arrived at the first pile of bones, I saw Sebastian kneel beside it. He started speaking under his breath and swiping his hand over the remains.

At first, I thought that he was going to raise it back. When he just stood up and the pile was still just a pile, I wondered what he had just done.

"What was that about?" I asked clearly, my teeth barely chattering at all.

"Easing their way back to the afterlife."

"Oh," I said, shifting back and forth on my feet to keep myself warm.

He turned on me, backing me up into a tree, his lips twisted.

"What? You going to start in on me again about the damn skeletons? Going to tell me how despicable I am?"

I had no idea what to say to that. No idea at all.

"No. I think it is honourable for you to do that," I finally said, and I really meant it.

His eyes widened slightly, his mouth moving to soundlessly repeat the words that I'd just said. Then he just huffed and turned.

"Fine."

We managed to find the last of the bones, and he prayed over them. After the last one, I said, "Who attacked us? Who would even know that we were all the way out here?"

He was quiet for a while. Every now and then he would tap his fingers on his upper leg as he walked, or he'd chew his bottom lip ever so slightly. I started to understand that these little actions were actually what he did when he was deep in thought.

"Jarcat must have found us. Though I have no idea how that could have happened."

We had travelled for hours before I felt drawn to my right. It was a caressing feeling in the back of my mind, gently tugging me towards it. The two of us had managed to get near some mountains, and we were close to the base.

"I think there's a cave nearby," I said.

“How do you know?”

“I am sensing something that feels like home.”

We didn't go far before we broke out from the trees and saw the mouth of a cave nearby. Both of us could fit through it side by side, and the cave tunnel was just as wide, curving to the left.

Not going far, Sebastian dropped the pack he was carrying over his shoulder and lowered himself to the ground. “Warm in here.”

“I know,” I said, revelling in it. “There must be a pool of magma down the tunnel, further underground.”

“That's how you knew it was here huh? Guess you still have some of your innate talents left.”

“Do you mind if I go try to find it?”

Sebastian stared at me before nodding and grabbing a dagger. “I'll find food for us.”

Not until he'd left, and I was on my search for that primal source of heat, did I think about what he'd said. Sebastian didn't really eat. Was he getting food just for me?

I shook my head. Sebastian must eat sometimes. And besides, the guy wouldn't want to drag a half-starved man around. This was for his benefit.

I was surprised at how close the pool of magma actually was. Only a ten-minute walk down the passage. The walk had been a bit steep in places where the path kind of dropped, but the effort was worth it when I saw the beautifully roiling red-orange liquid.

I still had resistance to heat, as I was able to get closer than any human could without protection but my clothes did not. I had to take them off before I got closer. I was sad to find that with the loss of my powers went the ability to physically interact with magma. I couldn't get very close to the pool before I had to stop and just sit. I really wanted to hold some though, but I didn't.

I'm not as stupid as I seem.

I closed my eyes and allowed myself to get lost in the bubbling sounds. This felt as close to home as I could get. I wasn't worried about lava getting on me because I could sense that I was safe there.

A while must have passed because I heard my name being called. Sebastian was close, but I couldn't see him.

“I caught some fish. They are cleaned and cooking right now. Come on, I can't get any closer or I'll burn to death.”

I chuckled and went to where I'd left my clothes. I immediately felt Sebastian's eyes on me, roving over my body while I dressed. On a lark, I decided to dress a bit more slowly, giving Sebastian a show. I slid each article of clothing over my body. I let him see my obvious erection.

Maybe I was high from being so close to a source of power for me, I don't know. But that is the only reason I could think of for why I strolled up to Sebastian and pressed a chaste kiss on the man's lips.

“Thank you for getting food.”

Then I just went back to where we'd set up camp.

Chapter 3

Sebastian spent most of our meal together avoiding my gaze. He hadn't had time to respond to my kiss back near the magma pool, and I didn't know if he would have.

The man only picked at a few flakes of his fish, eating with his fingers since we didn't pack forks. We hadn't really planned on a trek through the wilderness.

The silence was awkward, and I felt the urge to fill it. "Did you catch these with your dagger?"

He shook his head without looking at me. "I set off a small blast of energy near where some were swimming."

"Would have been impressive if you'd caught them with a dagger. My father tried to show me how. He was a nature Elemental. My mother was fire. Dad loved to teach me everything he could about nature and survival. I just couldn't get into it. I always preferred to start fires. Not the best ability for a small child to have in the woods."

When Sebastian chuckled under his breath, I nearly swallowed my tongue. I'd actually expected some kind of caustic remark about Elementals. I watched him pick at his food that he had placed on a large leaf. He almost appeared paler than usual, which I hadn't thought possible.

"Are you okay?"

"Huh?"

Sebastian looked up at me, the flames from the fire casting a yellow glow over his ashen skin. Under his eyes were dark circles and his lips were pressed together thin.

"I asked if you were okay. Are you upset because I kissed you? I honestly don't know why I did that since I am pretty sure we hate each other."

"No," he said, closing his eyes and letting out a shuddery rush of air. "I have used more energy than I thought I would. First, I slowed the descent of the ship, then I had to locate and save you from the lake. Now, I am having to keep using my energy to make sure that we head towards the nearest city."

"I had no idea that would take so much from you. Don't Magi usually have an object of focus to replenish their energy?"

Placing down his leaf, Sebastian stared into the fire. “Most do. But not necromancers. We need to kill a living being. To fully restore myself, I’d have to find animals to slay in sacrifice. Or—”

“Or what? Your next word had better not be Elemental,” I said it jokingly, but I didn’t actually know what he would say.

“Sex. With you. That is what Phil did when he bound us. The bastard thought he was doing a good thing.”

“Seriously? It sounds like a good deal to me and I could help you out with that,” I said, putting aside my own leaf plate that I had long since cleared of food.

I took a long swig of water from a canteen we had found (no kissing with fish breath). Then I went to sit next to him by the fire, and I reached out for him. Sex was something an Elemental could do well.

“You have a really great body. I’d love to show you how good I can make you feel. Show you that my experience with sex isn’t a bad thing.”

He flinched away from me and my newly grown erection wilted just a bit in my slacks.

“No. I’d rather wither up as a shell of depleted energy than sleep with another one of your kind. Especially you.”

And then he stood and stormed out of the cave and into the strong wind.

Shit, but I wish I understood that infuriating man. It was just a bit of sex. And what did he mean by sleeping with another of my kind? I mean, aside from the obvious.

Laying out our last remaining sleeping bag on the ground, I lay on the side closest to the fire. Using my jacket as a pillow, I fell into a shallow and troubled sleep.

I awoke to the feeling of fingers on my shoulder in what was a soft and tentative touch. When I opened my eyes, I noticed that I had rolled to face the rough wall of the cave. The fire had dimmed to embers and flickered specks of light over the stone.

I faced Sebastian, and met his gaze. For a moment, I was sure that I had seen into his soul, those silver orbs drawing me in like a moth to a flame. There was hurt in his expression that I caught before he tried to hide it.

Unable to stop myself, I reached out to cup his cheek, brushing the backs of my fingers along the cold skin.

“You’re freezing, how long were you out there?”

He shrugged as best as he could from his position. The steel shields went back up on his face but I refused to move my hand. Instead, I brought my hand to his hair and carded my fingers through those silky brown strands.

“What do you need Sebastian?” I asked as I tightened my grip ever so subtly.

“I think you know.” He didn’t sound happy.

“I thought you’d rather wither.”

His lips pursed before relaxing. “I changed my mind.”

“Don’t seem like the type to do that often,” I said before I shimmied closer and brought my nose to the crook of his neck.

I breathed his scent deep, glorying in the musk of pure male with a rich overlay of the woods. I flicked my tongue out to taste his skin, the saltiness bursting in my mouth. Licking my way up, I made a path up the side of his neck to find his ear. I sucked the lobe into my mouth, raking my teeth across it just enough to sting.

I felt my cock twitch, slowly coming to life.

With a breathless voice, he replied, “No. I don’t often change my mind. But I need this. I need the energy to get us out of the forest.”

Letting the small piece of flesh go with a pop, I brought my face to within inches of his and said, “Really? That’s the only reason?”

I let my touch whisper down his arms and over his slender hips, up and down. My lips and tongue continued their assault on Sebastian’s neck. I made sure to work up a couple of marks with my teeth for good measure.

“Yes. It is. Now please, don’t make me beg.”

Normally I might have considered making Sebastian do just that, just liked he’d done only days before. But at that point I desired him too much to care.

In one fell swoop, I pinned him beneath me, my hands on either side of his face. I brought my mouth down on his in a brutal clashing of lips and teeth. Our tongues swirled and probed, exploring every inch of wet heat.

His hands reached to grasp the back of the shirt I still wore, clutching so tight that I knew I'd have marks the next day. My hips lowered to meet his, my clothed erection meeting Sebastian's. He was just as hard as I was, rubbing up into me, groaning.

"Need... penetration... so... close," he said, gasping as he broke away from our kiss.

"Naked."

I whipped off my clothes in short order. While Sebastian worked on his, I darted to the fire pit to rekindle the flames. Given my natural talents in the area, it didn't take long to restart it.

Though when I turned around I was speechless.

With one arm under his head, Sebastian lay out like my own personal feast.

He had the well-toned muscles of a man who had trained in combat, and the red glow from the fire danced over them—defining them. There was not a hair on that torso save for a trail of fine silk that dipped down to surround his cock.

Oh and what an impressive dick it was, long and slender. Uncut and dripping into the dip of his belly button, angled a bit to the left. His balls were plump and tight to his body.

I pounced, grabbing his legs and bringing his entire length down my throat until I felt the tickle of his pubes against my nose. I was incredibly glad that I'd trained away my gag reflex.

He cried out, filling the corridor with the echoes of his pleasure. Maybe he'd never had somebody deep-throat him before.

Letting him go from my mouth for a moment, I pushed his legs closer to his chest and looked at him, "Are you sure?"

His mouth hung open, both hands fisted at his side. Sebastian nodded.

Scooting back a bit, I leaned my head down and sucked one of his lightly furred balls into my mouth. While I worked that part, I brought my fingers down to caress Sebastian's tight entrance.

Massaging it, I slipped the second testicle into my mouth before letting them slide free. I heard my soon-to-be lover's breathing grow heavier and more rapid, his kiss-swollen lips parted and glossy.

Spitting on the fingers that circled his hole, I started to press in with one digit. Immediately Sebastian lifted his hips, his ass seeking more.

“I’m not a girl, Reynard. Just fuck me!”

Teasing his perineum with my tongue, letting my saliva drip down to ease the way of my fingers, I brought my free hand to stroke his dick. Slowly, I increased and eased a second and then a third finger in. Only because he’d asked for more. There was no way that I was sticking my cock in until I was sure he was ready.

“Fuck me!” said Sebastian again, nearly breathless, hips still writhing.

Grinning wickedly, I said, “Beg me.”

“No,” he said, but his tone was low and shuddery.

“Guess you don’t want my cock to fill you. I’m so hard and leaking a bit too. But I could just finish myself off,” I said, sitting up but keeping my fingers in his ass.

“Don’t you dare,” he hissed, and then added, “please.”

“Maybe...” I let myself trail off as I curled my fingers and hit that spongy pad of nerves.

That did it.

Sebastian nearly shot up, his eyes wide, while he cried out, “Oh please, please, please.”

I couldn’t hold back any longer. So, I brought myself up to Sebastian’s face, and straddled him. “If you want it, get me wet first.”

I tapped the tip of my ruddy cockhead on his chin, and saw a pearlescent bead of pre-cum smear on the skin there.

Oh Gods, how I groaned when he sucked me. It must have just been because it was Sebastian. Maybe there had been sexual tension between us that I had been too irritated to feel. I’d had partners deep-throat me before and Sebastian only got halfway. But it felt so warm, so good.

When I had been sufficiently covered in wetness, I moved back, slinging his legs over my shoulders. Pressing the tip of my dick at his entrance, I pushed. I probably should have seen it coming when he grabbed my hips and pulled, finding myself buried to the balls in Sebastian’s slick passage.

While I groaned in pleasure at the tightness, I heard Sebastian hiss. I didn’t thrust like I so desperately wanted to, instead taking one of his hard pink nipples into my mouth. I bit it before moving to the second nub, which was sucked thoroughly before also being bitten.

I caressed the length of his body, soothing him and pressing feather-light kisses along the pulse at his neck.

Only once I felt his muscles relax, did I dare move.

With unhurried motions, I slid in and out, feeling him clench his muscles around me. Sebastian clawed at my back as I sucked up another mark on his neck and made my way up to his jaw.

“Faster. Please.”

I grinned against the unnaturally smooth face and said, “My pleasure.”

I punctuated that by slamming my hips forward, resting my arms on either side of his head. Every one of my moves was met by Sebastian as he mewled loudly.

Sweat built up with our frenzied motions, slicking the way for his cock to rub between us.

Angling my thrusts upwards, I knew I hit the right spot when he erupted, spilling his hot, creamy release onto our bellies. His cries filled the cave as I snapped forward twice more and found my own completion.

As my cock jerked, I met Sebastian's eyes and saw them glowing bright enough to light the room. His mouth was cracked open as he sucked air deep into his lungs. The atmosphere around us crackled, and his body shivered beneath me. The light slowly faded to their normal silver before he blinked several times as if to clear them.

Pressing feather-light kisses against his cheek and nose, I rolled to lie beside him and drew him next to my body. We didn't bother to clean ourselves up or move any further. We just fell into a comfortable sleep.

Present day

“Okay, I really did not need to know that part of it, Rey!” says Sol as she holds the paper on which I had just written my first lovemaking with Sebastian.

“It's part of what I have to tell you. It's important,” I say, leaning back from the table where I'm sitting, working the kinks out of my now-stiff back.

Kiren, who is reading as Soline hands him the papers, finishes the last segment and then chuckles.

“Nice,” he says, I see a twinkle in his eyes.

Soline rolls her own eyes and says, “Could you have just said something like, ‘We kissed and fucked’?”

She looks so hopeful that I grin a bit as I say, “If I have to hear about when you, Kiren and your husband have threesomes, surely you can read this.”

Soline looks at me and tries to look disgusted. All I see is an undercurrent of pity for me.

“I’m sorry. Can you continue?”

I shake my head and say, “Maybe later. I have tasks that need to be attended to.”

Soline nods and says, “How silly of me. Of course you do. But do tell me when you are ready to resume your tale. Perhaps after all of the sex?”

I chuckle though I’m not feeling it. “Perhaps.”

Kiren leaves first, after nodding at me.

Soline hesitates by the door, her hand touching the knob with the tips of her fingers. “For what it’s worth, I’m so sorry that I kept things from you. You have to know that.”

She leaves, closing the door quietly behind her as I put the papers away in the drawer of my writing table.

I see a letter in the drawer, which I didn’t realize I still had. I didn’t know I’d kept this.

It’s from an old lover of mine and childhood friend.

Dearest Reynard

I am writing to you, this missive, to inform you that I am leaving Azmarine. I have already asked Kiren and he has given me leave. My journey will be for at least a year, but perhaps longer. Perhaps what I am about to tell you is just my wild and fool’s heart talking, but I’d like to get to know the humans and the Magi. Believe me, I understand the reasons our people had for disdaining technology. And I understand that you wish to keep our culture strong. However, I no longer believe they are valid in all cases. I wish to travel the world and seek tech that will be useful to us. This can potentially be a boon to our people.

Thank you for allowing me this, even if you do not understand.

Sincerely, your friend for life,

Cathal

It was written to me quite some years before today though. Cathal was back in the city, somewhere. We'd briefly taken up our "friends who fuck" relationship, but it fizzled out. Now he is still in the army and happy in his life. It was never love for Cathal and I.

I knew what love was with Sebastian.

I shake my head and drop both of my hands down beside me. I don't remember why I kept it, but I could barely stand to finish reading it all the way through, even though I knew every word it said. I crumple the paper up in my fist and toss it aside.

I don't have time to think about Cathal, and how deeply I should be upset at him.

The sun is setting behind the mountains, which are barely letting over its red-orange light. Shadows loom heavy in the streets currently being lit up with lanterns. Shopkeepers and other citizens hurry by me, waving their greetings as they go about their business.

There actually hadn't been much to do, though I know I had implied otherwise to my sister. I just need a clear head and a calm soul. Perhaps I should go into the desert and lay on the sand while it still retains the warmth from the sun. It would be a nice way to relax and try to forget.

From behind me, I hear Kiren's voice calling out for me. I turn to greet him and notice that Cathal is beside him. They are jogging briskly towards me and their faces look quite serious.

"What's wrong?" I ask, steeling my back and going into Lord-of-a-city mode.

"You should go into the shelter," says Cathal, staring at the ground as if the pebbles are so very interesting.

"No. I've been back for a few weeks now and it's been the same shit—"

Kiren raised his hand and tried to speak, but I interrupted him.

"Let me talk!" I say, the words snapping out. "I have been trying to be more involved in the city affairs and nobody is letting me. You know how damn hard

it can be to get Soline to spill any kind of info. But I won't take the same from you two. Come on, please tell me what is going on."

Kiren gritted his teeth before running his hand through his hair.

"We're going to be under attack soon. A message just came in warning of it," says Kiren, green eyes swirling with unease.

"When? I didn't know that this would happen so soon," I say, fighting off the urge to pound something.

Citizens around us, who are listening in, gasp and quicken their pace.

"My contact says that by the time he managed to escape and get to a communicator that his captors had been gone for half a day. I'd say we have about a day and a half left to prepare, at best," says Cathal.

I nod. There was no time for tantrums. "And who is your contact?"

Cathal replies, looking to the side and wincing, "Sebastian Risdro."

Chapter 4

Present day

I had been running around for nearly forty-eight hours. No attack had come, and we hadn't seen any sign of travel pods. I stopped doing the various tasks that I'd set upon myself in order to grab a small bite to eat. I hadn't eaten since I found out about the coming attack. There is so much to do to evacuate the people and make sure they are safe and well taken care of.

Truth be told, if this weren't such a dire situation I would enjoy the break. That way I could avoid thinking.

When I open the kitchen door, I think that I should feel surprise when I see my sister, her husband (another fire Elemental), Kiren and Cathal in various positions in the room.

"Sit down," says Soline, in a serious voice as she pushes out a stool at the counter with her booted foot.

"Sol. I really have things to do," I protest, but I know my voice sounds weak.

I'm tired, hungry and soul weary.

Kiren pipes up, "All of the non-soldiers, children and elderly are deep within the old underground temples. We have patrols up and workers who are almost done fortifying our few possible entrances."

I plop down in the dark wood chair and soon find a mug of steaming tea set in front of me by Sol.

"Right now we think perhaps the rest of your story about Sebastian may help us here," says Kiren, folding his arms across his chest.

Out of the corner of my eye, I sneak a look at Cathal. He looks decidedly nervous, and I don't blame him, given what I know of his past.

"Do I have to do it here, in front of everybody?"

Sol nods, her curls flying around her face. I would argue with her, but I am too tired.

"I've caught them up to where you left off."

Shit. Here goes nothing.

So, I start talking.

Three Weeks Ago

When I woke up the next morning, I noticed that Sebastian had squirmed out of my grasp. He sat beside the fire, poking at a cooking fish. I saw that beside him was a pile of berries, the nice and plump purple ones that were tart and sweet at the same time.

“Thanks for making breakfast,” I said with a yawn. “Man, I slept well last night.”

Sebastian didn't look up, but said, “You need to keep your energy up.”

“How about you, Sebastian?”

That got him to look at me, eyes narrowed to tiny slits.

I don't let that intimidate me, “Despite how I act when you piss me off, I'm a pretty friendly guy. So how about your energy levels?”

“Fine, they are completely restored, so I thank you.”

I took the fish he'd been poking at and started eating it as I popped berries between bites of fish.

“My pleasure,” I said after I'd swallowed.

Again, he was quiet. But I didn't expect anything different.

So, I said, “Do you really not need to eat?”

He shook his head. “When I gained my powers as a child, I stopped eating. I no longer had the need.”

“Hey Sebastian?”

He glared at me. “Mmmm?”

“That's weird.”

He grinned wryly. “Yeah. It is. No other mage I have met is like this.”

I had the feeling that I'd insulted him somehow, but I hadn't meant it that way. My family and I tease each other all the time.

So I added to what I'd said before, “But your lack of appetite makes you who you are. I'm starting to like you.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” And then I added, “We should do that again. The sex I mean, it was great.”

As we were packing up the few things we'd taken from our packs, I heard him say, “Yes, we should. It was pretty good.”

I probably had the most idiotic grin in the history of grins.

I was pretty good. Sex with me was pretty good. I knew that. But hearing the necromancer with the cold demeanour say it was uplifting.

So, we left the cave, after I took one more naked trip to the magma pool just to soak up the nice warm feelings of it. Our trip continued the way we had been heading before, with Sebastian making the occasional check to make sure we were on track. (I hadn't noticed before, but when he checked the direction his eyes would get a silvery glow to them. Very sexy!)

It was about noon by the time we got to the outer edges of the capital city of Corevias. I could see, in the distance, the downtown area was full of towering skyscrapers. It would take days of walking to reach it. The suburbs and other parts of the city sprawled out for many miles, taking over what had been forest.

The moment we came into the city, we neared some kind of huge factory or warehouse. The asphalt stank like garbage and chemicals. We walked down the side of one of the roads, passing the seemingly abandoned buildings.

Just as he was opening his mouth to speak, something caught Sebastian's attention. Shoving hard, he pushed us both into a doorway of a small building. We crawled, so that nobody could see us through the two windows that were barely letting light through and made it into another room in the back. This must have been an office at one point, the occasional yellow and ageing paper littering the floor, an overturned desk in the corner.

Hiding in the corner behind the protective cover of the desk, I asked in a voice that was barely audible, “What the hell did you see?”

“Jarcats,” he mouthed back to me, eyes wide.

Tapping the fingers of both hands on his legs, his eyes darted back and forth, like he was thinking up a way to escape.

I tapped his shoulder to get his attention and whispered, “How many were there? Even without my powers, I still have combat expertise. We can take them.”

Shaking his head, Sebastian said, “Jarcats was there, as I said. You know how powerful he is. If he is here, then he likely has a small army with him as

well. That moment where he was alone by Azmarine was a fluke. And even then, think about how many people it took to take him on. That was the only time I had ever seen him alone, and it was because the spell he was casting needed him to be alone in its beginning stages.”

“Well shit,” I murmured, reaching beside me to pick at a crumpled sheet of newspaper.

“My sentiments exactly.”

As Sebastian sat and started to plan, I shuffled around the room on my knees. It may have been reckless, but I hated sitting in one place doing nothing. Along one of the walls, near the floor, I saw the slightest inconsistency. There was a small gap in the floorboards. It wasn't there on the rest of the wall and was wide like a closet door. I stood up and started to pry at the wooden wall panels, getting my fingernails under it.

“What are you doing?” asked Sebastian, sounding incredulous.

“There's a hidden door here,” I said, distracted and trailing off.

“So, it's an old building. It was probably boarded up years ago.”

I don't know why, but I didn't think that was the case. I thought it was hiding something.

I felt drawn that way.

When I pried enough of the panels away, I'd revealed a passageway and headed down it.

“This is a dumb idea, Rey. Seriously, this could go anywhere.”

“It's the same feeling I got when I felt the magma nearby, only stronger,” I said, because I couldn't explain the sensation any other way.

Sebastian and I were quiet for a while as we walked down the musty, old corridor. It twisted and turned several times but stayed level for several minutes before we got to another set of panels. This time we were facing the back of what was obviously a false wall.

We listened to the other side and heard only faint sounds. Once the sounds were gone completely, I took one board away and peeked out.

I saw an office that overlooked a huge warehouse area. In the large expanse of room were what had to be close to a hundred travel pods. All of them were

of the variety that had shot us down before. Soldiers moved around, carrying wooden crates. I couldn't see the contents, and doubted that Sebastian could either.

Voices came closer from a nearby hallway, and I quickly put the panel back and listened.

"Well look faster. I have it on good authority that the necromancer has been under Phil's direct order. He's taken one of those primitive Elementals and is helping it get back the powers I absorbed from it. He knows I am here and is headed this way, I'm sure of it."

"I understand, sir. But how can one man jeopardize our entire operation?" asked the first voice again.

The sound of flesh smacking flesh snapped through the air before the man, Jarcat, who was obviously in charge said, "It is not your place to question me. But if you must know, I will tell you. If Sebastian discovers what he can do with that power, he will be nearly unstoppable. Those filthy vermin in Azmarine have no idea what they have. They squander it on growing plants and making fires. Truly pathetic."

The first voice stammered a bit of nonsense before saying, "Y-yes, sir. We will continue to look for him. But I think we killed the two of them in that crash."

"Good. If you do well, I might just keep you as my apprentice when my plans come to fruition."

"Should I wake the elders? They are in the engine areas now."

Jarcat spoke forcefully, "Do not. They need their rest in order to get their revenge."

"All right sir. I will see that Sebastian is captured. Still wish him to be delivered alive, sir?"

"Yes, that would be preferable."

The door snicked shut, and from the cracks of the panels I smelled the acrid smoke of cheap tobacco seep towards us.

The two of us backed a bit into the corridor, out of earshot. We huddled close.

Pointing forward once we got to the door, Sebastian spoke, "I can cast one spell, and maybe another to do something about Jarcat. It will make our bodies

and energy signatures invisible. The problem is that every Magi in the area will know I am around, and the spell doesn't last forever."

"Maybe we shouldn't risk it since they will catch us for sure."

He shook his head. "We'll have enough time to get to a travel pod. If you can fly it to the Order headquarters that is in Corevias, then we will be safe. Can you fly one?"

I winced but nodded. "Not well. But enough to perhaps save our lives."

I hoped so anyway, because we were screwed otherwise.

Lifting both hands onto my shoulders, he made me do the same to him. He touched our foreheads together and chanted quietly. Glowing arcane symbols floated up around us in a wide circle, covering us from head to toe.

We ran down the corridor and moved aside the wall panels.

Jarcat's head whipped over to see what had just happened. As he stood, ashes fell down from the brown rolled cigarette in his hand. He glared, and his hand glowed and raised as he went to cast a spell.

Sebastian was faster. He snarled out some guttural words, and Jarcat became trapped in a violet force field. I couldn't hear his cries of outrage, but I could see his lips move.

"Now run. Be as silent as you can because they can still hear us. But let's get out of here and into a ship."

I nodded before I said, "I assume that if he can't get through that shield, than neither can we?"

"That's right, unfortunately."

Jarcat would be safe from being stabbed for now.

So, we booked it. I don't think I had ever run so fast in my life.

True to his word, nobody could see us. But they could sure as hell tell that Sebastian had cast a spell.

Jarcat's mini-prison didn't last long, and he soon emerged from the office barking orders, running around with his red cloak flying behind him. He was fuming, and his teeth were bared as he swore. Other mages scurried around looking furiously in every place they could. I saw one of them go to where we'd just come from, but once Sebastian and I were out of the tunnel, some kind of barrier blocked the entrance from sight. Clever.

Under our feet, the ground didn't change at all. It was like we were floating over the ground except that I felt it under my boots. Sweat beaded up on my forehead, and my knuckles whitened over the dagger at my side.

From out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jarcat, old and wrinkled but still standing with an aristocratic poise. He held some kind of metallic, circular device in his hand and was pointing it around. I could tell that he couldn't see us, but that didn't matter.

As soon as he pressed one of those gnarled fingers on a button, Sebastian collapsed to the ground in a heap. They still couldn't see us, since they didn't immediately run over. Sebastian curled himself into a ball of writhing pain. No sound escaped his mouth, but I saw him bit his lip so hard that blood welled up and dripped over his chin in a thin red stream.

"Curse the Gods!" yelled the head mage. "That should have broken his spell."

The mage's apprentice meekly walked over with his head down and his hands wringing. "If I may, sir?"

"Go ahead. Tell me whatever nonsense is running through your head."

"Perhaps he is having sexual relations with the Elemental that he brought along? We both know that he refuses to kill without just reason."

I listened to this as I picked Sebastian up and slung him over my shoulder. The weight almost felt like too much, but I had to get him to the travel pod closest to the open siding. Normally I would have been able to carry him without an issue, before I lost my powers and therefore some of my supernatural strength.

I couldn't help but be fascinated by what I'd heard. I knew that Sebastian wasn't like most necromancers, but that he doesn't kill without reason? I didn't know that, though I should have guessed. Sebastian had been challenging my perceptions of him from day one.

Sebastian shivered and clung to the folds of the back of my coat, and I'd felt coldness seeping out of him through his clothes.

We got to the travel pod just in time. I was by the door to it, with my free hand on the handle and sliding it open, when a shout sounded behind us.

"Right there!"

Shit, shit, shit!

“Sorry about this,” I said before I threw Sebastian to the floor of the pod, trying to be as gentle as I could.

I leapt in and slammed the door shut, fastening the locks.

“Okay. I can do this. I drive the pod at home every now and again,” I told myself as I sat in the driver’s seat.

The panel before me was nothing that I’d seen before. Not even Sebastian’s pod was like this. Everything glowed, and there were no traditional buttons or levers. No words were anywhere to indicate what I should do.

Since there was no way to actually figure out which button to push, I pressed the pad in front of me. It was a square, red and glowing.

And it did nothing. Great.

I heard, and felt, the banging and shouts on the door. I had no idea what to do, feeling so out of my element. I tried another panel. I mean, one of them had to do something right? I felt the engine purr to life only to sputter to a premature death.

“The panel with the circles on either side of it,” said Sebastian’s raspy voice from behind me.

I pressed that panel but nothing happened. Did technology hate me? It must.

“Draw your finger—” he took a pause to catch what seemed like a desperately needed breath—“across it like a zig-zag, then press the panel you did before.”

By the end, his voice was barely audible over the shouting from outside.

When I did as he instructed, everything came to life and the pod started to move forward. Bracing myself, I took a hold of the wheel, which could pivot in all directions, and started to fly.

I took off just in time because the door was just starting to slide open a crack. I busied myself by manoeuvring through the warehouse. The side of our travel pod scraped along another pod, making a loud metallic screech. In front of me, I saw some of the soldiers starting the process of shutting the massive warehouse doors. But I was close and just slipped the vehicle out in time, aiming it up into the sky in a wobbly line.

I heard Sebastian’s ragged breath and his body slowly crawl across the floor. Just as he made it, I heard a sharp crackle of power and Sebastian’s cry. Moaning in pain, he still managed to close the door and lock the lowest latch.

Then, there was silence.

Okay. I was freaking out. Sebastian was still quiet, and I was too unsure of my piloting skills to look around to see what was up with him. As it was, my hands hurt from how hard I was gripping the steering wheel.

By what I was seeing on the various panels, we had been followed for a short amount of time. The closer we got to the main city, the further away we were tailed. But as we neared the metropolis, natural traffic grew heavier. Soon I couldn't tell which ships carried a normal citizen or a minion of Jarcat.

Eventually, I managed to slip into a parking garage and land the infernal ship.

As soon as I stopped it, I jumped from my seat and took a look at my companion.

There was a gash that went from the side of his face near his ear, all the way down to past his chest in a jagged line. It wasn't bleeding much anymore, just a bit down the middle. Whatever had caused the wound had burnt the slash as it went. Sebastian was lying on the floor in a pile, though thankfully, I still saw the rise and fall of his chest.

Opening and closing various cabinets, I eventually located a first aid kit. *There is no way that I could convey to you just how excited I was to find that the kit did not consist of various magical healing instruments. It contained traditional healing implements.*

I moved Sebastian to lay flat on the ground first. Then I moistened some of the pre-packaged pads with disinfectant and cleaned the wounds. I noticed him twitch as I did so, even though he was unconscious. Must have stung.

Then I took gauze and tape and bandaged the still oozing injuries.

Shit. This was bad. This was really bad. Not just because I was worried for myself. I found myself concerned deeply for Sebastian himself.

I brought my hand to stroke down his hair, brushing it from his face. He was so beautiful, even injured. I bent down and placed a kiss on his forehead, which left my lips tingling with the cold radiating off him.

“What do I do? I have no idea how to help him,” I whispered to myself and heard the edge of desperation clearly.

I bent down again and placed a gentle kiss on his lips, swooping my tongue to lick at the saltiness of them. I felt perverted, doing this to an unconscious man. But when he started to kiss back, I didn't care.

I continued, still softly, until he pulled back and saw him mouth, "Sex. Energy."

Oh. Yeah. That could work, but there was no way that I was penetrating him while he was in that kind of state. I'd have to hope that other acts could help just as well.

I worked open the button on the top of his pants, popping it open and pulling down the zipper with a snick. Pushing down both his slacks and his undergarments to his knees in one move, I freed his still-limp cock. Now something had to be done with that.

First, I dragged my tongue down his neck and then to his sternum. My hands smoothed up and down his sides until they found a home on Sebastian's hips. I licked over to the soft disks of his nipples, sucking the right one into my mouth, rolling it gently between my teeth until it hardened.

I nipped and sucked until I heard his breath hitch and his body began to squirm. It was just too bad that his other nipple was covered by the gauze and bandages.

I resumed my journey downward, tasting the valley between Sebastian's abs, slowly and deliberately teasing.

"Please," he said, the words falling from his lips like a sigh.

I allowed my breath to wisp over his wet skin, cooling it before licking again. I did this all the way to his belly button, which I swirled my tongue into, thrusting in a facsimile of sex.

"That... feels so... uh," mumbled Sebastian, whose head rolled back and forth on the floor. His voice was still hushed and possibly sore from his cries of pain earlier, but I could hear the evident desire.

I took pity on him and went down.

I flicked my tongue out for a taste of the tip of his cock, revelling in the hint of essence that I found there. Immediately, my actions started to work as the shaft below my tongue hardened a bit. I used one hand to roll his balls, giving them the occasional tug, just hard enough to make him squirm. Then I took his cock fully into my mouth and sucked.

I relished the feeling of letting Sebastian fill my mouth. The throb of the veins on that perfectly sculpted dick. His foreskin was fully stretched over the rosy tip by the time I let him plop free from my mouth.

Just when it looked like Sebastian was about to protest, I placed a finger on his lips and said, “Shh, just trust me.”

I removed my own pants and undergarments and wasted no time in thrusting two fingers up my ass. I hissed at the sting but knew I had a huge grin on my face. I didn't mind at all.

Being able to help Sebastian by having sex with him? Possibly the greatest feeling ever.

Removing my hand and spitting on it, I then inserted three. With my other hand, I used more saliva to slick up that rock-hard shaft. I positioned myself over it as Sebastian placed a hand on my leg.

“Are you sure? I don't want it to hurt,” said Sebastian in what I assumed was a wound-induced bout of caring.

I smiled wickedly and said, “I do.”

Then I slammed myself down to the base of that dick. I cried out, clenching my eyes shut even as my own cock started to leak and turned from just erect into steel.

“So hot,” whispered my lover. His eyelids fluttered closed, and his hands fisted into trembling balls as they rested on my legs.

I leaned and took his lips in a soft kiss that didn't match the brutal way I fucked my ass on his cock. Up and down I went, pegging my prostate with every move. Soon he even thrust back a bit. We would break our mouths apart to breathe, but never for long, before continuing our rhythm.

I had no warning, but I felt his cock pulse and fill my ass with seed. The act was enough to trigger my own completion, which sprayed from me all over Sebastian's chest in a white stream.

Collapsing to my side, careful of his chest wound, I took a look at him. When he started to remove his bandages, I protested.

“It's fine,” he said, and peeled one off.

His skin had knit together. I couldn't even see a scar.

“Holy crap!” I whispered. “That's impressive. You are some kind of fantastic, and not just in a sexual way.”

Sebastian smiled, real and wide. I couldn't help but mirror him as we lay in each other's embrace for just a while longer.

Chapter 5

With his energy restored back to normal, Sebastian went about the travel pod. He opened up various panels and electrical boxes. Said that he was looking for whatever made this ship different.

“I feel weird in here,” I said when he’d started to use one of the tiny screwdrivers he’d found to jimmy open a lock on a door in the back.

“What do you mean?” he asked, his head close to the slit in the lock opening and staring.

“Just... I felt drawn towards the area with the ships in them before, right? Well, I feel like I reached the place I needed to be and I’m surrounded,” I said, leering at him without shame.

“Surrounded by what,” he asked.

He grunted, and I heard a click from the lock. He looked over to me with a wide and triumphant grin on his face and then flung the door open.

I gasped and stumbled back when I saw it. Inside, attached to hundreds of wires and sitting atop an engine, was a man. Probably. The guy was ancient, practically a walking mummy. So I couldn’t be one hundred percent sure of the thing’s gender. Its skin was red, with flecks of orange and yellow in it. The thing’s head was utterly devoid of hair and the completely naked body was covered in thousands of wrinkles.

“I-is it alive?” I stammered, backing away as I caught a gross whiff of stale air.

“Yeah. But what the hell is it? It’s not Magi or Elemental. I don’t think?”

I shook my head and tiptoed forward just enough to slam the door closed.

I said, “Why don’t you fly this to your Order’s HQ and figure this crap out before I get even more creeped out?”

Sebastian agreed with a nod of his head, but then added coyly, “I bet you miss my skeletons now in comparison, huh?”

I just groaned and swatted his arm. “Asshole.”

“Indeed, but you love it.”

I kinda think I did.

The Order HQ was much the same as the one I'd been to before with Sebastian. Only this time we were flying, so a voice came over the loud speaker and I heard an electronic blip before the machine spouted words.

<<Unknown vessel. Please state your identity and purpose for arrival.>>

Sebastian touched a screen beside him and said, "Sebastian Risdro here with a stolen enemy ship. Over."

<<Voice recognized. Thank you. Please proceed.>>

I was sitting backwards in my seat, keeping an eye on the door for the creepy old guy. No way was that thing catching me off guard.

I said, looking at Sebastian from the corner of my eye, "How come things weren't this strict at the HQ in your home town?"

"This city is more dangerous. The crime rate here is quite high. More protection is needed. That might be why Jarcats are here actually. Nobody would notice him amid a city full of crime. Besides, it was pretty obvious back there who I was, walking up to the doors with skeletons. They can't see me now."

"True."

We landed on an airstrip near the top of the huge facility. I saw from the window that we were being surrounded and Phil was strolling towards us.

We got out of the ship and went to meet the man half way across the roof's tarmac.

Sebastian gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. "There's some old decrepit man in the engine area, hooked up with wires. It doesn't look like us."

A shrill cry of alarm sounded from the ship and Phil chuckled. "Looks like one of our mages already found what you are talking about."

Going back to look and see Phil's reaction, I stood outside of the travel pod. No way was I getting closer than I had to. Phil took a pen from a pocket in his shirt and lightly pressed the tip of it into the old man's forehead.

Nothing happened and I released a breath that I wasn't aware I was holding.

"Wuss," whispered Sebastian in my ear.

I shivered at the feeling of his hot breath against me but still carefully watched Phil.

After several minutes of poking and prodding, Phil backed away and spoke, loud enough for all around to hear, "Everybody out but Sebastian and his Elemental friend."

In no time flat, the area was cleared and we had privacy.

Phil leaned against the wall of the ship, watching the old man on the engine with rapt fascination.

"I heard the rumours but I didn't know they were true," said Phil.

Sebastian asked, "What is he?"

"A native of this planet."

I blinked and whipped my head to Sebastian. He'd heard that right? Was Phil out of his mind?

Sebastian didn't look at me but instead just nodded, "The legends are true then?"

"Okay. You two need to seriously stop talking around me like I am not here," I said, shouting and stamping one foot.

Shit. I was turning into a child.

Both men looked over to me and shook their heads.

"The natives on this planet before we arrived," Phil said. "Did you know that the humans who were our ancestors have not always lived here?"

"What do you mean? Did they live on another continent on the planet?"

Phil shook his head steadily. "Nope. I mean this planet itself. We came here as one race. I know now that we actually bred with the natives of the planet, which is how the Elementals and Magi came about. We used them as slaves."

I felt ill. The idea of slavery infuriated me.

I said, "I read a lot, even books that are imported into Azmarine. I can say that I have never heard about any kind of alternative world history."

"I've known Jarcat for years," started Phil. "I think in his studies, he found obscure information on the true history of our people. The documents he found were vague and easily misinterpreted. I know that when Jarcat told me of his suspicions that Magi and Elementals aren't from this planet, that I didn't believe him. He said he thought that the natives of the planet were being preserved somewhere. I told him that he was losing his mind and to stop studying so hard."

Sebastian hummed thoughtfully before he said, "Guess Jarcat wasn't so crazy after all."

I rested my head in my hands as I slumped to the ground by the ramp to the travel pod. My head hurt and my eyelids felt like they weighed a ton.

"What does this have to do with this guy or what's going on?"

I realized that I had begun to yell into my palms.

Sebastian leaned back in his chair and said in his cool and detached voice, "Because your people were the greatest threat out of all of those who had started to breed with the natives. Elementals were actually the descendants of the leaders and aristocrats from the group of people who arrived on our planet. They went after the capital city, the most sacred grounds of the natives. Azmarine. The Magi actually tried to stop the Elementals from the utter slaughter they were trying to do. Your kind wanted to breed with them for their power and then kill them to get rid of competition for resources."

Phil added, "And this decrepit man is actually one of the natives that I suppose Jarcat found somewhere. Though where or how I have no idea."

"So we started the great war," I said in a hush.

Looking from between my fingers at his form, I saw him standing gracefully before me. I brought my hands to fist my curly hair and yelled curses to the blue sky above me.

Sebastian knelt before me and spoke in a serene wave of words, "Calm yourself, Rey."

He placed a hand on my arm and gave me a wobbly smile.

I took a few lungful of air, letting each breath out slowly before saying to Phil, "Okay. So I still don't get what's going on."

"Legend has it that some of the Order of the Magi took some of the natives and preserved them in a magical state of stasis so they would not age. But any concrete evidence of such a thing occurring has been long gone. To the point where even I, leader of the order, thought it to be a legend. Now I know otherwise."

My eyes widened. "You really think that guy is some sort of native of this planet. How do you know that whole story about us flying to this planet on some kind of huge travel pod isn't a legend? This guy could be some kind of magically enhanced... guy."

I tightly closed my eyes and spoke again before anybody else could, “And I know how stupid I sound right now.”

Sebastian grabbed my wrist and squeezed. “While your theory is not correct, it isn’t stupid.”

Huh? My jaw just about dropped. Of all the things that happened on that day, Sebastian saying that I wasn’t stupid had to be one of the most shocking. Maybe sex was wearing down his barriers?

I could only hope.

“Tell me, Mr. Taje. Do you not feel the connection you have to this man?”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

I did. I really did. But admitting that would be like admitting my ancestors were some kind of race of crazy genocidal psychopaths. Which they would be, if the stories were true. But I did feel some kind of connection to the wrinkled old man with his red-flecked skin and his fiery eyes—

“Holy fuck!” I said, pointing to the man, whose eyes were open and his bony hand was trembling as it pointed up and out at me.

The decrepit man ground out the words like gravel. “Monster. Child slayer. Death to your kind, who take the elements for your own use.”

Then the man started to wheeze and clutch his chest.

I couldn’t take it.

I ran out.

I had managed to run down several flights of stairs before Sebastian caught up to me.

“Hold up. Where are you even planning on going?” he asked, slamming a hand down on my shoulder once the two of us were both standing firm on a landing.

“Anywhere but here. I can’t take this anymore Sebastian. This is all too much for me.”

“I understand what it can be like. How overwhelming learning something new like this can be.”

“How could you?” I asked, moving my face to within inches of his.

“You did not just say that. You have no idea how I feel.”

Spinning around, he quickly brought an arm to wrap around my neck and put me in a tight chokehold.

So, he was going to fight me. I don't know what I'd done to bring this on but I'd bite. I needed to blow off some steam.

I rammed my elbow back, jabbing his stomach until I felt his grip loosen on my neck. I slipped free and dodged to the right to get away from the swing of his fist. He ran forward, ready to strike again when I darted my leg out, seeing him fall to the ground.

He caught himself and sprang back to his feet, faced away from me. I charged and slammed him against a wall, twisting an arm behind his back.

And the scrappy fucker slammed his head back on my face. I felt blood gush from my nose, and I got really mad.

No more trying to subdue him, I was going to go for broke. I leapt and punched at the same time, cracking my fist along his jaw.

“Fuck!” he shouted right before I pinned him again.

Writhing beneath me, he snarled and spat at me.

“Just tell me what the hell I said and I'll let you go.”

Pinning his wrists above his head, his eyes became luminous and narrowed.

“You really want to know?”

I blinked, confused for a moment but not enough to loosen my grip on him. “I thought that was the point of this?”

“Fine.” He closed his eyes. “Let me go for a second and I'll show you.”

I slit my own eyes at him until he glared pointedly at me. I shrugged and let him go, slowly but surely.

When he sat up, he reached into the pocket of his trench coat, an inner pocket that had been closed with a zipper.

He handed me a few photographs. They had been worn around the edges from age, and had been wrinkled from wetness and since dried (I assumed from when we'd crashed into that lake before). I looked over them carefully, not knowing if I was really seeing what I thought I had.

The pictures showed Sebastian with someone who could not have been anything less than a lover. In one photograph, the two of them were dancing

under some coloured lights. In another, they were kissing passionately on a sofa. In the last one, they were standing at an altar, exchanging vows.

What took my breath away was not the fact that Sebastian was one of the men in the pictures, but that I knew the other. I knew him well.

My former on and off lover and sex buddy, Cathal.

“I loved him. I loved him so fucking much. I had never opened my heart to anybody until he came along. Not after being sold by my parents. I met him when he came to my city looking to learn more about our ways. We fell hard and fast.”

I wasn't sure I wanted to know where this was going.

“We went everywhere together and decided that we needed to spend the rest of our lives together. He eventually had to go back to Azmarine, where he said he would work on getting permission to live with me permanently away from the city.”

I felt sick to my stomach, and my heart was aching.

“We kept in touch over the phone. But it took him more time than he expected. So, I went to surprise him. I needed to be with him even for a little while. Do you want to know what I saw when I got there?”

Oh Gods, no I didn't. Though I was sure I had a pretty damn good idea of what he did see.

“I went right into his house because you people don't lock your doors. I heard the sounds from his bedroom, but I didn't think to believe them. Maybe he had a brother that sounded like him. Maybe those weren't the cries of pleasure being wrung from Cathal that I had grown to love. But I opened that door. I saw my beautiful water Elemental Cathal under you. You were fucking my spouse's ass as if you had no care in the world.”

Hearing the words out loud were so much worse than thinking I knew. I wanted to vomit.

“I would never have done that if I had known. You have to believe me.”

He turned away from me, but I could practically feel the heartbreak and despair from where I stood across the travel pod. “It broke my heart. Shattered it.”

“I'm sorry. We didn't mean anything to each other. He was just a friend from childhood.”

He held a hand out behind him and said, "I don't want to hear it. Let's just get to the quarters I have here and sleep."

I nodded even though he wasn't looking at me. Together he walked down more flights of stairs. I don't know how many because I wasn't focusing on anything but the tightness in my chest. I realized that this pain hurt worse than losing my powers. I'd give them up in a heartbeat to save Sebastian pain.

I just wish I understood what that meant for my feelings.

Eventually, we got to a floor with a hallway full of apartments. Sebastian walked to one and swiped a pattern on the small screen beside the door. It opened with a low blipping noise and the two of us walked in.

The walls in the small apartment were slate-grey and unadorned. A leather couch occupied one wall, which Sebastian flopped onto right way.

I sat in a similar looking dark leather chair that was opposite to Sebastian and closed my eyes. It was nice to be comfortable.

"You can take a shower if you'd like. There's one in the bathroom through that door. No tub unfortunately, but the water is hot and the pressure is nice."

I smiled because Sebastian was at least still talking to me.

"I will. But I hope you have one as well. You also stink from our trek in the forest. Can smell you from over here."

He smirked and the waved towards the bathroom. "Go. Wash."

We were both clean and sitting at the two-person dining table eating some of the canned foods that Sebastian kept in his safe house. He was poking away at a portable computer, utterly focused. Every now and then, I would see his eyes slip to look at me.

"I'm sorry again for what I did to you," I said, not looking up at him.

"Stop it. I told you that I don't want to hear it. You didn't do anything on purpose."

"All right. If you're sure," I said, reaching out and putting my free hand on Sebastian's. "Just know that I'd never hurt you on purpose."

My lover nodded, sadness still radiated off him.

I picked at what I was assured was beans, jabbing the individual pieces with my fork. I was hoping that at some point, Sebastian would tell me what in the

world he was doing over there. I squirmed in my seat and then bounced a bit. There had been entirely too much quiet and while I understood it, I needed to break this spell of serious and morose silence (no wonder my father put my sister in charge).

Grinning wickedly, I plucked a little brown morsel from my bowl and flung it at Sebastian's forehead.

It hit and slid down to tumble off his nose and down to his lap.

His eyes narrowed at me, and he hissed, "Are you a child?"

I threw another one. "Nope. But I'm the only one who has food."

"And I could kill you by draining your life force with my magic."

I frowned. "But then who would give you sex energy?"

He growled and mopped his face with the napkin that he'd snatched from beside my bowl. I promptly flung another at him.

This time, he deflected the mini projectile with the napkin.

"Ha!" he said, and laughed.

I smiled wide and said, "See. That got you smiling."

His expression cracked and wobbled before he changed the subject.

"So I think it may be a bit of time before we can get to Jarcat and get your powers back. It will take quite a while to accomplish."

Now it was time for my own grin to fade to a frown. "So it will be a while yet until I get back home?"

He nodded and stared at the computer on the table in front of him.

"This is all getting to be too much, Sebastian. I feel like I'm afloat on an ocean, and there is no land in sight. My people are in danger from Jarcat and his band of Magi, we've been deluded about our history, and I just found out that I did a horrible thing to somebody I was really coming to like."

So much for me wanting to break the serious mood.

I stormed around the room until I got back to the bowl of beans, which I picked up and hurled across the room and into a wall. Regretting my actions right away, I darted to the kitchen and grabbed a towel.

Tears stung my eyes. "I'm such a moron. Everybody is right. I can't even control my temper. My moods are swinging so much I'm surprised I'm not dizzy yet."

With rough movements, I wiped up my food, grumbling under my breath as I realized I needed another cloth.

I felt Sebastian's hand on my shoulder first, before he drew me back into him in a loose embrace.

I turned and sank to my knees in front of him. "I'm so goddamn sorry and I know that I don't deserve your touch for the part I played, however unintentional, in the breakup of your marriage. But I need to forget. I need you right now."

His hand stroked through my hair and went to cup my cheek as I stood to face him.

"I know. I also want you."

This time our kisses were as light as feathers, a slow sweep of tongues and gentle touches. My fingers skimmed up the bottom of his shirt and played over the hard muscles of his abs. His nipples had already hardened to stiff peaks.

Moving apart only to breathe, we must have kissed for hours, eventually moving to the bedroom to lie beside each other on the bed. Our limbs were tangled together and our clothes were shed at some point along the way.

Gods but I needed this, needed this wonderful man's body.

Sebastian broke away from me, resulting in an unmanly whimper ripping from my throat.

He placed the tip of his thumb against my lips and whispered, "Just getting oil. I want to do it properly this time instead of using spit to slick the way."

I nodded because that sounded great. Though I'm sure that he could have said anything at that point and I'd have agreed. He was back quickly with a small, dark green bottle that had a twist-off cap.

He slicked his fingers and was about to reach behind him when I rolled from my side to my back and lifted my knees to expose my entrance.

"I need you."

Those beautiful eyes flashed and his pupils dilated before he slunk towards me. He placed one hand on the back of my thigh and nudged the index finger of the other at my already fluttering hole.

Sebastian pushed just one in with an agonizing slowness, going in and out with care. As he stretched me further and further, he went up to press his lips to

my throat. I was gasping for breath, clutching the bed sheets in my fists and resisting the urge to wildly buck my hips. He licked along the pulse in my neck before he placed the tip of his already oiled cock at my entrance. When had he moved his hand and lubed himself?

That thought no longer mattered when he slipped into my greedy ass, being sucked in like I so desperately wanted him. Sebastian didn't stop until every last inch of him was buried and his balls brushed against me.

We moved together then as one, my legs wrapping around his hips. It was deliberately slow and—dare I say—beautiful. Every inch of his body melded to mine and I lost track of where I ended and he began (*I don't care how cliché that sounds because it was true, so don't laugh Sol. And hey Kiren, you can shut your face too*).

The pleasure built up in me, rising like a wave and crashed over me, taking my lover with me. My hands flailed trying to grab onto anything as we shook against one another, spilling our passion.

Collapsing atop me, Sebastian's breath started to slow until it evened out into sleep.

Not able to help myself in the bliss of the moment, I whispered three meaningful and yet so very stupid words, "I love you."

Reaching over to the sheets beside me, I felt around in a clumsy series of pats. The entire side of the bed next to me was cold, and the blankets were tucked in around me so that I felt snug. Shrugging them off me, I got up and put on some of the clothes that Sebastian kept in this small apartment.

Man, I was so glad that we were about the same size, especially because this small place was rather chilly. I plodded out of the bedroom, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. I expected to see my lover sitting at the table, looking at his computer and not eating. Maybe sharpening knives?

Well, I did see the whetstone that he had used earlier, sitting on the table along with a half-empty glass of water.

But no Sebastian.

The apartment wasn't that big, so I didn't have to look for long to discover that he wasn't in the place. Not even a note was placed anywhere to inform me where he had gone. Only a small card with a bar code on the back of it.

How rude was that? I had thought that we were past this stage of Sebastian not talking to me.

So, I made some food for myself, convinced that Sebastian had just gone out for a bit. One hour passed, then two.

Once four hours had gone by, I started to think that maybe he never really forgave me for the part I'd played in the breakup between him and Cathal.

Okay. New order of things to do.

Number One: Find Sebastian.

Number Two: Get powers back.

Number Three: Go back home to Azmarine and wring Cathal's neck.

It seemed like a valid plan to me. I'd hammer out the details as I went.

I got up from the chair I was sitting in and immediately fell to my knees. Silver washed over me in waves and was all I could see. I grasped out for support, clutching the fabric of the chair to ground me. I felt hot and gasped for breath.

When my sight began to clear, I felt drawn to leave the apartment. It was like there was somewhere I needed to go. I wondered if I somehow knew where Sebastian was.

In my search for Sebastian in the apartment, I'd found a stash of weapons. I grabbed a leather coat and put it on, and then filled every pocket with blades of various types. I couldn't use any of the guns, since they all relied on the ability to cast spells in order to operate. I also grabbed a bunch of the money I saw stored in a little metal container. I also took that little card. It was probably important.

Putting on the boots I'd left by the front door, I went to leave. There wasn't much else that I could do.

I went back to the staircase we'd used before and descended. Eventually, I got to the first floor and started to wander.

There were a number of mages milling about the halls and foyer. They gave me strange looks but didn't stop me. I wondered for a bit how lax the security was around there when I was approached by several armed guards.

"Identify yourself," said one of the guards. She had drawn her gun and was pointing it directly at me.

“A guest of Sebastian Risdro.” I saw a couple of the guards get looks of disgust on their faces. “I have this card. I think it’s ID.”

I reach into my pocket and every one of the remaining guards drew their weapons. Maybe I should have moved my hands slower?

At least they weren’t shooting.

I extracted the card and tossed it to the ground, and then placed my hands above my head in surrender.

The woman who’d first drawn a gun on me bent to pick it up and took a small device from her side. It shone a red glowing line over the bar code on the card and blipped in a cheery tone.

At least I thought it sounded cheery. It didn’t sound bad at least. Bad would sound like a siren. This was more like a chirp.

She tossed it back and said, “Fine. But call down next time instead of wandering around like some kind of lost moron. I’ll escort you to the main entrance.”

We were almost at the door to leave the place when I heard the crack of a gun behind me. The female guard who was escorting me out was slumped on the ground in a heap, a thin line of blood seeping from the corner of her mouth. I looked around and noticed that small handfuls of soldiers were being held at gunpoint. So many of the soldiers had turned on their comrades.

Walking towards me suddenly was the apprentice that had been talking to Jarcac previously. The youth had a smug grin on his face, and his eyes glinted in the artificial light of the large foyer.

“I thought the necromancer would have taken you with him. Guess he was trying to keep you safe.”

I tensed my muscles to jump at the man, but the muzzle of a gun was pressed to my temple in a lightning-quick move.

The apprentice came toward me, touching my shoulder with the tips of his fingers. “I wouldn’t try to do that if I were you. Our plans are set in motion. We’ve taken the headquarters in every major city on the planet. The Order is now under Jarcac’s control. Nobody can help you. Least of all Sebastian.”

His cruelly twisted lips were the last thing I saw before pulse after pulse of energy washed through me and I fell into a twitching mass. Then I blacked out.

Chapter 6

I woke up in a cold room. I'd been stripped of all of my clothing and weapons, and I was lying on the rough stone ground. Somewhere behind me, water dripped down in fat plops to the floor.

It was a prison cell, and the door was made of solid steel with only a tiny grate in the front and a slit at the bottom that looked to be just large enough for a plate of food to slide through. My shackles were attached by a chain to the wall. There was a bucket in the corner and I cringed. Not even Elementals used buckets for our criminals. Gods. We had indoor plumbing, even for those of us who needed to be detained for the safety of the others (we didn't take prisoners often). No other object was in the room, and no other person either.

A dim bulb was on the ceiling, covered by a metal cage. The light was just barely enough to see by.

With no windows to the outside, I had no idea what time of day it was or even if I was above or below ground. The cold I felt made me think that I was in a basement area, but I was no earth Elemental. If I were Kiren, I would have been able to detect how deep underground I was or wasn't. In that regard, I was out of luck.

I heard the scrape of the locks on the door being opened, and I immediately sat up, not even bothering to cover my genitals.

Coming in was a familiar face. It was the apprentice that I'd seen in the ruins of the warehouse. Behind him were a couple of guards (I could tell because they were huge, like walking mountains). They rested their hands on the butts of their guns.

I wanted to tell them that they needn't worry. I was starved, naked and without any of my powers. But for once my mouth decided to take a break and stayed closed.

Small blessings I guess.

"So I think that you can guess why you're here," said the apprentice, putting his hands behind his back and standing still.

"Um, not really. Can you spell it out for me?" I said, having an idea but not having enough confidence in myself to be sure.

Raising one brow, the apprentice said, "Really?"

He sighed and waited, as if expecting me to answer or get a clue or something. I just stared at him with blank eyes.

“Fine.” He cleared his throat. “We have Sebastian.”

So, I was glad I hadn't opened my big mouth. See, I thought that they were going to ask me where the man was. That had been the million-dollar question for me. Now I knew. Okay, so what now?

“No matter how hard we try, we cannot get him to tell us where the Native is. Would you like to tell us? We can be very persuasive.”

I tried for a wry grin, but my lips just wobbled on my face instead. “I can honestly tell you that I have no idea where it is.”

He didn't even approach me. I saw him slap the air with a glowing hand, and a burn of pain swept across the side of my head, as he stayed across the room from me.

I stifled a hiss of pain and resisted the urge to try to hold my forehead.

“Want to try again?”

“Not really, since I told you that truth the first time,” I said, my voice rising to match the anger I was feeling.

Another magic slap on the other side of my face (couldn't these guys do anything without using some kind of spell?).

My entire head hurt, from just those two strikes. He kicked the air, and I felt it in my ribs. I was sure one of the bones had been cracked. Again, to the other side.

I doubled over, holding my stomach and grit my teeth before opening my mouth just enough to say, “I don't know where it is.”

One of the apprentice's hands went up to stroke his chin thoughtfully. “Well, if that is the case, then I don't have any use for you.”

Oh how I wanted to think quickly. If they killed me, how could I help Sebastian? Come up with something, anything. And then I had it.

“I was in charge of watching it while Sebastian went to the Order headquarters,” I blurted out, waiting until the apprentice rolled his hand in the air to gesture me to continue.

“I left it in the ship that we stole from you and left the door open by accident. By the time I realized my mistake, the man was gone.”

The mage laughed and held his stomach a bit as he did so. “Do you honestly expect me to believe that? Who would be that stupid? And besides, the Native wouldn't have been able to move far on his own.”

I tried to shrug and just winced from the after-effects of the pain I had been dealt. “Have you heard the rumours of the Lord of Azmarine's brother?”

Apprentice narrowed his eyes and said, “I have, though I've never given much credence to gossip.”

“Has your mentor told you about how he stole my powers and cursed me? I just ran up to him even though he was clearly incredibly powerful. How dumb was that?”

My actions that day were pretty stupid. I didn't even have to lie to this guy to tell him that.

“Anyway, maybe somebody took him or something,” I said.

“So you are seriously saying that you left one of the last natives of this planet, sitting out in the open somewhere.”

I hid my face and shuddered (*which I think I pulled off beautifully if I do say so myself*). “That's right.”

“Sebastian Risdro must be slipping to leave a moron like you in charge of such a thing. I'll have to go see what Master Jarcats says.”

The apprentice stalked out of the room with his walking mountain men, and they slammed the door shut behind them.

For once, I encountered somebody more dense than me. My explanation had been lame, but I was glad it had been believed.

Then I just had to wait.

At some point, I must have drifted off into a fitful sleep, because I woke up to hear a quiet scratching sound. I looked around while I sat up and couldn't see where it was coming from. I thought that it may have been coming from above me somewhere, but the cell was so dark that I couldn't make out any kind of details.

After several maddening moments of wondering what was up, I heard the sound of metal clang to the ground from the ceiling. That was followed by clacking of what could only be described as bones. That was what came to my mind right away, and I soon found that I was right.

The sharp nails of a small rodent climbed up my legs and then my torso. The hollow sockets where the skeleton rat's eyes used to be were glowing, and upon the surface of its skull were tiny runes etched on it crudely.

In its mouth was a scrap of paper, shimmering faintly. I opened it up and read the note:

Place the rat near the side of the door to your cell. When it is time, it will explode. You should be facing away with your arms over your head. Once it does, you will have to come for me. Detonating the explosions will have sapped nearly all of my scant amounts of energy.

Sebastian

My lips quivered into a smile. I must have been losing it to feel affection for such a cold and to the point note. Yet I did. I'd only been parted from my lover for mere hours but I missed him already.

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I sat on the note to keep it from view. Sebastian's idea was clever, on my way to the door I used the glowing eyes from the rat to see where it had come from. There was a small air vent, barely large enough for the rat itself. Clever man.

I placed the skeleton rat next to the door on the side on which it opened. I went back to the corner of the room and tried to look as unimposing as possible.

I don't know quite how much time passed by, but it couldn't have been long before the handle on the outside of the cell started to be turned. The door was opening as the apprentice and the guards came through.

"My master doesn't buy your story of leaving the guy on the ship. So you'll have to take it up with—"

The apprentice didn't get the chance to finish what he was saying as the rat exploded violently, sending the door off of one of its hinges. Stone from the wall was sent flying, none of it onto me. The mage and guards screamed and fell with three sick thuds.

I turned quickly, stunned at how I was still alive. I knew that I'd fared far better than they had. The three corpses lay in a heap, bleeding and battered. That was when I'd noticed the barely visible sheen around me.

The note. It must have had some kind of protection on it.

Quickly I stooped to one of the guards and looked for keys. I found a couple on the guards and pass-cards like the one I found in Sebastian's home.

I ran out into the hallway and looked both ways. Down one of the halls there was a cell door that was off its hinges and there were some small rocks scattered about. That was the direction I ran in.

I went into the cell to see Sebastian lying on his side on the ground, his eyelids barely open. His eyes were fading to grey with only the occasional fleck of silver. I ran to him and scooped him up in my arms.

“Oh Sebastian. Why did you go off by yourself?” I whispered raggedly as I ran out into the hall and tried to find the stairs up from this place.

He put a shaky hand on my chest and uttered a few words.

Suddenly my ribs tingled and radiated heat outward. It was like I'd been cold for so long and was now being cloaked in a blanket of pure warmth. Gasping, I nearly stumbled on the steps. My eyes stung like I'd been looking at the sun for too long.

Finally, my fingers burned and smoke puffed out from the tips of them.

“You—”

I kissed his forehead and ignored his grimace.

“I went off by myself to absorb your powers back from Jarcat. If we'd gone together, you would have warned him off with your bumbling nonsense.”

As he said it, a barely there smile curved one side of his lips.

“I—” I had known that I didn't have much time, but I needed to feel him. So I took his lips in a deep kiss.

When he leaned back, our lips were swollen.

I said, “So how do I get out of this place?”

“Go right,” said Sebastian, resting his head on my shoulder.

I followed his directions to the tee. He led me out to the exterior of the building. On all sides of us was cliff, beyond which I could hear the loud crash of waves.

“It's deep enough and there are no rocks on the bottom. The drop shouldn't be too far if you go feet first.”

I set him down to his feet, and he wobbled a bit before placing his hand on my arm to steady himself.

I said, “What do you mean me? Aren't you going?”

I grasped his wrist and started walking towards the cliff.

“Swim as far as you can down the left shore until you come to a bridge. Go up onto it and walk down the road to your left. There should be a travel pod. Take it and go home after you go to my safe house to pick up some things, some money.”

“No,” I said, practically dragging him along. “You are coming with me.” He may have shaken his head, I couldn't see. I refused to look back at him.

“I knew that we wouldn't get out of this together.”

Okay, that got my attention. “What?”

“Once I found out that Jarcat fled here, I knew that you wouldn't make it out with me alongside you.”

“You just don't want to try. If you're worried that you'll slow me down, I don't care. I'll carry you if I have to.”

“They'll never stop chasing me. You need to get back to your city and help your people.”

He was right, dammit. But I didn't have to like it. There had to be another way.

When he spoke again, tears almost stung my eyes. “And forget about me.”

By then, we were almost at the edge of the cliff, which really wasn't that high. I would have called it a hill if one side of it wasn't a sheer drop to the water below.

“But I l—”

Sebastian placed his hand on my lips and whispered, “Don't.”

Then he pushed me hard. That probably used the last of his energy, I wouldn't know. I was already falling. Above, where Sebastian still stood, I heard the sounds of men calling out and rushing the edge of the cliff.

The last thing I heard before hitting the water were the words: “Let the Elemental die in there.”

Present Day

“So what happened then?” asks Soline as she rests her chin in her hands and stares at me with her undivided attention.

I shrug, drinking the dregs of my now-cold tea. "I swam for ages, got to the bridge, found the pod and came back here. It was all so anticlimactic."

I don't mention that I took the white sheet that Sebastian and I had made love on. It seemed a bit too pathetic.

While I'm talking, I see out of the corner of my eye a movement. Cathal was edging away.

"Get the hell back here. I almost forgot my vow to wring your puny little neck," I call, feeling frustrated and helpless.

I see the Adam's apple in Cathal's throat bob as he gulps air.

"Why did you hurt him?" I ask. "He is such a great guy underneath that cold exterior."

"I don't know. I didn't mean to hurt him." His voice squeaks as he puts out his hands as if to pray to me.

"You didn't think that his husband sleeping with another man would hurt him?"

"I was young. I made a mistake. I needed to be back in Azmarine. When I came here, I didn't realize how much being with Sebastian had stifled me. I should never have married."

I make a noise in my throat that I'm sure doesn't sound manly in any way, shape, or form. "You didn't see the heartbreak in his eyes when he told me about you, Cathal."

I am going to lay into him more. I don't think it will make me feel better, but I need something.

I don't get the chance because outside the gongs are being sounded. We are under attack.

Chapter 7

Outside the sun is starting to set and the clouds are darkening the sky. Earlier in the day, it had been sunny and beautiful, and now it is starting to rain in fat drops. Behind me, I hear Kiren on his communicator directing his soldiers.

We are just on the outskirts of the city, so I look up and see travel pods flying towards our city, cresting just over the mountain range that is closest to me. There are so many of them, and to be honest I am a bit worried.

As I see one of the ships let loose a stream of purple energy at the warning gong, I realize that I'm a lot worried. The gong topples over with a great clang, and the person who was manning it leaps to the side to avoid being hit. She stumbles a bit and falls over the side, only to snap into flight as soon as she regains her senses. Thank the Gods she is an air Elemental.

I run back inside to arm myself with a longsword, though I know that I probably won't get the chance to use it. None of the ranged weapons we have would be of any use against fighting travel pods.

Then I run out to the street.

"Where do you need me?" I ask Kiren, since he's obviously the one with a mind for tactics.

"West Tower," he says. "They are short on fire up there."

I nod briskly and run off to my duty.

Beside me, the road gets shattered by a ray of energy, leaving a deep smouldering gash in the cobble. I dodge to the side and run to the tower by taking some back alleyways. The Magi don't even have to get out of their ships. They are so confident of their skills.

And why wouldn't they be? We have made a mistake by being so lax in our defences.

I don't let my melancholy drag me too far down. I get to the stairs of the tower and run up all six flights. The top of it is mostly covered, but with an open section all the way around. That way soldiers can shoot their attacks through it, but not be hit themselves. Though based on what I just saw on the road, this tower doesn't stand a chance.

The soldiers don't turn, but all greet me. Right now, I'm not their Lord but their comrade.

I kneel by the opening and look for a good shot. Pods fly all over the city. Every now and then, one of them turns invisible. Barely any of our people are getting attacks through, but the travel pods are taking down our buildings one by one.

When I am pretty sure I have a clear shot, I reach into the energies around me. I let them swirl up my arms and through the tips of my fingers before shooting them out towards one of the attackers.

It hits, slamming into the side and almost engulfing the vehicle in flames. But when it keeps flying past the fireball I just let loose, its gleaming surface is only just barely singed.

“What the hell?” I snarl.

One of the soldiers beside me mutters, “It's been like this since they first attacked.”

Just on the ridge of the mountains around us, I see another fleet of ships land and just rest. They've surrounded the city.

The travel pods inside the city land near the town square. Then the Magi get out. They've rounded up a good number of our soldiers. When the hell did they do that? I see Jarcat who is looking all around the city. His own minions are aiming guns at our troops.

Taking out a metal cone device, he lets his voice carry over the buildings to reach me and the rest of the officers, “If you want them to live, show yourselves.”

I have no other choice. I run down the stairs to meet them.

I approach Jarcat, whose red robes flow behind him in the wind that rushes over the area. His eyes gleam with satisfaction.

“So you got back your power, have you?” he said, his smile twisting in that way that made me sick.

Tinged with madness.

“Sebastian's a fool for giving it back to you. After all, you were the one who ran up to me when my shield dropped in the first place.”

“Why are you doing this?”

He clasps his hands behind his back and rocks on his heels.

He smiles. “Because I can. I don’t think that the Magi need to share the planet with you.”

“But we all came here at the same time,” I protest, seeing out of the corner of my eye as Kiren walks up beside me, followed by Cathal.

They both gave me confused looks.

“I beg to differ. I assume that good old Phil told you a bit about the legends, didn’t he?”

I don’t say a word and make my face a steel mask.

“I know that he did. Legends state quite clearly that you Elementals ravaged the lands of the natives, slaughtering them and stealing.”

Kiren shakes his head. “My ancestors wouldn’t do that. We’re a peaceful people. And how come we’ve never heard these legends before?”

Jarcat snorted. “Perhaps you are today. But you were not back then. Did you think that maybe your history was forgotten for that very reason?” He kept going, “The Magi wanted to peacefully integrate with the natives. You beasts wanted blood. You didn’t want to share. Do you know why you are physically stronger than the Magi?”

I glare, but Kiren says, “Okay, I’ll bite. Why?”

“Because you take after the natives. You wanted their power and strength, so you forced their women to carry your children. You raped them on their holy grounds and gained their strengths. The Magi wanted to stop your kind, and the natives wanted to help us do it.”

I say, “All right. Say this is true? We started the Great War. We also ended it with a peace treaty.”

“Your kind only drew that treaty up because you had won. You’d wiped out all of our tech. You had become the superior beings physically. We had no choice.”

“So what? This is about revenge for something that happened thousands of years ago?”

Jarcat shook his head and says, “The natives?”

He gestures to one of the travel pods that had landed near the town square. Coming out of it, being supported on both sides was one of the natives. His skin was pockmarked from all the wires that had been attached to him.

“This man, as well as the rest of his kind, is from that era. They know how to not only stop your kind, but how to tap into the natural power of this city. Elementals may have taken this place and won the war because of your sheer numbers and power, but you have forgotten your war-like ways. The natives of this planet disliked technology and Elementals bred with them so much that the same distaste is in your blood. The Magi have not. We embrace modern technology and are now superior.”

“Fuck that!” I snarl.

“What can you really do to stop me? We have the advantage. I have the numbers behind me, so Phil and the rest of the order cannot do much to help you. My acolytes and I can now harness the power of this place and reign supreme. The natives that have been preserved all these years want their revenge and will do anything to help.”

My hand darts to my longsword and I whip it out. I leap forth, fusing my blade with fire and slash to strike at Jarcat's neck. I'll show him what I can do.

“Stop,” he says casually, and I fall to my knees.

I feel the power stiffen every one of my muscles. I try to move but I can't. I can only just barely let my chest rise up and down to breathe.

“Most of my life was spent raising one of the natives from his slumber. He taught me how to come to this city and absorb enough power to raise the rest of them. They have immeasurable power,” he says, stopping Kiren and Cathal, as well, if their curses were anything to go by. “Too bad that none of my forefathers could find the natives. They were hidden until recent years when I discovered their location. We could have taken down you beasts earlier.”

“My people didn't do those things that you speak of. Our ancestors, sure, but we are innocent. We just want to live our lives,” I say, with great effort. “Don't do this to us.”

He grins and gestures his men towards me and my friends. “It's cute how you plead for your freedom. I wonder if the natives did the same, in order to keep their homes, their children.”

I growl when one of the men grabs my arm tightly and hauls me up.

“I bet they did. And you Elementals didn’t listen to them. How many children do you suppose your forefathers killed in order to take what they felt they deserved?”

He leads us to one of the houses that his men have secured and then locks us in. They surround the place with their soldiers.

“We’re stronger,” says Kiren. “Physically we can take them. But as soon as we do they’ll send their extra fleet in to take us out.”

“There has to be another way out of this,” I reply, pacing the floor. “What he said about our ancestors was true, Sebastian’s boss told me some of this. And Sebastian confirmed that what Phil said was true. It’s a hard pill to swallow, but I think that deep inside you know the accusations are true.”

Kiren sits on a lounge chair, putting his hands between his knees and glares at the floor. “I don’t know what we can do other than call the Order of the Magi for help.”

“But that guy back there said that the order wouldn’t be able to help,” says Cathal, sitting across from Kiren.

Kiren looks up and says, “I have spoken to Phil many times over the years and not once did I get that impression, there has never been worry about lack of troops. There must be more to this than that.”

So the three of us sit and think for as long as we have time to do so.

So as smart and tactically minded as Jarcat and his followers have proven themselves to be, they don’t know everything. Specifically they do not know how nearly every home in the city has a passage that connects to a series of interlinked tunnels that travels the span of the city. It’s all underground, so most of my kind don’t prefer to be there. As it is, I feel a bit stifled and trapped, being so deep underground.

Kiren, being an earth Elemental, isn’t so bad. I don’t mind being underground if I’m near magma. And I’m sure Cathal wouldn’t be so damn fidgety if there were some kind of underground source of water nearby. But our tunnels aren’t near those things, and are protected from them in order to maintain their integrity

The entrances to these tunnels are well hidden in the floors and are virtually undetectable. Granted the Magi are smart, and I’m sure they’ll figure out how we escaped eventually. We are just hoping to buy some time.

Though to do what, I am unsure.

Right now, we are heading down the various twists and turns that will lead us to the rendezvous spot that we picked. All of the soldiers would meet there and we would make plans.

Many of the other soldiers were already there, though some were definitely missing. Even more of the fighters were injured to various degrees.

Thankfully, Soline isn't here. We (meaning me, Kiren and Sol's husband) had convinced her that she needed to stay behind with the spouses and children to be in charge of them. She wanted to fight, and goodness knows she's damn good at it as well. But our city needs its leader. So I'm glad she is safe in the underground temples.

"You go check to see who needs to be rearmed," Kiren says to one of his lieutenants and then turns to Cathal. "You see to the injuries. I think many of them are being dealt with already, but make sure."

Kiren turns to me and says, "You always told me that your father kept books and other information in the vaults, correct?"

I nod.

"Go in there and see what you can find. There has to be something that we can do to protect our city."

I want to argue. I want to say that if the natives of this planet couldn't do anything, how could we? But I had to try, so I went on my way.

The vaults are underground, as well, and were made by our ancient ancestors. They were built to last. The doors are built of reinforced steel that is plated with titanium. The vault's combination was entrusted to me by my father, and the only other people who know it are Soline and Kiren.

I open it and slip in, closing the door behind me since there's a way to open it from the inside.

There is a fair bit of stuff down here; most of it does not have much use to me. A variety of gold bars line the walls as well as numerous small chests of gems. There is a short shelf of old books, which my father had assured me were not interesting. I wonder now if my father had been hiding something from me. I feel all the more a fool for taking his word for it. I hope for the sake of his memories that I am just being paranoid. How can I handle more lies?

I grab a stack of the books from the shelf and slide on the wall to the ground where I start to flip through them.

I'm thankful that I am at least a fast reader, since I manage to skim the pages swiftly.

Each page that I go over seems to prove that my father simply did feel that these books were of no interest to me. They just go over some of our old social and religious rituals (nothing that would be of any use in a fight or anything). There are some diagrams on the ancient pages that have patterns for traditional clothing.

Not one word even goes to prove what Jarcat claimed was true, though I know that Sebastian wouldn't have lied to me. When he did open up, it always seemed to be pure honesty.

I get up to put the books back, and see that behind where the books had been sitting, was a loose panel in the wood of the back of the shelf. I nudge it aside and see a few older books and papers.

The books are some kind of journal and account the tasks of an Elemental whose job it was to coordinate breedings with the natives that they called the Taje. Oh, shit. The natives were called Taje. My last name. We took them over, and my damned family took the name of the race as their last name. Like some kind of trophy.

I set the book down, go to a free space in the corner of the vault, and empty the contents of my stomach.

The entries in the journal make me sick if you want the truth. I was always told that we were peaceful. That this planet was ours, and we needed to care for it. How could my ancestors lie to me? To my people? I had to at least think that my father was protecting me by keeping this from me.

Kiren breaks me from my thoughts by opening the door to the vault. He kneels in front of me and says, "What have you found out."

With a broken voice, I say, "It was all true. Our past is a lie, Kir."

"Shit."

"Not only that, but I've found out nothing to help us out now."

Sebastian would have known what to do. He'd have helped me figure out a plan. No, I can't think of this right now.

I sigh. "Do you need me?"

"I came to tell you that we've set up barricades to take them down one by one when they make their way down here. I also just wanted to see how you are doing."

I nod briskly and leave the documents on the floor. "I'm not a child. You realize this?"

"I know. But you were very distraught before this about losing Sebastian. Perhaps you can go see how Soline and the people in the shelter are faring?"

"You are right. As usual. Sol is probably getting up to all kinds of trouble anyway, knowing her. Checking up is probably wise."

We both smirk, and I make my way to the temples. As soon as I can no longer see Kiren, I frown deeply. I can't believe that even during a war, my family checks up on my life.

The temples are in the mountains and can be reached by the tunnels under the city. They can also be reached from the other side of the mountain, deep in a cave in the jungle on that side. The doors on both sides were over ten feet tall and titanium plated. To open them required a combination locked panel to be opened (which I knew was an old-fashioned method). The panel revealed a lever, which could be pulled and set off a series of mechanisms that opened the heavy doors.

The doors scrape slightly along the ground as they open slowly. I go through and then close the lever on the other side (which doesn't require a combination), and see the refuge that has been set up. I'd been the one to set up the plans, but seeing it being used is different.

The temple is massive and contains several rooms that are the size of buildings. The first room, the one I'm in, is a gathering area. People are sitting around, eating and socializing. Some people seem withdrawn into themselves. I guess we just aren't used to being threatened. This is scary for them to be forced from their homes and hidden from the sun. Especially so soon after Jarcac had originally attacked the city.

There are signs placed around to direct citizens where to go. I head towards where I know the offices to be set up.

The office is situated in the smallest of the rooms and has a few desks set up. Here, there are also crates of supplies. Soline is flitting from place to place, chatting with people and giving orders for how supplies are to be rationed. To be honest, it looks like everything is running smoothly. Judging by the looks of exasperation on the faces of those who are taking orders from Soline, I think they feel that way too.

She isn't used to being idle.

"Dear sister of mine," I call out with a half-hearted wave.

She spins around on her toes and upon seeing me, launches into my arms like the ball of energy that she is.

"How are you? Kiren hasn't been keeping up with calling me. I know he is busy and all, but I'm dying here!"

I frown. "I'm fine, but the enemy has pretty much taken over the city above us. We've barricaded ourselves in the tunnels. They've overwhelmed us, Sol."

I say all of this in a quiet voice as I lead her away from the ears of the citizens.

Her eyes widen before she collapses onto a padded wooden chair that is nearby, her body making a soft *fwump* under her. "How long can we keep them away, Rey? They will starve us out. What do they even want?"

"Revenge."

And so I tell her in whispers what I've learned. Her tiny fists ball up and punch the wall beside her. I'm glad that I'm not that wall. Her hand leaves a single mark. Her underlings look over with concern, probably in good part for me since she's been known in the past to whale on me. Now that I have my powers back and my body is at full strength, I can take what she can dish out.

"Please tell me that you didn't know any of this." She jumps up and wraps those hands around my neck, practically hanging off. "So help me Gods Reynard Taje, if you've known something this big, and didn't tell me, I will flay the skin from your bones."

Behind us, I see her husband run up and place his hands on her shoulders. Not for the first time I am glad that he isn't a fighter because it means he can be around to rein in her temper.

"I didn't. I'm as upset as you are, Sol," I say, as I start prying those deceptively strong hands off me.

Her eyes are narrowed as she allows herself to fall back into her husband's comforting arms. I smile gratefully at him.

"It is my fault in a way. I believed Dad when he told me not to worry about anything that was in the vault. That there was nothing of interest. I'm a fool, and I have never been more glad that you are the leader and not me."

Sol's rigid shoulders, slump and she sighs. "You are a good and loving man. I don't want you to doubt yourself. And you aren't a fool for believing Daddy. You are trusting."

"I sure feel like it. You have your hands full with running the city, foreign relations as well as planning for this war."

She raises a hand in protest to stop me from talking, and says, "I am so sorry for keeping that from you."

I smile. "It wasn't a jab at you for withholding information. I understand that you had good intentions. I am just saying that I feel like I should have been doing less protesting of technology. I should have been doing more research into our past. Perhaps there could have been some way to aid us in this war."

Sol smiles and turns to her husband. "Please take over here. You've been watching me and I trust you. And Reynard, I think that perhaps the best use of your time would be to go into the vaults and do more research."

I'm pretty sure that the other leaders in the shelter would be relieved, and I was proven right when Soline went over to tell everybody that her husband was in charge.

Then Sol and I go out to the rendezvous point.

Chapter 8

My sister and I part ways when she explains our decision to Kiren. He also looks a bit relieved to see Soline.

I am about to go back to the vault when a feeling comes over me. I don't know what exactly it is, just a slight pressure in my chest. It almost feels like something is tugging me above ground. As I go back to the vault, I wonder if the feeling is Jarcat trying to control me. But then I realize that if he could control me from wherever he is, that he could do it with anybody else.

So what can it be?

Dizziness overcomes me, and I rest one shoulder against the nearest wall for support. All I see is silver lit up like burning embers, dancing like flames. Beckoning me like before when I was in Sebastian's safe house.

I know right now that Sebastian is nearby, in the city or approaching it. I don't know how I can tell this for certain. It's just a deep-seated feeling.

I quickly go to the vaults and grab the papers and diary that I need before I head out.

I take one of the lesser-used tunnels that leads to a small passage. This passage is just large enough to crawl through and leads to a work shed on the outskirts of town. I figure that the Magi are less likely to be in this small shanty. They are probably looking over the houses that the soldiers were kept prisoner in.

At least, I hoped. I hoped that they weren't in the tunnels already.

I peek out from under the floor boards I set aside and then climb out of the hole, replacing the flooring. This shed is near some of the public gardens kept by the earth Elementals. It is mostly filled with tools and jars of preserved seeds and roots for planting. There are no windows except for the one tiny one situated high up on the door.

I brush the dust off of it and look out. I see travel pods flying over the city in the distance. Every now and then, one of them flies over the small building that I'm in.

They are searching for us. But the second wave of fighters that had come along is still situated along the mountain ridge. I wonder why they haven't moved.

I eventually come to notice that every fifteen minutes I watch from my window, a foot patrol comes by. That might leave me with enough time to get out of the shed.

Once the next foot patrol goes by, I open the shed and dart out. My options are either the bushes on the side of the gardener's house, or run further to get to the alleyways of the city. That would mean that I am out in the open for quite a long time (considering how dangerous the travel pods can be). But I need to take the risk.

There is an acre of gardens and open grassland between me and the shadows of the alley that I am aiming for. I wish that the shed with the tunnel had been beside the wheat fields. Then I would at least feel safer.

As if the Magi were trying to prove me right, I start getting shot at. Blasts of energy hit to the right and then to the left. Some of my skin gets singed, and I cry out. I see a charred line across the backs of both of my calves.

I am so damn close to the building. It will provide at least a little bit of protection, and maybe I can lose them.

Behind me I hear the sounds of Magi on foot, calling out orders to try and flank me. I hear guns being cocked, and threads of panic well up inside of me.

The pain in my legs is so intense that I can barely continue. Only the thought of letting everybody down keeps me running.

Building up heat in one of my hands, I concentrate the power, feeling the flames curl around me. As I breach the shadows, I send a plume of fire behind me, willing it to spread like a fan to engulf all those who are following me.

This doesn't stop the travel pods that are following me, and I know that I can't really destroy them. So I keep running between buildings, wishing I had an idea of where I needed to go.

I don't stop until I have cleared several city blocks worth of distance, weaving left and right to confuse anybody who is tracking me. I stay low and avoid being detected by air patrols.

I wish I knew why I was being drawn out here into so much danger. I still follow the sense of urgency I have, being tugged in its direction like a rope has been anchored to my very being.

I don't know where I am heading until I see Jarcat. Before him is Sebastian, who is on his knees. Blood is dripping from the corner of his mouth, and it is all

I can do not to run forward to try and save him. I know I'd be shot before I even got close.

He and Jarcat have a couple of soldiers around them in front of the city library on its grand limestone steps. Jarcat pulls back his hand and I hear it smack across Sebastian's cheek. "What is Phil planning?"

Sebastian looks up and spits bloody saliva onto Jarcat's chest and says, "That you have no idea how fucked you are."

Another slap, this time Sebastian twitches after the blow as if electricity is running through him.

"They don't have the resources. We control every city now."

Sebastian mouths the words, "You will never win."

I back into the alley a little bit so I am not seen, and I hear Sebastian speak once more, "You may be getting the natives into place in order to gain the power that courses through this city, but it won't succeed."

Getting the natives into place? What place?

I hear Sebastian grunt in pain and a wet cough wrenches free of him.

"You talk too much," sneers Jarcat. "They're at the shrine right now. The power will flow through our ships and it will be done."

The shrine. Okay. What shrine? Were they talking about that place where Jarcat had been when this all started? What of it?

"And do you think the average citizen won't rebel against this? Rebel against the murder of the head mages of the order?" says Sebastian.

"With the power of this city in our specially outfitted ships, it won't matter what the people have to say. I will control them all. And besides? The shrine is protected by guards. Phil could never get past our defences and my little friend here," Jarcat says, patting the shoulder of one of the natives who stands beside him leaning on a cane, "can help me stop any Elemental who tries to break in as well."

And that's when I got it. I understood what was happening. Sebastian drew me to him to get this all out in the open. To get Jarcat to reveal his plans to me unintentionally.

And I know what I need to do.

So as I have mentioned before, I am reckless. I tend to do things without thinking them through. But in this one case, I need to act. If I think too hard, or ask for Kiren or Soline's advice, I might be dissuaded from my goal.

But the safety of my people is on the line. I need to do this for them. And for Sebastian, who is being held captive by that lunatic.

The tunnels really do go everywhere underground, as I have mentioned before, so this is good.

Now I think back on my life and on all the things I know about my city. The place where Jarcat had originally started trying to affect the city? The walls in that room were covered in murals, all very primitive but always reminded me of my own people. But I know now how wrong those assumptions had been. The murals depicted the natives of this planet engaged in everyday life, interacting with the elements in nature. And the pole that went from the floor to the ceiling was a shrine.

It made total sense.

I remember as a child, I would wander around the area, exploring the tunnels often and playing in them. I knew of a particular tunnel that went in behind that shrine. It had partially collapsed hundreds of years previously, and one had to crawl through spots of it. The journey was perilous, so nobody used it these days. Honestly, people didn't see much reason to visit the murals either. Except for scholars (but there aren't an overabundance of those in Azmarine, we're a hands on kind of people).

So I knew that I had a way to get into the shrine.

When I crawl through the tunnel, my knees scraping along the rough stone ground, I eventually get to the entrance to the shrine room. This part of the tunnel is almost completely blocked except for a gap near the top of a huge pile of rocks.

Climbing is hard because there are loose stones everywhere. This wouldn't be a big deal if I didn't need to move silently. I need to be careful to avoid making any kind of sound. At the top, I peek out for long enough to see what I am up against.

I am ten feet away from the shrine, which is surrounded by the natives. They are in a circle and are glowing from head to toe, floating just off the ground. Their arms are raised and stretched out to the carved pole. Near them are three guards who are armed. In the other main entrance to the room are five guards. I'm sure there are more all along that tunnel.

Eight against one. Possibly more if I don't act fast. So I need to do this right.

Below the pile of rocks I am on is only a one-foot drop, so I don't have to worry there.

Before I go, I draw my sword and sheath it in flames. I crawl to the top and jump out.

I'm noticed right away, before my feet even touch the ground, but I expected nothing less. I draw strength from the nature around me and cast a shield of fire to surround me; my footprints glow like embers on the rocky floor. The first two soldiers who come at me get knocked back when I violently will my aura of fire outwards. The next meets my sword with his own. I feint left and then make my move, gutting the man before me.

I gather more flames around me and blast them to knock back the soldiers again as I move ever closer to the shrine. One of the men makes it through, and I spin, slashing the air in front of him, missing. But the sword's flames sear into the soldier's body, burning deep while he screams in agony. I don't waste any time and run the last two feet to the shrine.

Once there, I behead the first native. The Taje. Shit I don't want to. But this is for my people. So I swing once more and behead the next.

Blood is pooling on the ground, the glow in the area is fading. I spin to deflect the slashes of two of the soldiers who have approached, but I'm not fast enough to avoid the next hits. I take a deep gash on my arm and another on my leg.

I have to finish this. I knew it was suicide when I started. I send out one last blast of fire, shoving the soldiers away, knocking around the natives just slightly. I need to be quick. There is no way I can summon more energy to produce flames this soon.

I slay the rest of the ancients, each in quick succession. The pole stops glowing slowly, fading to a dim speck until the room is shrouded in shadows.

I fall to my knees. There is no point in trying to run. I am weak from the exertions of the past few days and then this effort.

I face my death head on, not looking away. The white-hot pain of a sword being driven through my chest makes me scream out. It is agony.

But I do not think of my family or my people, though I did this for them. No, all I can think of is how much I wish I had more time with Sebastian. How

much I wish I could have held him one more time. Kissed his soft lips. Or how I wanted to yield my body to him again.

It was not to be.

And so I fade away.

Everything is dark. I am looking around, yet I am pretty sure I don't have eyes. I can't blink or turn my head. I don't think I have arms either. This feels weird.

What's happening? Where am I?

Wait? Who am I?

Flickers of what may be memories seem so far away, behind me I think. I can't really force myself to care.

I think I'm heading forward, though I can't see where. I just know that it is where I need to be.

Floating here is like swimming through a thick and viscous liquid.

Then, from behind me, I hear a whisper. I can barely make it out, but it sounds sad. It cracks and fades.

I move farther to the place I need to be.

Then I feel a tugging behind me, like a thread is wrapped around me and is pulling me towards something. The feeling is making it harder to get where I need to be. In irritation, I glance back.

I see something that looks like embers, still barely hot. But they aren't orange. They are silver.

Curious, I float away from my destination and check out these alluring embers. Slowly, I approach and they burst into flame. Small at first but the closer I get, the larger the flame until it is the size of a pyre.

Then I hear the voice again, familiar and clearer. "Reynard."

Who is that? Is that my name?

Who is calling for me?

"Come back to me, you fucking moron!" the voice says, muffled like it is speaking through a wall or something.

I inch closer still, reaching for the flame. When my fingers caress the surprisingly cool fire, I feel a jolt through my body.

Body?

I open my eyes. Everything is blurry, and I can't see much. I think that maybe it's my bedroom ceiling?

“Wha—”

“Rey,” says somebody, female and way too loud.

I feel arms being wrapped around me, lifting me a bit from the bed I'm lying on.

“When Phil found you, I was sure you couldn't be saved,” says... Soline, yeah I don't think I could ever forget her voice for long.

“What happened? I only remember killing those natives and then—”

Soline draws back, and her worried and loving look becomes fiery and evil. She rears back her hand and slaps me. Everything, all of the recent events in my life, comes slamming back into me. I gasp aloud and desperately chase my breath, willing it back into my lungs.

“Don't ever do something so stupid,” she starts to cry, “and idiotically brave and wonderful again.”

She collapses against me and sobs, wetting the thin fabric toga that is draped over my body.

Across the room I see the rest of my friends approach. Kiren's eyes are suspiciously wet, but the rest of his face doesn't show signs of crying.

He says, “You saved us. Phil had been there, trying to get through but he couldn't break the barrier. He couldn't get into the city to ask us about tunnels, and truth be told we had forgotten about that abandoned passage. Taking down those natives was just what they needed to clear the soldiers out and get into the city to help us.”

Into my chest, Soline says, “You're a hero. I am so damn sorry that I ever doubted you in any capacity.”

“It's all right,” I mutter in a rough and crackly voice.

I find myself looking around the room, for somebody. Cathal, who hasn't come too close to me, lets one corner of his mouth raise.

“He is lying down. He’s exhausted,” says Cathal, nodding his head towards the closed door of my room.

Gently disentangling Soline and handing her off to her husband, I struggle to my feet. Dizziness overcomes me, and I plop my butt back on the edge of my bed. My hand rises to clutch at one of my temples, and I groan.

“I need to see him, please,” I say, not caring how whiney and pathetic I must sound at the moment.

Kiren immediately goes to one side of me, and I rest one arm over his shoulders to let him support me. Cathal goes onto the other side of me and they help me walk out the door. Sebastian’s room isn’t too far down the hall, but my feet and legs feel like they are made of rubber and my friends practically have to carry me the entire way.

When I enter the room my eyes focus in on Sebastian. His alabaster skin is paler than I have ever seen it. I can see the veins under his skin pulsing blood through his body. His arms hang limply beside his body.

I let Kiren and Cathal deposit me on Sebastian’s bed and I say, “Please close the door behind you and don’t let anybody in unless I call for assistance.”

They pause for only a moment, Kiren most of all. I think he is used to protecting me. But he smiles and nods his head before also taking his leave.

Once the door clicks shut, I collapse beside my lover, tracing circles onto his bare chest. The sheets that are covering him go just up past his hips, and I let my finger dip down to the top of the fabric.

I press a soft kiss to the side of his jaw, working my way to his chin and then down his neck. My hand sneaks lower, barely whispering over the silken flesh of his flaccid cock. I move until the weight of Sebastian’s balls rests on my palm, cradled lovingly.

I see his eyelids flutter but remain closed. He used every bit of power in himself to bring me back. Based on what he has told me about necromancy, I wasn’t sure he could even raise the dead back to actual life.

But he did it for me.

I am so overwhelmed with emotion that I nuzzle my face into his neck, breathing in his musky scent. I need him so bad.

After I slip the sheet off his body, I start to stroke his cock, which rapidly hardens in my hand. I’m already so stiff that it hurts, and I’m leaking all over the bedspread.

Moving on top of him, I take us both in hand, careful to avoid crushing his body. That's when I see his eyelids slit open, dazed but aware.

"Moron," he whispers, but it sounds like an endearment to me now.

He gently wraps his arms around my shoulders and spreads his legs under me.

"Take me."

I shift to get off the bed, so I can find something to use as lube when he says, "I want it rough. I want to feel you."

He brings his knees up to his chest and exposes his hole to me, that pink starburst.

I dive down, feeling suddenly energetic despite my recent brush with death. Oh what Sebastian does to me.

Laving the tip of my tongue across that wrinkled skin, I taste his pure maleness. It is so wonderful. More. Gods, I need more.

Stiffening my tongue, I jab it in, revelling in Sebastian's gasp and then moan. I continue to fuck his ass with my mouth, faster and faster until I feel one of his hands clutch my hair. He tugs it hard and his eyes are pleading for me. Desperation rolls off him in waves.

I oblige him and position my leaking head at his entrance before pushing it in with one swift move.

His cry bounces off the walls, and my breath catches in my lungs. I never thought I'd get to do this again. Touch him, feel him, or even to be inside of him again.

I'm vaguely aware of noises in the hallway outside, but ignore them. The door never opens, and I wouldn't stop even if it did.

Sebastian's legs surround my waist as I thrust, hard and brutal. My lips find his, clashing down so hard I draw blood, whose, I don't know. We don't care. Ours tongues dance together in time with our fucking. Sweat makes our bodies slip together, and heats us up further. I grip both sides of his head in my hands and stifle the cry of my orgasm in his mouth. It pulses inside of Sebastian, filling him and spilling over.

He breaks away from my kiss to scream out in ecstasy as his dick twitches violently and spills between us.

The wonderful glow of energy returning to Sebastian fills the room from his eyes before he falls limp in my arms.

His skin is still pale, and feels cold as I run my hands up and down his torso.

“I think I’ll need another round later today. When I recover more. Just what I needed to heal,” he says, voice rough from screaming.

I fall to lie beside him, bringing the sheet to cover us up to our chests. Drying cum be damned, I can’t move. Neither can he.

“Why did you do it?” he asks, meeting my eyes.

“For my people,” I say and then bury my face in his chest. “And so that hopefully you would be safe.”

“Reynard. You could have asked for help. You could have done something else.”

I shake my head against him. “By then it may have been too late. I heard you telling Jarcat the whole story, you knew I was there right?”

“Yes,” says Sebastian, kissing the top of my head, “but I thought you’d gather more people.”

“It would have taken me a while to get to them. Then convincing my family that I wasn’t going off half-cocked again, not thinking things through. I had to go by myself. I couldn’t risk anybody else.”

I feel like he wants to say more. He even tries to a few times, but the words always die part way out. I am sure that he wants to refute what I’ve just told him. My ideas aren’t always the best when it comes to tactics. I know this. But I also know that part of my plan was correct. And I saved my city, right?

Sebastian sighs deeply before he draws me up for another scorching and wet kiss. I smile against his lips.

We eventually part, to fall down on the bed and close our eyes.

As I drift off I hear him quietly say, “I love you, idiot.”

The End

Author Bio

Becca Finn loves a good book. Ever since she can remember, she has been dreaming up new characters and stories for them. When she wasn't drawing or daydreaming, she was writing. However, it wasn't until she discovered the wonderful world of male/male romance that she decided to produce fiction that others would want to read.

Today, she is a parent of three small children, a writer, an artist and lover of whatever life can offer. She is bisexual, but if you ask her, she will tell you that she's queer. Becca may be quiet and introverted, but is a firm ally of every person in the LGBTQ spectrum and beyond.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#)

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SOARING PAST DEATH

By Morticia Knight

Photo Description

Black and white pic of a slightly built young man with his head bowed, on one knee, arms wrapped around his other knee. He's chained to the ceiling by a collar around his neck. In the foreground, there is the bottom half of a man facing him, holding a flogger.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

After years of doing this I never thought anything could surprise me, but I was wrong. Of all the trainees to be assigned, somehow Viper 44 was the last one I expected to see in the program.

Still so young, but then that's what the mission requires.

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I didn't want to box the story in too much that the author is tied down so I left the letter somewhat open. What I'm hoping for is a sci-fi/dystopia genre story with political machinations and emotional layering of the protagonists—the mentor and trainee. The degree of BDSM and what preferences are open to interpretation though I expect at least moderate pain play. Viper 44's mission is one many have failed before him; therefore is mentor's job is to do it well so he succeeds. Failure only has one outcome.

Whether or not sex is in interwoven in the training or separate is entirely up to you. Maybe this is all just advance interrogation techniques survival or is he being trained for a role he's to assume. Only limits I'm going to request: no scat or necrophilia. If used, I prefer torture that focuses on the mental repercussions more than the physical though I'm not particularly squeamish.

In the end, these characters have an existing relationship that gets dramatically altered at this moment in the picture.

BTW, the name Viper 44 is a placeholder and maybe used or discarded, author's choice.

Sincerely,

Vivian

Story Info

Genre: dystopian, science fiction

Tags: futuristic/post-apocalyptic, BDSM, military men, twink, spacemen/aliens, slave, reunion, age gap, dark

Content Warnings: torture, graphic violence

Word Count: 21,587

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SOARING PAST DEATH

By Morticia Knight

Chapter One

“What the fuck is he doing here?”

The barely edible ration he'd just consumed for breakfast fought valiantly to make a reappearance. Turning to Raptor 10, Silverback 13 didn't miss the look of surprise that crossed the man's face despite his expert efforts to conceal it. They were all experts. Experts at detecting, interrogating, torturing and killing the enemy. Except for the one that mattered the most—the one they'd had no luck eliminating. The one they'd never even seen.

“I was certain they would have told you.”

13 grunted as anger, pain and frustration combined into one potentially explosive emotion. “Obviously, they didn't.”

He turned away from his friend. Friend? Maybe Raptor 10 should only be considered an acquaintance seeing as how nothing was the same anymore. Not since The Scourge had arrived on Earth and turned it into their own personal slave factory. Things like real friendships were too risky to keep.

Like love.

But he and 10 went back a long way, and if there was any human being left on the planet that he gave a fuck about, he was the one.

You're a lying sack of shit old man.

Reluctantly, he forced himself to face not only Raptor 10, but the boy who was now called Viper 44. 10 stood next to him, but 44 was on the other side of the two-way glass of the processing room in The Rebellion's primary underground station. Naked. Willing. Ready to fight. Ready to suffer for the cause. Waiting to meet the trainer who would either prepare him for the mission that would rescue Earth from the clutches of The Scourge, or who would send him to a gruesome death. Silverback 13 would be that trainer.

13 gazed at the small, beautiful form of the man whom he had once had as his sub. It was foolish to dwell on what might have been. They'd both known that their prospects as lovers and partners had been grim from the start. Life was struggle and loneliness. It was fear that ate away your sanity. Yet, death was to be avoided in case living became interesting again. So Silverback 13 had let 44 go to protect him. To save him from the program.

And here he is. After years of doing this I never thought anything could surprise me, but I was wrong. Of all the trainees to be assigned, somehow Viper 44 was the last one I expected to see in the program.

Still so young, but then that's what the mission requires.

He knew Cyrus would be angry, upset. Possibly refuse to train him.

Not Cyrus. Silverback 13.

But for a mission of such incredible magnitude, 13 was the only one that The Rebellion would trust with the training. And 13 would do anything that was required of him to aid The Rebellion.

At one time, Viper 44 had believed in love. Believed in 13's love—Cyrus's love. However, 13's unrelenting dedication to the cause had been the death blow to any hopes of lasting happiness together. 44 audibly snorted.

Happiness.

The word should have been banned from all Earth languages. Until recently, he had also believed that the word "love" should be on that same list. Regardless, none of his thoughts mattered. All that remained was for him to complete his training and face almost certain death.

There was little chance of success—none of The Rebellion plants had ever survived—but he wouldn't let that deter him. He had to at least try to be the one who made it, the one who would bring about the fall of The Scourge. His ex-Dom had tried to hide 44's special skills away from The Rebellion to prevent him from being recruited. What 13 didn't know was that he'd volunteered. 13 might not like that he was there, but the man also understood the basic facts. Viper 44 took pleasure in pain, and the Lord of The Scourge loved inflicting it. He'd soared higher than he'd ever believed possible under the skilled tutelage of 13. Now, that same instruction would aid in potentially saving 44's life. It no longer existed to save his soul.

The heavy iron door scraped noisily as it opened across the concrete floor. He kept his eyes cast downward as he sat on his heels, shoulders back, hands clasped behind his back in the program stance. The absurdity was that his cock was hardening at the thought of the former lover who had cast him aside entering the room. He wanted to be humiliated by his body's response, but it would serve him better if he wasn't. Maintaining an erection as much as possible would be part of what would be expected of him on his assignment.

44 had already practiced enduring the cold. He would be naked the entire time he was on the satellite ship where The Lord kept his lair. Ruling from Earth was a bad idea for The Scourge's insane leader—too many humans plotting on him. The male life-form was dumb, but not dumb enough for them to pick off that easily.

Of the almost nonexistent intel they'd managed to obtain, one of the details uncovered was that the inside of the space station was frigid and without any type of carpeting or padding covering the metallic floors. 44 had also toughened up his knees before he'd arrived to be trained. Every possible scenario needed to be accounted for. As no pleasure slave had ever survived longer than a week with The Lord, much of what they knew was merely conjecture. Including what the evil fuck looked like.

"Viper 44, welcome to the program. I'm Silverback 13, your trainer."

Why is he acting like he doesn't even fucking know who I am?

"Yes, Sir."

Two can play at this goddamned game.

"Lord."

44's face drew into a scowl before he could stop himself. His head was yanked back by his hair so hard he lost his balance, throwing one hand down to keep from landing hard on his elbow.

"Any display of emotion in front of The Lord could result in your immediate termination. You stay still when I say so, you speak only when I ask something of you, and you never, *ever*, react to anything that happens to you."

13 had growled it right next to his ear, a small burst of spittle landing on the side of 44's neck.

"Is that clear, soldier?"

"Yes, Sir."

He'd kept his tone as even and flat as he could.

"I said, *Lord*."

That's when it changed. When he became truly afraid for the first time since he'd become determined to enter the program. 13's hand still clutched his hair, gripping him tightly, painfully. He wanted it, wanted *him*, and it could never be. Want spelled disaster—it was an emotion that crippled. Especially when they

were bound to a mission from which he would likely never return. Undoubtedly, 13 knew it too.

“Yes. Lord.”

13 pulled him up forcefully by his hair and dragged him to the other end of the room where the shackles and the majority of the other implements were located. The entire room was approximately a thousand square feet and as gray and sterile as the rest of the facility. The only objects of beauty were the bondage devices themselves. In addition to the shackles—there were the chains, the benches, the tables—everything outfitted with cuffs, collars and restraints. Every manner of apparatus that he and Cyrus... 13, had ever delighted in.

“Stand here. Don't move. Eyes down.”

He yelped as his cock was slapped harshly.

“Louder.”

Another blow landed on his tip, the sting building along with the hint of pleasure.

“Make sure I know you feel it. Give me your screams. If he doesn't believe you're in a lot of pain, he'll make sure that you are. He has to accept that you love it no matter how excruciating it is.” 13 barked it, his orders spat out fast, no hesitation.

The final strike was so hard, his toes curled and he grimaced before he could stop himself. This time 13 grabbed him by his throat.

“I've been in this room with you for less than ten minutes and you've already signed your death warrant twice.” His voice had come out like a snarl. “You're done.”

13 gave him a shove as he let go of his neck, and he fell to the ground, landing on his ass.

“*Bullshit.*”

His words hit their target and 13 whirled back around.

“Yeah? You know what's bullshit Viper 44?”

His face flushed and he appeared out of control as he rushed towards him. When 13 had been his Dom, he'd never lost control. Ever. Bent at the waist and stabbing a finger at him, any hint of control had evaporated.

“Bullshit is the other 43 Vipers who went before you and never came back. The ones who lived, breathed, and eventually *died* for the program. Older, more experienced subs who had embraced their submission for years, who began when they were younger than you, who weren't trying to prove something to an ex-lover.”

There was no thought when 44 sprang to his feet and slammed his body into 13. If he hadn't been so enraged, it would've been amusing. He wasn't more than a hundred and thirty pounds or taller than five foot six. 13 was well over six feet and usually about two hundred and twenty-five pounds when he was at his peak muscle mass. And there seemed to be plenty of mass when 44's head hit the solid wall of 13's midsection.

“Fuck you, you arrogant prick! You know absolutely nothing about why I'm here.”

44 struggled against the tight hold 13 had on him. 13 grasped his upper arms, allowing him to flail and kick at him without even flinching. After a few minutes of struggling like a crazed wild animal, he stilled, panting, sweating.

“Are you quite finished?” It had come out akin to a growl.

“You don't know.” He refused to cry, but he would beg if he had to. “You have no idea why I'm in the program.”

He allowed his gaze to rise and meet 13's. To finally look into the gorgeous deep brown eyes that had always made him melt, had made him give every ounce of himself over to 13's control. If only he could again. 13 set him down and released his arms.

“Then enlighten me.”

Chapter Two

Reluctantly, 13 let go of 44 and frowned as the young man turned away, hugging himself. He wouldn't allow himself to think of 44's real name. It was essential he stick to the protocol of dehumanization. All recruits belonged to a class of rebel—Viper, Silverback or Raptor—depending on their strength level and skill set. Vipers were small, crafty and vicious when they stung. Silverbacks were sheer strength and 13 was their lead Dom. Raptors were rage personified, aided by a synthetic drug that could be triggered when needed. After that, they were assigned a number based on the chronological order they were inducted onto the team. It was a good practice. There were so few of the original fighters left that it helped to keep from thinking of the ones you sacrificed or fought alongside as individuals—people who had other people who cared about them.

Which was a part of why 13 was so puzzled by 44's inclusion into the program. It had been difficult to maintain his temper when he'd spotted him through the glass. When he'd seen the only man he'd ever loved, the only one for whom he'd be willing to die. The one who now seemed ready to forfeit everything to a cause he'd once ridiculed.

13 had given everything to the goddamned program, but he'd hidden 44 away so he could never be discovered. Beautiful young men who were drawn to pain were the perfect tools to get close enough to The Lord. Close enough to kill. In addition, 44 had spent months trying to convince 13 to leave The Rebellion, to run away with him. 44's position had always been that opposition to The Scourge was pointless and that they should seek their own happiness together.

“Well?”

He was tiring of the whole charade that centered on him training 44. There had been a sweet purity buried inside of 44 that only he had ever been able to reach. 13 not only didn't want to see that become sullied, but he was also sure 44's annihilation at the hands of The Lord would be much swifter than the other recruits before him because of it. He knew 44 well enough to know that he couldn't be readied for the mission in two weeks. It was preposterous. And 44 wasn't a number to him. 44 was a human being that he still loved more than his own life. Fucking hell, more than anyone else's life as well.

“I have to do this. The mission is all that matters to me.”

His words had barely been audible and 13 caught the crack of 44's voice at the second part of the statement.

"I can't imagine what universe you think we could ever be in where I would buy that pile of horse crap. You did nothing but denigrate the program when we were together."

Together. Fucking hurt to say that.

"You told me over and over that it was a mistake for me to be involved, that it wasn't worth it. And now it's all that matters to you?" He snorted. "Try again Buttercup."

44 flinched at what had been a very private endearment. The last thing 13 had ever allowed anyone to see in him was any hint of softness, anything that could ever be construed as tender. But 44 wasn't anyone.

"You don't understand."

13 threw his hands up in the air. "Obviously. Now cut the shit and spill it. You have two more minutes before I drag your sorry ass outta here and tell them you're untrainable."

"Then you'll be giving me an instant death sentence." 44 chuckled with no humor. "At least that one would be quick and painless."

13's breath caught.

The fuck?

"What are you babbling on about now?" His voice had lost a considerable amount of its edge.

44 gazed up at him, small wrinkles between his eyes as he pulled his brow together. "The new protocol? You know, the one where any Viper deemed unable or unwilling to complete their assignment would be dispatched immediately."

Ah, the language they chose. The Rebellion was always certain that every bit of verbiage they used was innocuous enough that it would dull the impact of its true meaning.

"Son of a fucking bitch."

He'd muttered it. In reality, he'd meant to keep the comment to himself, but his walls were slipping, eroding as each new bit of information unfurled. It had begun the moment he'd spied 44 behind the glass. Drawing in a deep breath, he

carefully constructed the wall again and prepared himself to do his job. The one that he was sure would result in his ex-lover's death anyway, but would at least offer the scantest possibility of hope.

"Then tell me why you're here." He released a heavy sigh. "Before we get started."

It had been a dick move on his part and he knew it. But the hurt that still lodged inside him from 13's rejection had risen sharply to the surface when 13 had entered the room. The Rebellion recruiter had informed him of the dispatch clause, idly mentioning that 44 would be the first Viper it would apply to—so 44 had been fairly certain 13 would be completely unaware of it. It had been tucked away in with his small arsenal of motivators intended to make his ex-lover train him properly for the mission—to not go easy on him.

The Rebellion had determined that the knowledge The Vipers possessed in regards to the operation to murder The Scourge's leader was too sensitive. If someone failed the training, they couldn't be left running around with that secret knowledge. It was also a great inspiration for a Viper to suck it up.

Suck it up, Buttercup.

That was what 13 had said the first time he'd ever used the bullwhip on him. 44 had laughed so hard that the session had become completely derailed, 13 eventually joining in on the hilarity. After that, he'd only used it affectionately—primarily when they'd made love.

He moaned at the pain slicing through him at the memory.

A good memory. A fucking beautiful memory.

"I found them."

There was no reason to lead up to it. To be coy. He knew 13 would know exactly what he meant.

Gazing over at 13, he noted the flat expression. God, he fucking knew the man so well. He knew exactly what 13 looked like when he masked himself against any genuine emotions.

"Where, how?"

"After you left me, I had nothing left. No one to live for."

He'd waited to say that to 13 for a year, but surprisingly, it didn't give him the satisfaction he'd always fantasized that it would.

“So I decided the only thing left for me to do was to hunt for them. Even though I saw the building my mom and sister had been holed up in torched into obliteration by The Scourge, I returned to Bear Valley and the Sierra Nevadas to search for them, search for someone who might’ve known of them.”

He paused, remembering the day that 13 had found him. The man who would become his Dom had rescued him after the battle which he’d assumed had claimed his family. He’d been hiding in a cave and had fought like one of the local bobcats when 13 had discovered him and held him tenderly, eventually calming him down. 44 had barely been eighteen years old, born after the initial takeover. Raised on fear and distrust, it had surprised him that 13 had not only been able to reach him, but to initiate him into a submissive state of being.

All of his anxiety and dread had been channeled into the glorious pain that 13 had inflicted on him. It had become his elixir against the abject terror that life had always held for him. He had taught 44 to trust for the first time, to let go of his worry. 13, and his unique brand of love, had become 44’s entire existence before 13 had abruptly torn it away from him after they’d only had a year together. Breaking the promise he’d made to always care for him.

“It took me over nine months of trekking through the wilderness to find them. I used the survival techniques you taught me as well as the focus I learned through our sessions.” He stared directly into 13’s eyes. “I never imagined I’d have a use again for anything that’d happened between us.” Shrugging he added, “I suppose there’s even more I can use now, given the current circumstances.”

“Don’t joke.” 13’s steely-edged tone had returned. “This is your fucking life we’re talking about.”

44 was amazed at how the calm trickled over him at first, then completely enveloped him.

“No. It’s not. It’s my mom and sister’s lives.”

Chapter Three

“We’re breaking for an hour. Be back here at nine, then we’re going to hit it hard.”

Without waiting for an answer, 13 marched out of the room. It was too much. Fuck The Rebellion for doing this. Even though he’d kept his relationship with 44 a hardcore secret, one never knew. Could he be completely certain that it hadn’t ever been compromised? There was no such thing as certainty in the new Earth world.

He’d left the iron door open, deciding he would worry about all the mind-fucky, head-spacey bullshit later. He would give himself an hour to wrap his brain around what 44 had just dumped on him, then he would come back and Dom him *raw*. But first, he needed to pay a little visit to Raptor 10 and find out whether the man was going to blow air up his skirt, or tell him something that at least resembled the truth in regards to the mission.

Rounding the corner of one of the long hallways in the catacombs of the underground station, he almost ran Raptor 10 over.

“Ah, funny I should meet you here, buddy.” He’d sneered out the last word.

“The training door is open, the sensors went off. Why aren’t you in there with 44?”

Well, fuck me sideways.

There was a glimmer of concern in 10’s eyes. The day continued to be ever surprising.

“We’re taking a break.”

10 grabbed his arm and valiantly attempted to pull him to one side where they were more concealed. Not wanting to be a complete asshole, he allowed himself to be guided.

“You can’t take a break. Commander 7 won’t allow it.” His voice had been barely above a whisper.

“Since when?”

“Since the mission went Omega.”

Holy motherfucking shit.

There was no point in retreating into panic mode—there had always been a strong likelihood that everything they had been working towards would reach a point of being so fucked that hard decisions would have to be made. It meant that 44 was their last chance. If he didn't succeed, then they would all go in, guns blazing, consequences be damned. They would probably all die, the remaining Earth survivors that weren't chosen for servitude incinerated, and The Scourge would make the planet of humans their sole domain.

“Anyone planning on telling me that?”

“It's a need to know.”

13 gritted his teeth. “Yeah? Well they need to know that after this is all over with, whatever happens to 44 is going to happen to them times ten.”

“Don't. For his sake, keep it together.”

Is that compassion in his voice?

If the day got any weirder, he would assume that someone had inserted a hallucifun chip in his neck. At the rate things were going, recreational drug use was beginning to gain some appeal.

“Fine.”

He knew he was practically snorting like a bull to keep his anger in check, but as always, anything that benefited 44 was his most important consideration.

“But 10? If there's anything left inside you that's from before, keep me in the loop?”

“Why do you think I came and got you?” There was a curl at the corner of his mouth trying to turn into a smile. “Now go back in there and get your boy ready.”

Can't shiver, can't move, can't breathe fast.

His foot itched. It was right below his ankle bone and he would happily give a blow job to the entire Rebellion if he could scratch it. But his first order from 13 had been to sit perfectly still, in position, for thirty minutes. There'd never been anyone other than 13. It hadn't even occurred to him prior to being with him that he was gay. He'd always assumed that the only lover he'd ever have would be the palm of his right hand.

The first night after he'd been rescued, 13 had snuck him into his private quarters before the refugees had been logged in. As the top trainer for all their

missions, regardless of type, 13 had his own mini-compound at the base of the Nevadas, near Mt. Whitney. It had been tucked away safely in a canyon surrounded by rocks and a cluster of thick evergreens.

According to 13, there was a road paralleling the range that had once been a main artery for people traveling up the state once called California. That was prior to the time when they'd all been forced underground, back when there were pockets of humans still trying to survive above ground. But on that day, he had been so completely terrified that he'd barely been coherent. Nonetheless, he'd still been able to see the hungry look in the eyes of some of the other soldiers. He'd clung to 13, somehow sensing he could be safe with him, not wanting anyone else near. The soldiers had assumed he'd been checked in and the refugee commander had no idea that 44 even existed.

That first night alone with 13 had been strangely comforting. He should have been petrified—the man was twice his size and looked as though he wouldn't know what a smile was if it skipped up to him and smacked him across the face. Instead, 44 had curled up on his lap and fallen asleep in the comfort of 13's arms. In less than a week—and after a few pointless attempts by 13 to discourage 44's affections—they had become lovers. 44 had simply known that 13 was safe, that he was home.

Don't let your mind drift, idiot.

The agony of his memories sliced through him, threatening to ruin his concentration. 13 was right about one thing. Even the tiniest slip up could spell immediate death.

In a firm and even tone, 13's voice interrupted his thoughts.

“On your feet, then over to the wooden cock and ball restraint.”

He rose gracefully, reminding himself that even though it was his ex-Dom training him, he wouldn't be treated in the same way as before. There would be no praise, no encouragement, no safeword. Only harsh, painful demands. He kept his stride measured, his posture perfect, his expression impassive. Pausing before the wood framed stand that resembled a centuries-old stock, it nonetheless held one important distinction. The only hole would be the one that would imprison his junk.

They'd actually used it a few times before, however that gave him no solace. Whatever enjoyment he'd experienced with any of the implements they'd played with would no longer matter. Anything The Lord used on him wouldn't be pleasurable—at least not for 44.

13 approached him, back in full Dom mode. He towered over him in nothing but a pair of worn, tight as fuck black leather pants. 13's bulky, solid muscles rippled as he sauntered over to 44, running both of his large hands over his shaved head, then shaking them out as if in preparation for what was about to occur. Any reaction from the surprise at finding 44 in the program was gone as if it had never existed.

Handling him roughly, 13 tugged his cock and balls and stuffed them in the U-shaped, metal-lined indentation of the crossbeam that had already been adjusted to his height. Gritting his teeth at the sensation of the cold steel on his sensitive flesh, 44 worked to maintain a blank expression on his face.

Bringing the wooden arm down, 13 trapped his genitals. He proceeded to tighten the steel lining and 44 focused on his even breathing as the inner lining squeezed his dick and sac. His gaze was trained forward and it was a fight not to look down at what he was sure would be his purpling cockhead and swollen nuts. In the past when he'd played with 13 on the stock, their interaction had been much different. It wasn't merely that 13 was now pushing him harder. The connection wasn't the same and that hurt more than anything physical 13 could do to him. His ex-lover's harsh touch was done from a place of separateness.

Once 13 had seemingly bound 44's cock and balls to his satisfaction, he yanked first one, and then 44's other wrist up to shackle them wide and above his head, stretched to their limit. Then he kicked 44's legs apart, before restraining his ankles in the same manner. The pull on 44's genitals was more pronounced than ever once his limbs were imprisoned, and as each action was completed, 44 remained still and 13 remained silent.

There was barely a chance for him to register the quiet whoosh of the flogger before it angrily splayed across his back, the knotted ends stinging him in an arc across one shoulder blade and his upper arm.

He's using the one from before, the one I loved so much.

"Out loud."

"I was trying to—"

44 screamed. The second strike had been much more excruciating than anything he could ever recall them doing together. 13 had certainly never before hit him with full strength and without any build-up.

"No talking. You shut the fuck up at all times unless you're begging the Lord to punish you more or moaning about how much you love it."

The next blow was just as painful, landing on the top of his ass. About to practice his fake cry of ecstasy, he first bit his lower lip to assuage his response to the pain. 13 had apparently spotted it—the next hit was directly on his butt cheeks, the ends of the flogger nipping at the sensitive skin on the underside of his thighs.

“No hesitation. Commit to your love of the pain. Make him believe it, make *me* believe it.”

Another strike. He couldn't comprehend how each one seemed worse than the last.

“Yes, Lord, more please, I *beg* of you.”

Stupidly waiting for the words of praise, 44 had a momentary clutch in his heart when they didn't come. But why would they? It wasn't about the two of them reaching for sanctuary together, finding that balance with one another that would make their lives worth living. It was about staying alive long enough to kill a blight that threatened all that he held sacred.

The beating continued, 44 yelling in mock rapture. The rhythm intensified, the fiery pain traversing up and down the backside of his body. At his center was the hot, pulsing throb in his prick and sac—the pressure more intense than anything he'd ever known. He fell into it, fell into the dark arms of agony. Soon his cries morphed into something else, something genuine. A continuous wailing moan escaped his lips, the sounds hypnotic to his own ears.

Abruptly, the flogging ceased. Lost in a universe of his own making, it took him a moment to register that he hadn't looked for verbal approval from 13 that time. And that the awful beating he'd just endured hadn't been as unbearable as he'd thought.

It couldn't be that easy.

He was right.

The dildo that 13 shoved up his ass was at least lubed, but he hadn't had anyone inside him other than 13—ever—and that had been over a year prior. The shock of being filled to the max without any warning was half of what had freaked him out. 13 fucked him vigorously with the silicon toy, the burn even more severe than he could remember it being from when 13 had popped his cherry.

Once 44 got past the surprise of begin violated by the fake dick, he realized that it wasn't as large as it had seemed initially. His ex-lover was much more

endowed and 44 found himself becoming irritated with 13—concerned that the man might be behaving too hesitant with him. Regardless of it being his first day of training, they had very little time before 44 would be subjected to the abuse of The Lord. It was a good bet that their sadistic enemy was unacquainted with the concept of lubrication.

It was too pleasurable. The glorious stretch that he hadn't felt in so long, the pegging of his gland, the fullness—it was all there. There was a tingling in his spine, but it had nowhere to go. The pulse in his cock was so strong it gave the illusion that his swollen erection could explode. He couldn't move back to meet the object being rammed inside him, nor could he thrust forward. Yanking on his restraints, despite knowing he was tightly held all around, did nothing to alleviate his suffering. All he could do was take it.

He howled as 13 slapped his cock again and again while still fucking him hard with the dildo. His thighs shook with the strain of it all—sweat pouring down his neck and torso regardless of the temperature in the room. Soon tears joined the moisture leaking out of him. He ground his teeth together so hard, he actually feared he might crack them.

“Why aren't you begging for more, huh? You'd better fucking make sure I know you love it or I might eliminate you, get rid of you. Who needs a sex slave who's no fun? I'll just beat him until he's dead, maybe let all my minions fuck him to death...”

There had been a waver in 13's voice, then everything had simultaneously ceased. The images 13's words evoked were terrifying. Nauseating. They had to maintain the charade of what they were doing together by duplicating the surmised situations he might encounter with The Lord.

The next sensation was a spiked paddle on his already raw, tender ass. And so he begged.

Chapter Four

He was a disgusting human being. If he could even be considered a part of the human race any longer. 13 had beaten and tortured his ex-lover for almost two weeks. The only thing he hadn't done was have sex with him. Various dildos, plugs and vibrators of multiple shapes and sizes had, but 13 hadn't touched 44 in that way at all. Everything that had been done to him had been in the name of the program, all in the name of eliminating the enemy.

Who will undoubtedly eliminate him instead.

The guilt crushing him from the inside out at the knowledge that he had been capable of committing such horrific acts on 44 was something he doubted he would ever overcome. No amount of reassurances from Raptor 10 could break through to him. The urge to vomit rose up in his throat as it had so many times in the past several days. Every time he had sensed even the smallest twinge of need, desire—he had turned it around on both of them by amping up the cruelty. It was the only chance 44 had of survival, yet that had done nothing to assuage the cloak of self-loathing that currently enveloped him.

He was startled from his reverie by an insistent banging on the door to his compartment. Since he was the trainer of the supposed last hope for humanity, 13 had been afforded quarters almost as large as Commander 7's. As if that meant a good goddamned thing to him.

“What the fuck d'ya want?”

It wasn't as though he didn't put up with an assload of lame every day. The Commander's constant need to know what he was doing with his boy made him want to filet the shithead.

He's not your boy. Not anymore.

“Come on 13, it's me. Open up.”

Raptor 10.

“Just a minute.”

He pushed himself up from the luxury cot that—other than their leader—only the Vipers, Silverbacks and Raptors enjoyed.

One Viper anyway. All the rest are gone.

His stomach twisted like one of those old-fashioned washing machines he'd seen on the digi-com. There had been a channel that showed advertisements from fifty years before, back when humanity cared about what brand of laundry appliance they purchased. Under their current circumstances, a big communal vat-like tub was the recipient of all their dirty garments. Once a week, one of the grunts was in charge of making sure the soldiers were all taken care of. That was the extent of The Rebellion's domesticity.

Even the food rations didn't require any special care. They ate what came in the packages and tossed the remains. Somewhere away from their hideout was a mysterious location that produced the bland packets of nutrition. When he and 44 had been in the Nevadas together, they'd caught and gathered their own food. They'd lived simply, but with full contentment in one another.

Fucking stomach.

Opening the door reluctantly, he prepared himself for what might be bad news. As it was, he was barely holding it together with the realization that 44 would be leaving to go on his mission in less than twelve hours. 10 pushed past him. 13 frowned.

"The fuck?"

"Close the door."

"When did you get so pushy?"

As 13 scowled at the man he'd finally determined was more of a friend than he'd ever realized, he noted his subtle hand signals. Technology had become more of a pain in the ass as the years had worn on. For every problem it had solved, it had created ten more. The ability to maintain any type of privacy had evaporated. That was until the attack by The Scourge had provided Earth with its one and only favor—the breakdown of society and the subsequent chaos that followed. Being able to sustain the level of policing that had occurred prior to the invasion had become a hit and miss affair. As a result, people had invented their own organic forms of communication when there was any doubt as to the security of a location. Raptor 10 was using sign language.

"We're safe in here. I took care of that problem a long time ago."

"Don't they keep trying to reinstall them?"

"No. The digi-com transmissions I send out from my quarters make them think I'm in here behaving myself." He raised one eyebrow at 10. "I even programmed some realistic sounds that a man alone in his room might make."

“I don’t wanna know.”

10 moved over to the plank wood bench that was the only seating in the ten by twelve quarters. He sat down, and 13 perched at the end of his cot, his hands clasped, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Waiting. He knew 10 wasn’t making a social call.

“Well?”

“Raptor 5 just came back from a siege on one of The Scourge’s minion camps. He said that the whole thing had seemed too easy, which was why they were certain it was a trap. They all gave up without a fight, not one of ‘em tried anything. For a species that has always been ruthless and without mercy, it made no sense.

“After a few days of everyone sort of sussing the other out, the leader of the minions asked to speak with 5.” 10 glanced around the room nervously, his knee beginning to bounce in agitation. “Are you sure...?”

“You doubt me?”

“No, but... fuck. Let’s just say that if you’re wrong, it’s been nice knowin’ ya, ‘cause we’ll both be dead in the next ten seconds.”

“Goddammit, out with it already.”

“Commander 7 and The Lord are working together.”

He sucked in a large breath. The room spun crazily around him and the sensation that he was about to face-plant onto the concrete floor was almost overwhelming.

“I. Am going to. Fucking. *Kill* him.”

Heat flushed through his body, rising to his face in such a strong wave, it was as though he were a human volcano. He trembled from the effort to keep from literally exploding his venom onto his friend.

“No. You can’t.”

A sound more like an animal’s growl than something a human would make gurgled out of 13’s throat.

“We need him alive and unsuspecting. He thinks we’re all on board with the whole pleasure slave mission to kill The Lord. And that we’ll be happy to sacrifice our own lives when 44 fails. That’s been the real plan all along.”

“But he could still—”

“Think man, can’t you see it’s a setup? 7 has been buying time to get everything in place before he made his final move. The Lord needed him to weaken our ranks, wear us down until we were desperate. Every Viper that was ever sent in was going on even more of a suicide mission than they ever realized. There was never an opportunity for them to get to The Lord, never weapons or weaknesses they could use that the fake intel had indicated they could.”

13’s breathing increased in its intensity. Control had left the building and had been replaced by murderous rage. With words gritted through his teeth and in-between snorts, 13 attempted to remain calm long enough to get the rest of the information out of 10. Clenching and unclenching his fists, he took another deep breath.

“Go on, give me everything. Otherwise I’m going to go pay a little visit to the Commander right now and rip his balls off before I stuff them down his throat.”

“Deep breaths, chief. I’m supposed to be the rage monster.”

“Fuck that. Yours is enhanced, mine comes naturally whenever I think about innocent men dying over some fucktard’s personal agenda. Now out with it.”

10 nodded, a look of understanding on his face. “While I’m telling you the rest, you need to bear in mind that there’s a way for us to get the final result we intended in the first place, along with Commander 7’s head. But if you go all berserker it’ll ruin everything. It will also likely send 44 and his family to an immediate grave.”

13 scowled, an iciness surging into his veins to cool down the fire that was there. “What does 44’s family have to do with anything?”

“7 recruited 44, using his family as an enticement—”

“How the hell did he even know about 44 or his family? That doesn’t make any—”

“Let me finish, please? I’ll give you every detail—I swear to all that is holy—but you need to hear it all first.” 10 sighed as if all of the breath had escaped from his body. “Okay?”

“Fine. Yeah, okay.”

Lowering his voice in an almost compassionate tone, 10 continued. “You and 44 weren’t as stealth about your relationship as you’d thought. The

Commander has resented you for a while. He sees how the others look up to you, and he's always been threatened by it. Once he got in bed—so to speak—with The Lord, he searched tirelessly for any weakness that he could use against you. 44 is that one thing, the only human being that you would sacrifice everything for.”

His gut twisted into new and before untried knots.

I let him go for nothing, likely condemning him in the process.

“It was no accident that 44 found his family. Once 7 discovered you and 44 were no longer together, he contacted his cohorts who then located 44's mom and sister in one of the slave camps. The Commander had been following him the entire time he'd hunted for his people, so he approached 44 with the proposition of him being their last chance—the only one that could save his family. Save you.”

“Me?”

He'd never heard anything more ridiculous in his life. Not that he didn't need saving in his own bizarre way, but it was astonishing that 44 would give a shit about him after the way 13 had pushed him away.

I guess we've both been a little confused over the whole saving each other thing.

He grunted. “Shit.”

13 shook his head, dropping it into his palms, trying to unravel the complexities of what 10 was telling him. Trying to discern if he even believed a minuscule portion of it. He startled and straightened up when he felt 10's hand on his arm.

“Look man, I know this is all one big pile of puke, but I swear there're options. We can still win.”

“The first option I'm exercising is getting 44 and getting the fuck outta here.”

“Oh? Think he's leaving without mom and sis? Of course, even if he did, there's only the entire Rebellion to get past in this underground rat maze.” 10 mockingly slapped his forehead. “I'm sorry, I forgot to mention that mom and sis are already on The Lord's station where there will be a public torture and execution of the three of them while you're forced to watch. Of course, that's only after The Lord has had his kicks with your boy. If half of what we've

heard is true, ugly doesn't even begin to cover what 44 will have to endure. Don't you get it? This whole pleasure slave assassination horseshit has only ever been a game. A way for The Lord to get a little extra something out of the deal."

He really didn't want to retch in front of his friend, but the bile in the back of his throat had ideas of its own. One thing was for sure, it didn't sound like he had a lot of time to get 44 out of the whole mess. And he couldn't do it alone—he would need 10's help.

"And you're sure this minion, or whatever it is, isn't making crap up to keep himself alive? Or maybe he's been sent to plant distrust amongst us, get us to turn against each other. Not that I've ever needed much motivation in that regard when it comes to The Commander."

There had always been something off about the man, something smarmy. In truth, it wasn't much of a stretch to conclude that he might be consorting with the enemy.

Not much at all.

"He knew too much about The Rebellion, things only the highest in command would have known. 5 said it was terrifying when it became clear that it was all true."

"Holy shit." 13 had almost said it to himself. He looked up. "In that case, whadda we do?"

Chapter Five

Ten more hours. Ten more hours before I leave, before I never see Cyrus again, never see Mom or Rebecca again.

In his final hours left on Earth, he refused to think of Cyrus as a number. The program could take everything else away from him, but not that. It was dangerous to allow any softness in, but if he was going to die anyway, he needed to remember Cyrus the way he had been when they'd been together. Strict—but loving and protective. Every action obviously intended to put 44's needs first.

The ache in his chest far outweighed the other ones. Before it'd been healed with the restorative cream after his two weeks with Cyrus, his body had been plagued by endless bruises, pulled muscles, soreness and welts. Yet, none of that meant anything to him. It was all nothing more than the result of a training mission. It was his heart that was damaged.

He sat on the edge of his small cot in the six by eight cubicle that had comprised his home since he'd joined the program. Clutching at the thin blanket that was the only covering for the foldable bed, he pulled it to him. He wasn't cold. His nakedness was of no concern. But his need for a small measure of comfort in the final hours before he was sacrificed to an unknown hell gnawed at him. He wanted to hold someone in his arms. The blanket was all there was.

There was a shuffling outside his room and he tensed. No one was allowed to come near him, not even 13. From the moment he'd signed on, the only interaction with anyone that was approved was with his trainer, and even then, only in the training area. No one else was even permitted to speak to him.

Someone fiddled with the lock and 44 tucked his feet under himself, instinctively scooting back on his makeshift bed. The door opened slowly, the mystery visitor still hidden behind it. As soon as it had swung wide, 44 gasped. Not only was Cyrus there, but the one he remembered from before as being Cyrus's friend, Raptor 10.

Something's not right.

Cyrus held a finger to his mouth, his eyes boring into 44, a tiny glimmer that reminded him of their bond from before. 44 shuddered, the sense that there was a synchronistic reason for him joining the program assailing him all at

once. Both of the large men struggled to squeeze into the small space. 44 climbed off the cot, and all three of them pushed it up against the wall. Questioning them with a lift of his eyebrows, he waited for what he was sure would be distressing news.

Cyrus leaned into him, his ex-lover's hot breath tingling his skin, the brush of his lips next to his ear knee-weakening. For the past two weeks, 44 had been naked, bound, beat and fucked with various implements by Cyrus. But in that moment, nothing felt as raw or as intimate as the man's mouth so close to his face.

Cyrus's whisper was like a caress. "10 is sweeping the room. Hold on a moment longer."

Watching as 10 went through the motions of checking for listening devices, 44 attempted to remain still the way he'd been trained to do. Because his insides were jumping, somersaulting and cartwheeling all at once. He couldn't tell if that was a good thing or not.

10 nodded at them both. "We're clear."

Turning to Cyrus, he inhaled sharply because there was no attempt from his trainer to look away—he was purposely gazing into 44's eyes and what he saw in them had nothing to do with him being his trainer.

"I have something very important to tell you."

The look on 44's face was easy enough to interpret. He was in shock. Both he and 10 had toyed with the idea of playing the "need to know" game with 44, but neither of them wished to be a part of The Rebellion's methodology anymore. It was 44's life and he deserved to have a say in what went down. Especially since 44 would still be the pawn in their newly conceived plan to outwit both The Commander and The Lord.

13 could barely keep his expression neutral. The urge to gather 44 close and rock him in his arms was a palpable one. He loved him more than ever, needed him. But they would never stand a chance together until The Lord and any human traitors were taken out. Permanently.

At last 44 raised his head, looking at him with a questioning gaze.

"Has anyone ever tried the death capsules before?"

Those eyes. So fucking innocent.

“No. You would be the first.”

13 had already let 10 know that he would be the only one who would explain everything to 44—all that would be expected of him. It was only right.

“And if I don’t bite him hard enough on the first try, and the poison doesn’t get inside him, I’m worm food, right?”

13 tried not to cringe. “Correct.”

Unable to stop himself, he grabbed 44’s upper arms.

“But I know you can do this. You *have* to. The training we’ve done is more than sufficient for you to last long enough to get to him. I know he’ll have you bound and shackled most of the time, but strike the very second you get an opening, right when he’s distracted by tying or chaining you.”

44 dipped his chin in understanding. “And the minions will help you guys get to the station by taking you on their ships?”

Working extra hard to keep himself from stroking 44’s cheek with his thumb, he attempted to keep his tone as encouraging as possible.

“Yes. We’ll get there as soon as the capsules signal to us that the poison’s been deployed. It will be easy to take the rest of them out then.”

44 scrunched his eyebrows together. “But how can you be sure? How can you really know that the minions aren’t just faking you all out?”

The kid wasn’t an idiot. Never had been.

“We can never be sure of anything. But this is the surest we’ve ever been.”

Pressing his lips together, 44 seemed to have reached a conclusion.

“All right. Then fit the capsules on my teeth.”

Their good-byes, or lack thereof, had been excruciating. 44 had sensed that Cyrus had wanted to hold him as much as he’d wanted to be held. That there were words unspoken that might never be said. The distance between them had begun to evaporate from the moment his Dom had entered 44’s cubicle.

My Dom.

He didn’t give a fuck anymore about anything other than eliminating the vile creature known as The Lord so that he could go back to belonging to Cyrus once again. Because that was the reality. Even if Cyrus wasn’t interested in

keeping him anymore, he would never belong to anyone else. Cyrus would always be his Dom, his only love. Except this time, he would have the added joy of his mom and sister being in his life too.

The charade of being captured and taken to The Lord's ship had begun. They were on their way, traveling at a ridiculous speed to the lair in space. It was hard to keep all the details straight in his mind regarding everything. It was an undercover operation staged by The Rebellion that was actually a fake. Commander 7 still thought that Cyrus and 44 and everyone else believed the original assassination plan was underway. That 44 was going to attempt to murder The Lord using whatever methods he could since he would be nude and unable to conceal any weapons.

Except for the one Commander 7 and The Lord knew nothing of. The capsules. Once 7's nefarious scheme had been uncovered, 10 had rounded up the only soldiers he believed could be trusted to stage their own little coup. The most important person he'd recruited had been the scientist whom 10 had known since their childhood days. The scientist who'd invented the capsules and who'd never shared that knowledge with The Rebellion.

"Turns out he never cared much for authority. He's been saving this little device for the right moment."

44 reminded himself not to lick around his incisors where the capsules were fitted over his teeth. It wouldn't be good to call attention to his mouth considering the capsules were needle sharp to facilitate the breaking of skin. Also, he wouldn't be able to eat anything, or else he could pierce his own tongue which would kill him instantly. That meant that he would have to make his move quickly. Considering that any length of time spent with The Lord would undoubtedly be unbelievably agonizing, offing the Scourge leader as fast as possible was an excellent motivator.

The minions nearby kept eyeing him. He was fairly certain they weren't allowed to touch him as he would be The Lord's pleasure slave. It was difficult to work out in his mind whose side the four foot tall, lumpy dark blue creatures were supposed to be on. Since the Commander was actually double crossing The Rebellion, were these minions who were purported to be on The Rebellion's side, in reality still on The Scourge's side?

It gave him a headache. The only way to know anything for sure would be when The Scourge's incinerator rays and The Rebellion's boomer rifles battled it out. The looks and whispers amongst the minions had him on edge. The fear

that they'd all been found out already troubled him. The certainty that it would all be over soon one way or the other had never been more real to him than it was right then.

After being up all night plotting with Cyrus and 10, it had been easy to doze off during the trip. A sharp jostle of his shoulder startled him awake. His gut clenched at the realization that they were passing through an enormous hatch of The Lord's massive space station. If his circumstances hadn't been so dire, he might have been able to appreciate the beauty of the ship. It shone. There was nothing dark or foreboding about it, nothing tarnished or dingy. Bright, clean metal like a highly polished platinum comprised both the outside and the inside. The lines were soft and round—not the unforgiving hard edges that 44 had assumed it would have.

As the carrier he was on came to a complete stop, 44 shook uncontrollably. It was as if every muscle and nerve, every tendon and ligament was doing its own private dance inside his body. He was fucking terrified. One of the minions that had a grander outfit on grabbed him by the leash that dangled loosely at 44's side and yanked him forward. The chain was attached to a one inch thick metal collar that had been locked onto his neck as soon as he'd boarded the small ship.

The blue creatures were everywhere. Their funny little shuffling walk would have made him giggle under any other circumstance. *Any* other. He allowed himself to be jerked along by the alien grunt, considering it to all be a part of the act.

It's an act. That's all. I've been trained by the best, I can do this.

That's what Cyrus had said to him over and over, up until the very last moment when they'd held one another's gaze. Up until the door to the ship had closed.

"You can do this. There is more strength and power inside of you than any soldier I have ever known."

As he was led down the large expanse of the main section of the space station, he couldn't help but look around with fascination and curiosity. The way the various bubble-shaped adornments dotting the interior sparkled was very inviting. How could something so aesthetically pleasing be crafted by such a hateful species? Yet, he was certain there was more to everything than any of The Rebellion knew. If one large and powerful group of minions had already reached out to humanity, then would it be that much of a stretch to believe that they were also being forced into servitude?

Once they arrived at the end of the open area, they took a turn down one of the many corridors, and something else came to his attention. There was an obvious difference in status between the smaller minions and the tall, pale, willowy beings that scowled and hissed at the various minions who 44 passed, along with the one who led him by the tether.

It seemed incomprehensible to 44 that the two very different species were related to one another in any way. Were the taller ones the true leaders? Which type would The Lord be? As far as 44 knew, the humans had only ever encountered the small blue beings. They had certainly been the ones who had raged the devastating war on Earth. His curiosity as to how Commander 7 had become involved in such an intrigue kept his mind occupied on something other than the nightmare that was almost upon him.

They rounded a corner and up ahead was what appeared to be a gold-lined hallway. It was smooth and gleaming the way that molten metal would appear. The compulsion to touch the walls to see if they were indeed liquid was powerful, but he didn't give in to it. The present was the perfect time to begin implementing his self-control. The start of his assignment was likely only seconds away.

As if in acknowledgement of his thoughts, the immense golden doors at the end of the hall swung open as if on their own.

Fuckohfuckohfuckohfuckohfuck.

He couldn't do it. How could he bite someone hard enough to pierce their skin? And this wasn't just someone. This was a fucking *alien*. An evil, sadistic, powerful, motherfucking-in-charge alien.

44 gasped, almost blinded by the magnificence of the stunning creature that appeared from across the room.

It can't be him.

The being approached 44, a light shining around the alien that seemed to radiate from within. It was luminescent. Gorgeous was too tame a word to describe him. 44 knew it was a him because the diaphanous robe he wore did nothing to conceal his enormous manhood.

Oh Jesus.

When they were within a few feet of one another, 44 was overwhelmed at the differences between them physically. He was at least two feet shorter than the being. The lithe form of the creature, complete with his long straight limbs was disconcerting. Even more so when 44 noted that his hands were similar to

pincers, yet they didn't appear sharp. They were as soft and stark white as the rest of him. There was no sign of muscle or any other indicator of physical strength. His eyes were soft, large, sea blue and almond shaped—they radiated peace and beauty. The certainty that there had been some sort of awful misunderstanding nagged at him, threatening to derail his duty to the cause.

But then the thing spoke.

It was more cringe inducing than nails on a chalkboard. The croaking sounds that came out of the creature clawed at his nerves, almost making him visibly react before he could stop himself. But Cyrus's training kept him in check. He could feel his ex-lover's influence from afar. His touch.

“My slaaaave. Welcome.”

A snake. That's what it reminds me of.

“Lord.” He bowed his head slightly.

He didn't feel welcomed. Revolted was more accurate. The unholy noise that emanated from The Lord nullified any physical loveliness it possessed. 44 no longer thought of it as a “him”. Regardless of the enormous appendage that dangled between its spindly legs, 44 refused to assign it any gender, any regard.

It undulated around him, sniffing at him the way a dog would. One of the pincers thrust towards him and grasped at his skin, lightly pinching his arms, chest, neck, scraping down his back until they clutched his ass cheeks. The shudder was involuntary, rippling through him before he'd even had the chance to register the need to control it. The repercussions were swift.

He choked and struggled as he was dangled by his neck, held between what turned out to be very powerful claws. Soft claws, but the result was the same.

“Yooooou shall obey me in all ways or diiiiiie. My touches are your greatest wish. My punishments your greatest desiiiiire.”

He nodded within the creature's grip, then was tossed to the ground where he landed hard, splayed out on his stomach.

I give myself one day. I've got to get to him today, otherwise, I won't fucking last through this creepy shit.

A loud command emanated from The Lord. It obviously wasn't directed at him as it was shouted out in another language. He was tugged to his feet, then lifted up by his arms by two similar tall creatures—their glow less radiant, their garments less shimmering. They held him that way between them, his feet not touching the ground, even when he pointed his toes.

Once they had reached a polished black door at the other end of the spacious room, they halted. Breathing in short gasps, 44 tried to focus on the mundane things around him, avoiding any thoughts that might lead to pondering what he might be about to endure. The door gleamed in a way that was reminiscent of an opaque stone, like obsidian. There could be anything on the other side of it, things that were beyond his imagining.

After the stone barrier slid into the golden wall, they all passed through. A soft glow of light illuminated them as they proceeded down a narrow hall as if a giant firefly were hovering nearby. Images and symbols that were reminiscent of hieroglyphics were briefly lit up, then cast in the shadows. One thing was for sure, he was being led somewhere far, far away from the landing area for the ships. Possibly so far away that no one who boarded the ship could ever find him.

Swallowing down the lump that had built up in his throat, he returned to more thoughts of his surroundings.

Before he had the chance to continue his assessment of the strange images that flashed by him, the beings abruptly stopped. The door, or panel, or whatever it was they stood before, gave the impression of being like water. A non-solid mass that rippled and reflected back the lights and images around it. His own likeness stared back at him. It was distorted, twisted. Ugly. But what stood behind him was much worse. Scourge. Pestilence. Decay. It radiated off of the thing, eradicating any physical beauty that it might possess.

“It is time little human. Time for us to plaaaaay.”

Chapter Six

In a purely humiliating move, 44 had fainted. When he'd again become conscious, he'd been distressed to discover that he was tied spread-eagled on his stomach, lying on top of a smooth glass-like surface. His wrists and ankles were restrained by some sort of wire. It dug into his delicate flesh, and it was easy to tell when he tested it that if he pulled too hard, it would slice him to his bone. He would have no choice but to stay still regardless of whatever punishment was inflicted upon him—unless he wanted to gravely injure himself.

As he became more and more aware of his body, he was alarmed to realize that something wasn't right with his genitals. They felt unnaturally heavy, and were most definitely not flush between his belly and the surface he was tied to.

That freak pulled my junk through an opening in this table.

Refusing to contemplate whether or not his cock and balls were being restrained with the same wire that his limbs were, he focused instead on his training. Stillness. Calm, steady breathing.

“My toy awaaaaakes.”

If it wasn't for the unearthly sounds the thing made, 44 would have been sure he could endure almost anything. But by being such a fucking coward and passing out, he'd already missed one potential opportunity to take out the revolting creature before he'd been restrained. And now he had no idea what was in store for his helpless body.

He bit the inside of his mouth to keep from reacting to the soft pincers poking and probing at him, bile rising in the back of his throat.

“Do you like my caresssssss? Are they pleaaaasing to you?”

“Yes, Lord. Touch me more, I beg of you.”

His tone had been flat, unconvincing to his own ears. His words sounding silly. The games, the scenarios he and Cyrus had acted out together would be next to useless in the face of the vile being that stood next to him. He was absolutely, royally, figuratively and literally fucked.

A strangled buzzing noise emanated from The Lord, and 44 wondered if it was its version of a laugh.

“Sssssuch a terrible liar. But ssssssooooo prettyyyyy. I will let you live. For nowwww.”

No time. There was no time to waste. The Lord could end him at any moment when the whim overtook it.

“Would you like to guessssss what I’ll do to you firsssst?”

Trick question. How the fuck do I respond?

“I only wish that you do to me what pleases you the most.”

There was an ear-piercing roar, along with a splintering sound from the other side of the room where some object had undoubtedly been smashed. More buzzing, crackling, unnerving howls spewed from The Lord as if every hornet’s nest that had ever existed had all been teased at once.

“This game, it boooooores me! Don’t you seeeee little human? There have been maaaany others before you. I knoooooow. I knoooooow that you think you have a chance to beat me. That you think your precioussssss Commander is on your siiiiiide. But he’s not! He’s on *my* siiiiiide. I will neverrrrrr untie you from where you are now, you will stay there until you diiiiiiie, until the flesh peels from your boooooones as a result of my loving touch.”

His insides liquefied. Things were not going how they were supposed to go, not at all. He hadn’t expected anything to go smooth. As a matter of fact, smooth had never even been a consideration. But to have it all be for nothing, for The Lord to not even play along the tiniest bit because it was bored with the whole charade? It was too cruel.

“I want to play myyyyyyy way now.”

The Lord bent down so that it was practically right next to 44’s face, right where he could inhale the creature’s cold fetid breath. It was so unnatural, all of it.

“And my wayyyyyy is to break soulsssss. Torture is an art, a great achievement among our kind. And I. I am, *The Looooord*. That is why you shall not diiiiiiie until you watch your mother and sister sufferrrrrrr.”

44 yanked on the restraints, the wire slicing his skin, the sharp sting awakening his nerves, the warmth of blood trickling along his arm. Using every miniscule molecule of focus he’d ever possessed, he stilled, forcing himself not to give in to the insanity fighting for dominance in his mind. There had to be a way to finish it. Had to.

“Yesssssss. Cry if you want, I shall lick your tears awayyyyyyy, taste your paaaaaaain.”

Fuck you, shitheap.

His balls were grabbed in a vise-like grip, the creature's pincers crushing them. He was no stranger to having his nuts abused. Cyrus had covered all aspects of potential physical torture during their training sessions. It had never occurred to 44 at the time just how kind Cyrus was being. After more twisting and pulling, he was let go, but his sac was being dragged down as if it would rip off.

Weights.

Then the whipping began. He hadn't the slightest clue what sort of implement was being used on him, but in reality, he didn't see what difference it made. The hot, searing pain was so unrelenting there wasn't the vaguest chance he could get into any kind of space in his mind that would allow 44 to maintain the control of the situation from within. The training had been a joke. It no longer mattered. Yet, what had always mattered still did. His love for Cyrus, for his family. He thought of Cyrus's words before he'd left on the ship.

“You can do this.”

Either The Lord had exhausted its energy or had become bored again—44 wasn't sure—but the filth had finally stopped beating the crap out of him. Unfortunately, the pain hadn't stopped. If someone were to tell him that his flesh was being consumed by flames, he wouldn't have found the information surprising at all.

Wonder what sort of aftercare I'll get?

He almost snorted out loud until he remembered that The Lord didn't seem to be a humorous kinda creature. Sweat poured from him, his shaggy hair drenched with it, trails of moisture pooling in his crack, trickling down his sides. As he'd suspected, there wouldn't be much in the way of respite from his captor.

“I bet your traaaaaainer didn't use thissssss on you. It's our own special deviiiiice. When your loverrrrrr learns of your death and the failurrrrrr of your mission, I will personally show him what's left of you before I gut him aliiiiive.”

Keep it together. There's a way. There has got to be a fucking way.

Something like an old-fashioned plasma ball hovered in his peripheral vision. As much as he didn't want to contemplate what the instrument might do to him, he couldn't help it. He couldn't even brace himself. Any tension or tightening in his body would cause the wire to cut into him more, juicing his agony levels. And he couldn't pass out again. He needed to remain as alert as possible in case some sort of random opportunity to off the sick fuck presented itself.

There was a bright flash and an almost immediate concentration of what felt like a thousand bee stings to the soles of his feet. He didn't scream. He screeched, he cried, he howled. He begged—but not for more the way Cyrus had trained him. He begged for The Lord to stop.

Unconsciousness drifted near him and he was tempted to lapse into it—anything to save him from what made him wish for death. Another flash and another area of his body was targeted. More excruciating hurt, agony, physical and mental despair. When the energy from the torture device hit his cock, he surrendered to oblivion.

“Wake up toyyyyyy.”

44's head was yanked up, his eyes crusty and swollen from his earlier sobbing. He wanted to kick his own ass for pussing out again by fainting. It was obvious that he wouldn't have the ability to survive much longer, and he had to at least attempt to use the capsules. He grimaced when the Lord's face was mere inches from his own, the creature seemingly inspecting him.

“I liiiiiike your mouth. You can't hiiiiide it from me by twisting it.”

The fuck?

“I'm going to taaaaake it now.”

Still holding 44's head up painfully by his hair with one claw, 44 watched in abject horror as The Lord shoved the sheer fabric of its robe aside, exposing its nauseating organ. When he and Cyrus had lived in the Nevadas, they'd kept a few horses to use for travel. Vehicles were too easily spotted, a signal that humans were nearby. One stallion in particular had been a real horny bastard. What dangled before him was a snow white version of that horse's dong. It was not okay.

All he could think of was that he'd rather die, be beaten alive, have anything happen other than taking that disgusting thing in his mouth. And wishing he

could think up a plan in the next split second that would allow him to use the capsules.

Oh shit.

He held his breath as the large head of the creature's cock was pushed forcefully against his lips.

Don't be eager. Don't let him suspect.

He struggled just enough so that he was sure The Lord wouldn't catch on. The stiff member bruising his mouth was a good indicator that the creature had given itself over to its own primal lust. Raptor 10's scientist friend had instructed 44 it was vital that he hit a vein. That didn't seem like it would be too much of a problem.

At last, 44 allowed the bulbous knob of The Lord to slip into his mouth. It was impossibly huge, the urge to gag overwhelming. But 44 was determined to take in as much as he could to be sure he hit home. Both of The Lord's pincers went to his hair, clutching at it as he moaned and stuffed his swollen prick further past 44's lips.

There was a split second of The Lord's muscles tensing then its shrill screams echoed throughout the chamber, seeming to multiply as if they were in a mountain canyon. Revulsion filled 44 as the cold blood from The Lord filled his mouth, oozing out the sides, but 44 clamped down harder, eliciting an enraged shriek from the dying leader.

There was a moment where 44 thought he might suffocate on the injured shaft that remained lodged between his lips. The sharp ends of the capsules held it in, but The Lord inadvertently saved 44 by tearing itself away from the source of its agony. As the creature writhed on the ground, fighting its own annihilation, 44 spat repeatedly, retching. He was desperate to clear his mouth of the foul residue of both The Lord's blood and any possible lingering poison. 10's buddy scientist had assured him that the poison needed to enter the bloodstream to be fatal, but that didn't mean that it might not make him sick. Especially as 44 was the one and only official test subject.

Gradually, the cries and shouts of The Lord became groans that turned into whimpers that ended in silence. From 44's vantage point, he couldn't see The Lord's face, only its lower legs and feet, twitching slightly. The rest of it was parallel to 44 except it was lying in the opposite direction. Although 44 was fairly certain he'd succeeded, he wanted to know for sure. Because he wasn't

feeling so good all of a sudden and thought he might be in for another surprise. That he might be dying after all. It would be good to know that he'd succeeded before death took him.

Chapter Seven

“You need to stay sharp 13. You’re not going to do your boy any favors by being so worn out you can’t function, can’t fight to your fullest.”

Glaring at 10, he nonetheless knew that his friend was right. Viper 44 had been gone for almost twelve hours and 13 was sick with the terror of what could be happening to him right that minute. Every moment since he’d watched the hatch close on the only man he would ever love. And here he was, useless, not there to protect or to keep him safe.

They were at the camp where Raptor 5’s team and the rogue minions waited for the word to attack. In addition to Silverback 13, Raptor 10, and his scientist buddy—there were about a dozen more soldiers who 10 said could be trusted, who had been just as suspicious of The Commander all along. The pretext for the large group had been that they were there to escort 44 safely to the rendezvous point, due to unusual minion sightings.

By now, Commander 7 knows better.

They were stuck in a very dangerous limbo. If they took off in the ships to be near The Lord’s lair when it was time to move in, they would be tracked by both The Scourge and The Rebellion. If they sat where they were for too long, The Rebellion would find them and the traitorous minions. Then they would have a fight on their hands, and not the one 13 looked forward to. The one that would save his boy and every other human.

“He did it! *Let’s go!*”

The scientist’s shout jarred him from his musings. Grabbing his boomer rifle that could pack the power of an old-fashioned RPG or the precision of a sniper rifle at close range—he practically leapfrogged everyone else to get on to the lead ship. Everything seemed to move in double time, and right as they were launching, another shout rose up.

“Commander 7 is on our ass!”

Fuck. Don’t need this.

The hatches had barely locked shut when they blasted off, the egg shaped ships racing one another to stay ahead of The Commander and to reach The Lord’s lair in time to catch The Scourge unaware. However, if The Commander already knew that they had betrayed The Rebellion, then he would’ve warned The Lord’s space station. The element of surprise had likely been lost.

Even though he realized they still had at least an hour to reach the station The Lord used as his headquarters, 13 was tensed, ready to strike. Ready to end all the bullshit one way or another. Despite 44 being his only thought for the previous several hours, he banished him from his mind. If he didn't concentrate solely on eradicating the enemy, if he allowed himself any twinge of worry for the brave young man who'd risked and possibly already lost his life—then any sacrifice any of them made would have been for nothing.

He was knocked from his reverie by Raptor 10.

“Carter says that his readings indicate that the poison was administered.”

13 scowled, pursing his lips. He had been under the impression that once they'd received the signal from the capsules that they had been deployed, that it meant that the poison had hit its target, that The Lord was dead.

“I don't get it. Wasn't that what he'd meant when he said it had been deployed?”

10 shook his head. “No. It could have meant that the capsules had been discovered and destroyed, or that 44 had accidentally bit down too hard and broken them. Or that he'd tried to bite the target and the capsules were unable to pierce the skin—that they had simply broken against its shell and drained away.”

“Jesus. So what does he mean by the poison being administered?”

His friend appeared to be holding a smile at bay. “It means he's tracked the sensors that are embedded in the poison. They are inside the bloodstream of an alien life form. One that can no longer have the word 'life' attached to it any more. It looks like your boy succeeded.”

My boy. If he's still alive.

Thinking back on the first battle he'd ever had with The Scourge, 13 wondered if the course they had all followed could have been changed had they acted and reacted differently. If the minions that now stood beside them could have reached out then, would they have been able to end the conflict sooner? If his fellow human soldiers and leaders had taken a different course, would the suffering on both sides have been lessened?

Two of their ships had hung back, fighting with Commander 7's vessel, attempting to keep him from interfering with them boarding The Lord's space

station. 13 pressed closer to the oval shaped window. It was only six inches across, just enough for him to view what lay immediately ahead of them. Two of the larger battle ships belonging to their compatriot minions flanked them on either side. 13 watched in fascination as the incinerator rays that had terrified humanity for the last twenty years were trained on The Lord's sanctuary.

Not anymore, you dead motherfucker.

Control was a strange thing. Whenever he'd worked with a submissive man, it had been one of his greatest assets. He stayed in control so that his sub had the freedom to soar. As he readied for the combat ahead—the one that would either save or destroy them all—his control prevented him from giving in to the horrors of battle. If he could find 44, and he was still alive, 13 would keep him. He wouldn't use any control when it came to his love for his boy.

A roar of excitement rose up between them all—humans and minions alike—when the hatch to the landing area was blown apart. They would be able to gain entry, but there would be no barrier between them and the openness of space. He turned to Raptor 10 to voice his worries, but his friend seemed to already be aware of his concerns.

"5 explained to me that once we're inside, the minions can reseal the outer shell. We can dock in the landing area and fan out from there."

"Do we have any word yet on the locations of their former minion allies?"

During the wait back on Earth, the second part of the attack plan had been worked out. They were relying heavily on the ability of their newfound partners to provide them with intel.

"They're tracking them. Fortunately, the landing area is completely clear now. Could mean a couple things. Either the fighters moved away to regroup, or the landing area is now unable to sustain any life."

13 groaned. "Perfect."

"Troops! We're less than sixty seconds from arrival, prepare your weapons and let's take this motherfucker!"

5's words had the desired effect of revving everyone up—shouts, grunts and fist pumps filled the ship as humans and minions alike readied to take out a shared enemy. 13 moved away from the window and pushed his way to the front of the crowd gathering at the opening of the ship. No one bothered to remain buckled in for the landing. Despite all indicators pointing to their way being clear once they touched down, any deterrent to being able to move

quickly was an epically bad idea. They could all be obliterated before they'd even moved out of their seats.

The landing was choppy, ungraceful. Their shared objective to overthrow The Scourge so clear that no one seemed to notice that both species held on to one another to keep from being thrown about the cabin. And then the ramp lowered. It was on.

Am I dead?

It was impossible to discern what was real. The pain was there. The sickness was evident. But it was all contained inside some fuzzy ball that seemed to be wrapped around his entire body like a cocoon. It would be good to be dead. Because he wasn't sure he could ever get over what he'd been through.

Cyrus was wrong. I don't have the strength he thought I did. I'm broken.

Hot tears forced their way past his eyelids and dribbled onto the glass table he was still imprisoned on. That was when he realized he was still alive. His agony at not ever seeing Cyrus again a tangible thing that rushed through his veins, mocking him, reminding him of what he'd sacrificed.

But he'll be safe, Mom and Rebecca will be safe.

When he'd volunteered for the program, he'd known that the likely outcome would be his excruciating death. He didn't have the right to feel sorry for himself. He'd embraced the original mission, then the subsequent one with a full understanding of the risks. However, that knowledge did nothing to eradicate his loss. His misery at dying alone without any of the people he cared about by his side still devastated him.

Drifting, he figured the time was near when his consciousness would cease permanently. With what little he had left of coherent thought, he tried to bring to mind various moments from a happier time. From the only genuine happiness he'd ever experienced in his short life—his time with Cyrus. Washing their clothes in a stream, then splashing one another like kids with the cool water. The first time Cyrus entered him, taking forever to prepare him so that it wouldn't hurt, then bringing him to an explosive orgasm. Cyrus's powerful kisses that filled 44's heart with love. The first session with the flogger that had sent 44 to another place in his head, a place where no one could reach him. Where he was cloaked in comfort.

He held onto those memories so tightly that he was surprised at how real Cyrus's voice was, how close it was to him. It was amazing the way the mind could play tricks—he could even feel the heat of his ex-lover's breath against his skin, his masculine scent heightened by the strong smell of sweat.

Not ex-lover. It's my death and I choose to have him still be mine at the end.

“Logan, please, I'm here. Please wake up.”

That was when Logan knew he was hallucinating. He hadn't heard Cyrus use his real name since before he'd been let go by the man. A gentle hand wiped the hair that was caked on his forehead back from his face.

“Buttercup, I'm begging you, don't give up now. You're strong enough to hold on a little while longer. We're here to help you.”

A wall of pain filled his groin as his balls were released and the blood rushed back into them. He gasped, then groaned. Attempting to move, he hissed when the sting from the cuts in his wrists and ankles were awakened. Strong arms held him still.

“Don't move. You'll hurt yourself more.”

More voices. Movement. Soft kisses against his temple, across his forehead, along his cheek.

Don't be a dream.

He tried to open his eyes, but they were crusted shut. Attempting to speak, to find out if it was all real, the only sound that would come out of him was akin to a strangled croak. More voices surrounded him from all sides, but all he really cared about were the large hands that held him down gently, but firmly. Cyrus's hands.

“Well, Carter? Don't just stand there staring at him, do something!”

“Come on 13, he knows what he's doing. He has to scan him first, make sure The Lord didn't leave any parting gifts inside him that could transfer to the rest of us.”

There was some grumbling. “Fine, but I'm trusting you 10, I don't trust Carter. And don't fucking call me 13 anymore. I'm Cyrus, got it?”

10 chuckled. “Oh, we've got it, chief.”

“Fuck you. I want my boy outta this pesthole.”

I'm alive.

Chapter Eight

It had been a major cluster fuck once they'd stormed the ship, massive chaos as they'd aimed their weapons at their enemies. Their ability to discern the minions who were on their side from the ones that weren't had been next to impossible. But within minutes, it had all changed. As soon as it was clear to the minions on board the space station that their brothers were fighting alongside the humans, it became a brand new game altogether.

It turned out that The Scourge was really only made up of some creepy-ass white creatures that towered in size and in technological advances over the minions. Those who had been perceived as their enemies for so many years were just as enslaved and persecuted as the humans had been. Once they had banded together, it had been rather simple to tear it all down. The fact that the Commander's ship that included him and all his traitorous followers had been blown to bits had only added to the festivities.

No wonder The Lord and his weird buddies stayed up here and away from all the action down on Earth.

Once the enemies had been eliminated, Cyrus had endured a heart-stopping thirty minutes or so as he'd scoured the ship with the scientist Carter, and Raptor 5 and 10 searching for Logan. The unusual walls that sometimes resembled liquid gold and other times water, seemed to also block their scanning capabilities. The instrument that had been able to detect that the poison had been deployed hadn't been able to give the location of its whereabouts within the spacecraft.

When they'd at last entered the room that had contained the bloody, beaten form of his lover and the shriveled shell of The Lord, he'd almost collapsed to the floor in a combination of relief and dread. Relief that Logan had been found, and dread that they might've been too late.

Cradling Logan in his arms as they returned to Earth, Cyrus couldn't stop himself from gazing at him, marveling at how he'd survived in the face of such horror. How he'd succeeded. It meant nothing to him that the others eyed him curiously, no doubt wondering about his and the brave recruit's relationship.

Once Logan had been deemed clear of any contaminants, Carter had placed him under a medically induced coma to allow his body the chance to heal and to save him from what would be days of intolerable pain. Then he'd wrapped

his body in one of the medi-blankets they always carried in the first aid kits for severely wounded soldiers. It was lined in a healing balm to soothe the flesh and once draped around the victim, would keep him at the ideal body temperature.

Cyrus bent down close to Logan's ear, whispering.

"I love you, sweet, sweet boy."

After kissing Logan's brow, he straightened up to see 10 openly staring at him.

"What?"

He hadn't been able to hide his irritation. However, he owed his friend a lot. Everything.

The corners of 10's mouth lifted slightly. "It's gonna be a different world now. Different again. There'll be a lot of birthing pains as people try to figure out who they can trust and whether or not they're really safe." He jerked his head towards the blue creatures on the other side of the cabin. "It won't be easy on them. They'll be viewed with fear and anger."

Cyrus scowled, nodding. All the prejudicial bullshit that had been so much better prior to The Scourge takeover would start anew, no doubt more insidious than ever.

"What are you gonna do?"

Raptor 10 shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe start with going back to my real name. Quit playing soldier."

Cyrus snorted. "As if you would know how to do that." He furrowed his brow. "You'll have to get the rage chip taken out."

Raptor 10—Denny—looked away. "Yeah, maybe. Not sure what I'll do, where I'll go."

There was too much melancholy in his friend's tone, especially after such an all-encompassing victory.

"Hey man, why don't you come with us?"

Denny turned to him, a confused expression on his face. "Us?"

"Yeah, Logan, me and his family. I'm taking them all back to the place in the Sierra's, back to where there's some peace."

"You think he wants that?"

Cyrus resisted the urge to snap at his friend. Or possibly do him bodily harm.

“We belong to each other, it’s that simple.”

“Awfully sure of yourself now aren’t you, chief?”

Just as he was about to yell something nasty and hurtful at his friend, he noted the wicked gleam in Denny’s eyes. He was messing with him.

He grunted. “Fuck you, Denny.”

His friend’s laughter was the first really happy sound he’d heard all day. With it came the sense that there was a genuine future for all of them. For all of humanity and maybe even for the minions. Someday soon, he would want to know the blue beings’ history and how they’d come to be enslaved by The Scourge, how they’d fallen victim to the evil that had almost destroyed mankind. Until then, he would oversee Logan’s healing and prepare the place where they would retreat to once he was better. Where they would live out their lives. Together.

The days had been a combination of weird sensations and disjointed moments. He couldn’t actually say he’d experienced much in the way of pain—likely because his caretakers had kept him suitably drugged all the time. What little he remembered revolved around attempts to get him to sit up, to eat, to take various medications. Salves were rubbed into his skin, his hair was washed, his body sponged down. Those were his most precious memories. Cyrus had done all of that. He only wished he could’ve been more aware when it had happened. So much of everything had been filtered as though it were through a dream.

But he’d been up and about for over a week, his strength gradually returning. When he’d finally become aware of his surroundings, he’d noted that he was in a much larger compartment than the one The Rebellion had kept him in when he’d been in the program. It was Denny who had informed him that it was Cyrus’s quarters. Which of course had led to his next question, where *was* Cyrus?

“He had to take care of something on the outside. He’ll be back in a few days or so.”

Logan hadn’t known what to make of that statement. He vaguely remembered Cyrus whispering things to him when he’d still been under the influence of the meds. He couldn’t bring to mind what the exact words had

been, only that they had given him a sense of peace. But not knowing precisely what was going on and whether Cyrus planned on keeping him once he was better had begun to gnaw at him in the most frustrating of ways.

Which was why he'd decided that there was something he needed to take care of as well.

Right as he'd finished his morning stretches, there was a tapping at the door. Hopefully, it was Denny. Logan had enlisted the only person he felt comfortable with outside of Cyrus to help him with his scheme. Opening the door, Logan couldn't stop the big grin from spreading across his face as he saw what Denny held in his hands.

"I hope you know what you're doing, kid." Denny said it as he passed into the room.

"Thank you Raptor—Denny. I know what I'm doing."

He tried to keep the fluttering in his stomach at bay. There was no doubt in him that Denny knew much more about Cyrus's intentions than he was telling, so in some ways, Logan was launching himself into the unknown with his plan.

"How do you want me to do this?"

Logan couldn't stop the heat from traveling up his neck. He wasn't embarrassed about anything that he and Cyrus had ever done, but it had always been a private thing held sacred between the two of them. That is, until the program had wormed its way in and turned it into a job assignment. Which was why what he was having Denny help him with made him blush. It was back to being personal, something that would only be shared between them from that moment on.

After Denny helps me set everything up.

"Um, I think at the far end of the room. You're pretty sure the drill bit can break through the concrete?"

"Don't worry, kid. I got this."

Logan nodded. "And he'll be back when?"

Denny turned to him, an annoyed expression in his face.

"I told ya. I'm not exactly sure, so you'll have to be prepared to be in this position for a while. I'm not a hundred percent sure that Cyrus won't string me up when he finds out I helped you. Are you sure you're strong enough after everything—"

“I’m fine. Jesus, I was in bed for almost two weeks and pumped full of every drug, vitamin and healing accelerator ever invented. I’ve been working out all week to get my strength back. The only thing that isn’t fine is being stuck in this fucking underground room by myself ever since I first woke up.”

He was still rather cranky that Cyrus hadn’t been there when he’d finally completely regained his senses. Denny had assured him that it was only because what Cyrus had needed to do was very important. Yet whatever was so crucial remained a mystery, as Denny had refused to give him any other details. At least he’d been able to take some meals and spend some time with his mom and sister, grateful that they’d come through everything relatively unscathed.

“Look, take pity on me. I don’t need that overgrown pile of muscles coming after my sorry ass because he thinks I manhandled you.”

Logan couldn’t help but snort out some laughter.

Denny frowned. “Yeah, it’s all so hilarious. Especially since he’d die to save you.”

The levity of the moment passed as they both fell into silence, the implications of Denny’s joking comment too real in light of what they’d all just barely lived through.

Denny cleared his throat. “Yeah, so let me get this hooked up real quick, then I’ll be ready for you.”

Pressing his lips together, Logan nodded and removed his clothes.

It was great to be able to travel in one of the solar vehicles since no one worried about air strikes any longer. There were still reports of resistance either from minions not trusting humans or vice-versa and some humans and minions didn’t know what else to do with themselves if they weren’t battling it out—it had become their entire reason for being. But in general, everyone had put up with enough fighting for so many years that they were genuinely over it. The joy of not having to hide in fear constantly and being able to have some semblance of a normal existence was more than enough to keep most people busy.

Which was what had occupied Cyrus’s time for the entire week. It had hurt like hell to have to leave Logan before he’d fully awakened, but he’d wanted to be able to surprise him by taking him to their new home immediately. There’d been a combination of repairing what they’d left behind, and building a

separate structure for Logan's mother and sister. Cyrus knew he'd need plenty of alone time with Logan.

He approached the cave opening that was no longer as concealed as it had once been—it was no longer necessary. Precautions were still taken and people weren't unnecessarily careless, but it nowhere near touched the anxiety levels prior to eradicating The Scourge. He went inside the darkened cavern, and punched in the security codes. Until everyone had dispersed to make their own way, the normal procedures would remain in place. It was uncertain when or where a new authority or government would take over, or what form it might take, but Cyrus was completely uninterested in being a part of that anymore. He wanted his boy, his boy's family and a quiet existence in the mountains.

His blood rushed through him, amping up his energy levels. It was excitement. Logan would be better, physically and mentally. There would no doubt be some psychological issues to overcome, but Cyrus would be there by Logan's side through everything. His only fear was that Logan would reject him, wouldn't want him anymore. It would kill him, but Cyrus was prepared to take Logan and his family to their sanctuary and live separate just to insure Logan's safety. He would do whatever was necessary to make it up to him after breaking his original promise to protect and care for him.

He spotted Denny coming towards him in the main passageway that led to Cyrus's quarters. He immediately noted the startled expression on his friend's face before he recovered his composure.

Cyrus narrowed his eyes. "What's up?"

There was a nervous chuckle right before Denny answered. "Nothing, chief, nothing at all. Just didn't think you'd be back so soon."

"Oh?"

What the fuck is going on?

Cyrus hadn't been one of the few survivors of the Rebellion's program because he was an idiot. He knew when things were off.

"Yeah, so, see ya later."

Cyrus grabbed Denny's arm in a punishing grip as he tried to pass by him in the hall.

"Ow, the fuck?"

"Is Logan all right?"

Denny sighed. “Yes. Logan is perfectly fine. Except for the part where he’s wondering where the hell you disappeared off to.”

“You didn’t say anything did you?”

He still hadn’t let go of Denny’s arm and was aware that his tone had come across as somewhat menacing. Denny solved that by jerking his arm from Cyrus’s grasp. Of course, he’d loosened his hold anyway.

“I said nothing. Now quit practicing your advanced asshole skills on me and go see him already.”

Cyrus grunted. “Yeah, sorry. Thanks for watching over him while I was gone. I mean it.”

Denny punched his shoulder.

“I could tell. I’ll see ya later when you’re less bitchy.”

“Fuck you.”

“Like I said...”

Cyrus watched as Denny took off down the hallway, waving behind him with one hand as he sauntered away.

It’s time for me to see my boy.

That was going to be a part of his discussion with Logan as well. He wanted Logan with him and wanted to pick up where they’d left off. Cyrus would gladly accept all of the blame for leaving Logan to fend for himself. Even though he hadn’t exactly tossed him into the wilds—making sure that he was with a safe group that was under protection—he’d still broken his promise to be his caretaker, lover and partner. His gut clenched at the memory of Logan’s stricken face when Cyrus had told him he had to go. Cyrus would forever regret his decision from that day.

And there was the other thing. The horrific way he’d treated Logan during the program training. Oh sure, he’d told himself that it was necessary, couldn’t be helped. Logan had even egged him on, said not to take it easy on him. Denny and all of the others of The Rebellion had praised him for what a great job he’d done with Logan.

However, none of those facts changed the basic truth—he’d beaten, tortured and mind-fucked the most important person to him in the world. He wasn’t sure if he could overcome that reality in his mind, but he refused to make it all about

him. Logan had enough to deal with from the trauma he'd endured, and it was imperative that Cyrus remain focused on his boy. He would have to face his own internal shit by himself. And hope Logan didn't hate him for what he'd done.

Arriving at the door to his apartment, he tapped in the entrance code, then swung the heavy door open. He'd been about to say something but the air was stolen from his lungs. Logan was on his knees, naked, eyes cast down, hooked to the ceiling by a chain that was attached to a heavy leather collar buckled around his neck. Cyrus swallowed, trying to form an intelligible thought. His eyes tracked the length of chain that ran from the hook in the ceiling down to Logan's neck, then trailed off alongside him.

"Logan..."

"Sir. May I speak freely?"

It was jarring. Logan had slipped right back into their previous dynamic with one another.

"Yes. Please. Look at me when you speak."

His tone hadn't taken on the edge it did when he was in Dom mode, primarily because he was still trying to wrap his brain around whatever was happening. Because the scene before him was nothing at all like what he'd expected when he returned. If anything, he'd been prepared for Logan's anger, his resistance to the idea of them ever being together again. His hurt. Logan's submission had been the last scenario he'd envisioned.

Logan slowly raised his head, locking his wide eyes on Cyrus, holding nothing back. He appeared so fragile, so delicate, yet Cyrus knew better than anyone how much strength Logan held within him. How much power. He watched as Logan swallowed, seemingly trying to work up his nerve.

"I belong to you, Sir. I'll never belong to anyone else, so if you won't keep me, then know that I'll always be alone."

Shock overtook him at Logan's words. It was such an unexpected gift. Cyrus dropped to his knees, making Logan startle a bit.

"Of course I'll keep you, there could never be anyone else. But only if you can forgive me for how I sent you away before." Cyrus paused, his own nerves threatening to overpower him. "And for what I put you through for the program."

Logan nodded, never breaking his gaze with Cyrus.

“That was when you were Silverback 13 and I was Viper 44. Those people don’t exist anymore. It’s only Cyrus and Logan now.”

A well of emotion swept through Cyrus, the impact of Logan’s words almost derailing his composure.

Logan continued. “And I forgave you a long time ago for the other stuff. After all that happened to me—the program, the training, the ship... I understand now that you were only trying to save me from all of that. Protect me. All I could see last year was how much I missed you, wanted you. Needed you.”

“Oh, Logan.”

Cyrus caressed Logan’s cheek even as the impulse to be tender with him made him uncomfortable.

“I needed you too. I still do.”

“Then help me soar.”

Cyrus’s breath hitched. He had actually considered the very real possibility that Logan would never ever again want to experience any kind of pain. Cyrus had been more than willing to forgo that part of their relationship if that was what his lover required.

“We don’t have to—”

“I do. It’s as much a part of us as anything else is. I *need* it. But only from you.”

“Yes. Only me. You’re mine.”

“I’m yours.”

Cyrus grabbed Logan’s throat, using his thumb to stroke the light scruff on Logan’s chin. Logan’s eyes rolled back and he closed the lids, melting into Cyrus’s commanding touch. Cyrus took Logan’s mouth in a bruising kiss. It was quick and rough, Cyrus holding Logan’s head still as he worked his lips over and over against Logan’s, his tongue jabbing inside him, tasting his sweet essence for the first time in over a year. When Cyrus finally broke the kiss, they were both out of breath, their chests rising and falling almost in time with one another. Cyrus’s cock twitched at the sight of Logan’s swollen lips, still moist, so enticing.

Cyrus rose, anxious to begin. Because they were in the privacy of their quarters, Cyrus didn’t have anything with him other than his own flogger, the

one he'd made especially for Logan when they'd been together. It suddenly dawned on him why Denny had acted so strange earlier—Logan never could have put the chain in place on his own.

Not sure how I feel about that.

It was a tough call. He couldn't decide whether to be territorial or grateful. Probably both. He opened the top drawer of the small dresser that all the leading soldiers had been issued when they'd received their compartment assignments. He noted the bottle of lube and the dildo. He wouldn't need a fake dick for Logan anymore. The flogger next to the other items in the drawer had been a sentimental object that he'd kept from their old life. It had been almost too painful to use it during the program training sessions, but he hadn't been able to help himself. It had been his sneaky way of recapturing some of what they'd had. What he'd thought they'd never have again.

And now here he is.

He had to get back in control in order to be in the present for his boy. Snapping the flogger, he approached Logan, then stood before him with his feet shoulder width apart. Logan had one knee drawn up to his chest, his arms wrapped around it, his head lowered. Cyrus hesitated, unsure whether Logan was actually prepared to follow through with any pain play. It occurred to Cyrus that they hadn't mentioned one of the things that was essential in giving Logan the necessary control over their exchange.

“Do you remember your safeword?”

There was an audible sigh from Logan as he eased back into his kneeling position, his shoulders back, his gaze on the floor. It even appeared as though he were trying to conceal a smile.

“Yes, Sir. Poppies.”

Logan had explained to him soon after he'd been rescued by Cyrus that the bright orange flowers growing wild in the fields below the foothills during the spring had always been like a balm to his soul. An indicator that there was still beauty to be found in life, to not give up.

“Poppies.” Cyrus had said it barely above a whisper.

Strolling slowly over to Logan, he played the tendrils of the whip softly across Logan's skin, hypnotized by the way the dark suede strips contrasted with Logan's pale coloring, the way they fell along the curves of his shoulders as if they were attempting to embrace him. Then Cyrus traced them down

Logan's back, his prick hardening as he noted the goose bumps rising on Logan's body, followed by a tiny shiver.

“So fucking beautiful.”

Resting his hand on the top of Logan's head, he allowed himself the luxury of petting him a few times before he clutched a fistful of his shaggy brown hair. He pulled his head back until Logan lifted his gaze to meet his.

“I want you to stand up, then turn around, feet spread wide, hands above your head and braced against the wall.”

“Yes, Sir.”

It was perfect. The dynamic was there, but not the same as it had been. After all they'd been through together it was deeper, more real. Cyrus ran his hand slowly down the length of Logan's back, grateful that the healing balms had all but erased the evidence of Logan's abuse from The Lord. His boy's skin was soft under Cyrus's calloused fingers, as alluring to Cyrus as was every other minute feature of the young man.

Once Logan was in place, Cyrus continued his sensuous exploration with the flogger. This time he was able to tease Logan's perfect little ass, tickle the backs of his thighs, taunt him between his legs. Logan's body language indicated he was relaxed, comfortable with Cyrus and the situation. His limbs weren't locked and his shoulders weren't bunched, he appeared accepting of everything that was happening to him. Cyrus was certain Logan was ready.

The first series of strikes were quick in succession, yet only moderately intense. He twirled his wrist as he whisked the tails of the whip from the top of Logan's back, down his torso, then back up again. On his third pass, he increased the power of his ministrations, coaxing a series of low moans out of Logan. After completing that grouping, he angled to one side in order to facilitate his next move, a series of hits aimed at Logan's tantalizing backside.

But it was Logan's straining erection leaking with arousal that captured Cyrus's attention. It filled him with lust, but also with relief. A strange combination that nonetheless allowed him to fully embrace their renewed journey together. Swatting Logan continuously, he ramped up the intensity, careful to remain attuned to Logan's responses, even as his own stiff flesh pressed uncomfortably against the fabric of the tight pants he wore.

He watched in awe as Logan gave entirely of himself, readily accepting each series of lashes, lips parted in ecstasy. Cyrus paused once the redness in

Logan's skin became more pronounced. His roughened hands skated over Logan's heated butt cheeks, the compulsion to prod the matching dimples at the small of Logan's back too tempting to resist. He allowed himself a smile, as he was positioned in a way that Logan couldn't see him.

Pressing his body lightly against Logan's frame he nuzzled his neck, inhaling him in, the tip of his tongue flicking out for a small taste. Then he spoke in a low voice next to Logan's ear.

“Once more, then I take your ass.”

A tiny whimper escaped Logan's lips, his back arching. Teasing Cyrus. It was clear that Logan knew he had the upper hand. It would take a while for Cyrus to balance them out, but truthfully, he looked forward to the work that awaited them.

With a swish through the air his implement splayed across Logan's back, bringing forth a small cry. He increased the pace of his movements, his strikes. There was a specific sound, a certain moan Logan made that Cyrus recognized. It indicated to Cyrus that Logan had fallen into a submissive state of contentment. Logan had arrived at that place.

After tossing the flogger onto the bed, he grabbed Logan, enveloping himself around the much smaller man's body. Logan let out a gasp as Cyrus used his hands to explore him freely, tweaking his nipples, squeezing and kneading him everywhere. He encircled Logan's cock with his fist and his lover cried out.

“Not yet. You'll wait for me. Keep your hands on the wall and your face forward.”

Grasping Logan's throat with his other hand, he maintained his grip on Logan's heated erection, controlling him that way as Logan writhed under his commanding touch. The ability to give Logan unending pleasure was the only thing Cyrus ever wanted to live for again.

Letting go, he slid down Logan's frame until he'd dropped to his knees. He bit the fleshy part of one butt cheek as he moved the cool chain to the front of Logan. There was a gasp and Cyrus wasn't sure whether it was in response to the bite, the cold metal or both. He only knew that he was thrilled by Logan's every little response to what Cyrus did to him.

He clutched Logan's sweet bottom and spread him wide. Cyrus groaned at the sight of Logan's tiny pink hole, his balls tightening. His wish was that their

first time back together could last for a long time, but his need spoke to him differently. Rubbing his nose on the inside of Logan's crease, he drew in his slightly musky scent. He kissed the puckered opening, sucking then licking, delighting in the soft noises Logan made as he wriggled against Cyrus's face. Stiffening the end of his tongue, he breached the tight ring of muscle and pushed his way in, fucking him that way until he was certain Logan wouldn't be able to hold back an orgasm.

He abruptly stopped, Logan letting out an agonized moan, gasping for breath.

"Sir, please, I need you inside me."

"I need you too."

He stood, then walked over to the drawer that held the lubricant. After popping open the cap, he allowed a liberal amount to dribble onto his palm. The idea of exploring Logan's ass with his mouth and fingers everyday held more appeal than anything else he could envision. In some ways, stroking Logan internally filled him with more desire than actually fucking him.

With his clean hand, Cyrus combed his fingers through Logan's hair as he nibbled at his ear lobe. Using the other, he searched between Logan's crack to find his entrance. He spread the moisture around Logan's wrinkled hole as he massaged the opening, aware of Logan's acquiescence to him. Licking his way down his lover's neck until he reached the crook of his shoulder, he popped one digit in to Logan's asshole, pushing up to his first knuckle. At the same time, he suckled the delicate skin in the dip of his clavicle, purposely making a mark there.

Cyrus stroked him with his index finger—sinking in deeper each time, searching for Logan's gland. As soon as he glanced over it, he pressed down, pegging him gently. Logan jerked, inhaling sharply. He dissolved into a desperate sounding moan, shoving himself onto Cyrus's digit that was impaled inside him, clenching his ass cheeks.

"That's it, take what you want. Are you ready for more?"

"Unh, please, Sir, please..."

Cyrus slipped his middle finger in next to the other and twisted them within Logan's greedy channel. Picking up the pace as he finger fucked his boy, his cock leaked, balls aching, the need to be inside Logan stronger than he'd ever thought possible. But he wanted to see Logan's face when they came.

After pulling out of Logan's passage, he reached for the buckle on the heavy leather collar, yanking at the thick strap to get it open. To get it off Logan's neck so that he could embrace him and take him to bed. As soon as Logan was freed, he gathered the small man into his arms and carried him over to the mattress. He shoved the flogger aside and lay him down. Cyrus tried to straighten in order to remove his clothes, but Logan held fast to him as if he were afraid to let him go, silent tears spilling onto his cheeks.

"Shh, don't cry."

Cyrus swiped at the small drops of moisture on Logan's face.

"We're together now. Everything else is done. Viper 44 and Silverback 13 no longer exist, remember? It's only Logan and Cyrus."

"Y-yes. Yes, Sir."

Relaxing, Logan let his arms fall away from Cyrus, but he stared at him openly. Cyrus permitted it. It had never occurred to Cyrus to view what they did together as anything other than a magnificent sexual release. He'd always craved Logan physically more than anyone he'd ever been with in his almost forty years, but he no longer saw their fucking as a mere release. He saw it as making love.

Once he'd discarded his garments, he allowed himself a moment to enjoy Logan's nude form. Still too thin owing to his recent ordeal, he was nonetheless stunning. Long limbed, perfectly formed torso, with an innocent male beauty that imprinted itself on Cyrus's consciousness, demanded his reverence.

"Open yourself to me."

Logan lifted his legs, then held them up by the backs of his knees. Without looking away, Cyrus reached for the bottle of lube once more. He squeezed some onto his hand and rubbed his shaft, slicking himself up thoroughly.

"Hold your sac up and out of the way."

Logan did as he was told and Cyrus poured more of the cool liquid along Logan's crack. Logan jumped slightly as the moisture trickled down his crease, his asshole clenching and unclenching in response.

Fuck.

Cyrus lowered himself over Logan, using a hand to brace himself on one side of Logan's head and the other to grasp his own throbbing prick. He gazed down between them as he prodded his cockhead against Logan's twitching hole. Cyrus wanted in so bad, but he also didn't want to rush things. Even

though they'd enjoyed hours of rough play and raw fucks when they'd been together before, he needed to try and physically express to Logan what he didn't have the ability to say out loud. That Logan was all that mattered to him, that he cherished him, that he would die without him.

Rubbing his swollen erection in the slickness between Logan's butt cheeks, he could tell that Logan was becoming impatient, anxious for their coupling. Cyrus paused at Logan's opening and pressed his dick against the resistant muscle of Logan's asshole. As he eased himself forward, Logan pushed out and Cyrus watched as the large knob of his cock was swallowed up. With a gasp, he threw his head back, the slick heat of Logan's channel tightly wrapped around his stiff flesh bordering on too much sensation.

Without a thought, he instinctively thrust balls deep, pulling out, then slamming in again. He dropped onto his elbows so he could capture Logan's lips with his own. Cyrus kissed Logan with all that he had, licking inside his mouth, suckling his tongue, scraping teeth along his chin, then latching onto his lips once more. At the same time, he buried himself deep inside Logan, each long stroke bringing them closer to what Cyrus had missed for so long.

Sweating and grunting, the speed of his rutting increased, his nuts smacking loudly against Logan. The tingling in his spine signaled his imminent release and he wanted Logan there with him. Placing the brunt of his weight on one elbow, he reached between them with his opposite hand, searching out Logan's rigid shaft, ready for them both to fly. He encircled it, and Logan mewled against his mouth, a pleading sort of a sound. Cyrus felt the first pulses in Logan's ass and knew the sticky heat would erupt from Logan at any moment.

He broke the kiss but stayed close. "Yes..."

Logan yelled as warmth gushed over Cyrus's hand, spurting between them. Even as Cyrus cried out in the throes of his own orgasm, he kept his eyes fixed on Logan. Watching every little expression cross Logan's face as he worked through his ecstasy, Cyrus was lost to his boy. Would never want anyone or anything else.

They stayed joined for as long as Cyrus could manage it, not moving, allowing their breathing to return to normal. Cyrus's cock softened and slipped from Logan's ass, a trail of semen leaking out as he repositioned himself at Logan's side. He couldn't stop staring at Logan's lovely face. Without breaking his gaze, he lifted the hand that Logan had come all over and licked it clean. Logan bit his bottom lip as he viewed Cyrus's actions, his eyes widening a bit. It had Cyrus's dick making a valiant attempt at coming back to life.

He bent down to leisurely kiss Logan's swollen lips, sweeping Logan's mouth over and over with his tongue, reluctant to ever stop. When he did, it was only for them to catch their breath.

Oh, yes. I want more.

He could see that his sweet lover was drifting off. It was okay, he could wait. They would have forever from then on. Sweeping Logan's tousled hair away from his face, he couldn't help but smile when Logan's eyelids fluttered open.

"Are you okay? I should rub you down with some healing balm."

"Mmmm, yes, Sir. Very okay. And I'm not that sore..." Logan yawned, then snapped his mouth shut as if he were embarrassed.

Cyrus chuckled. "Don't worry, get some sleep now. I want you again once you've rested *and* after I've rubbed you down. That clear?"

Logan nodded sleepily. He appeared ready to shut his eyes again, but they widened instead.

"Sir?"

"Hmm?"

"Where did you go this past week?" What looked like a flash of concern passed over Logan's face.

Cyrus caressed Logan's cheek.

"I had to take care of our home, it's been left untended for too long."

There was a catch in Logan's breathing. "You mean... Where we were, I mean, our place from before? The mountains?"

"Yes, and I started on a new structure where your mother and Rebecca can stay. Is that all right?"

Logan's bottom lip trembled, his words coming out wobbly. "Y-yes. More than all right." He scrunched his eyebrows together. "Really?"

Cyrus couldn't hold back a laugh. "Yes my precious boy, really."

He gathered Logan to him, hugging him tightly. When he released Logan from the embrace, he still kept one arm cradled around him. He saw that Logan was regarding him, something else obviously on his mind.

"Ask me anything you want Logan. This is the beginning of our new life together and I want you to share in every aspect of it."

“Okay. Will it be like it was before? Will you still be my Dom?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes. I want it for always.”

“Then you have it. Always.”

Logan threw his arms around Cyrus's neck and they held one another for a long while. Once they relaxed against the pillow, Logan went limp in his arms as sleep took him. Cyrus listened to Logan's even breathing for a long time before he drifted off to a place where there were large fields of bright orange poppies surrounded by snowcapped mountains. He was with Logan, and together, they soared.

The End

Author Bio

M/M Erotic Romance author Morticia Knight enjoys a good saucy tale—after all, who doesn't? Since she loves several genres, you may find your heroes in a contemporary, historical, paranormal or sci-fi setting. One of her passions is bringing people's fantasies to life on the page, because life is too short for even one boring moment. Her stories are volcanic in heat, deep in emotion, and sprinkled with doses of humor.

When not indulging in her obsession for books, she loves the outdoors, film and music. The Pacific Northwest is the ideal spot to enjoy both hiking and beachcombing. Once upon a time she was the singer in an indie rock band that toured the West Coast and charted on U.S. college radio. She now resides on the northern coast of Oregon, where the constant rain and fog remind her of visits to family in England and Scotland when she was a child.

She is currently working on the Gin & Jazz series about the glitz and glamour of 1920's Hollywood and additional installments of the Uniform Encounters series.

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SOMEBODY NICE!

By Raine O'Tierney

Photo Description

A man stares at the camera, a hint of a smirk on his lips. His stubble-covered chin is tilted slightly down, and he has intense brown eyes. His black, gray, and white checkered shirt is open revealing his collarbone and a bit of chest. He wears a fisherman's cap, hiding his hair. Only his ears peek out. Freckles cover his brow, cheeks, and chest. There's an old scar on his left cheek.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

NewYorkDating.com Profile

Name: Danny

Age: 35

Location: New York City

Sexuality: Male seeking Male

Looking for: a nice person! Who loves dogs! And children!

About Me

This is Danny, he is a very nice person and he is very funny, but I think he is lonely. He helped me when my mom wanted to sell me to a reality show and now I live with him and I wanted to do something back for him so I want to find someone for him, because he has only me and Bunny, that's his dog, who is really big. And I'm 7 years old and Danny is 35, which is really old, but that doesn't matter he looks younger. Miss Portwood, my teacher said I need to say what Danny likes to do and he likes to walk with Bunny and work out and play football with me and Bunny and he works also, I think he is a police officer or something, he has a really cool car! And he has a ring in his nipple, which I think is really ouch, but he says people like it. I don't understand why but Danny says I need to be older but I'm already 7.

Hugs, Melissa

Sincerely,

Vera

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: coming out, family, first time, law enforcement, librarians, men with children, men with pets, virgins

Word Count: 18,608

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SOMEBODY NICE!

By Raine O'Tierney

Chapter 1

“I’m not going to let her go!” Melissa pleaded, her blue eyes shimmering. “I’ll hold on tight and she won’t get away from me, I promise, Danny!”

“No way,” Danny said. “She’s twice your weight, kiddo. If she gets excited and tries to run, she’d take your arms off.”

Melissa’s pout came out in full force, and she met his eyes in the rearview mirror, throwing her arms around Bunny’s thick, fuzzy neck. “I *never* get to walk her.”

“Yeah, life’s hard.”

Melissa put her face into the Rottweiler’s black fur, mumbling and muttering—probably about how unfair and awful Danny was. He gave her a full two minutes to voluntarily emerge from the pout before he bribed:

“Wipe the dog fur off your lip and you can pick what we buy at the Treat Bar.”

She immediately lifted her head off of Bunny’s back, and she giggled as the dog gave her a sloppy kiss.

“Can we get all green bones?”

“If you think Bunny would like all green bones.”

In the end, Danny held the leash as Melissa led the charge into the pet store. She skipped ahead of him, giggling and twirling, nearly running headlong into the door. He caught her at the last second, and pulled her away from a concussion. Unfazed, she ran ahead toward the long row of clear plastic bins, filled with gourmet dog treats. Above them, a sign read *Treat Bar* and it was covered in multicolored paw prints.

Bunny whimpered, anxious for a treat. She snuffled at one lid, knocking it ajar with her nose. Danny watched Melissa eyeing each set of treats, deciding with the seriousness of an appellate court judge what Bunny would like best. He was not, however, so attentive to the little girl that he missed the intense stare being directed at him.

Danny glanced out of the corner of his eye, and a grin quirked his lips.

Young, dark-haired Milo Swaisbrick half-hid behind the endcap of Aisle Four, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his tweed jacket. He tossed his head to the side, beckoning Danny to follow.

“Hey, Melissa? I’m going to look at something on the next aisle, all right?”

She nodded, stepping over to the next bin.

“You want me to hold Bunny while you’re looking?”

“Nice try, kiddo.”

He found Milo standing in between the rows of dog bones and the leashes. He grinned sheepishly as Danny approached with Bunny.

“Hiding?”

“It’s just... *Melissa*,” he whispered. And then, so adorable that Danny almost couldn’t stand it, he stood on his tiptoes and planted a hurried, off-center kiss on Danny’s lips, withdrawing quickly before Danny could reciprocate. The movement piqued Bunny’s interest, and the dog butted her head against Milo’s legs, eager for her own attention. The younger man bent down and scratched behind her ears, much to the pleasure of the Rottweiler.

“We could get together for more than five minutes at a time if you would just come out and meet the kid. I could introduce you?”

Milo’s eyes went wide behind his black-rimmed glasses and he quickly shook his head. “I already know Melissa.”

“You work at her *school*, it’s not the same as knowing her.” Danny teased and tempted with a wink. “I’ll even call you my ‘boyfriend’.”

“We... we haven’t moved there yet.”

“I know,” Danny said, unperturbed, “but have you ever tried to explain ‘just dating’ to a seven-year-old? C’mon, I swear it won’t hurt.”

But Milo looked like he might literally run away, and Danny supposed it was a miracle that the school librarian, ten years his junior, had even responded to the text inviting him for a “quick meet-up” at the pet store.

“Well, will you at least say ‘hi’ as my friend?”

“It might be weird at school,” Milo said quickly. “And...”

Danny sighed and reached out for Milo’s hand. Hesitantly, the other man took it and when Danny tugged him forward, Milo stumbled into him. He breathed in, savoring the scent of his secret not-quite-boyfriend.

“You’re trouble, you know that?”

“I know,” Milo murmured.

“I want to be able to spend more than five minutes with you here and there.”

“Me too,” he agreed.

“I still don’t get it,” Danny pressed, “your mom knows, your friends know, even a couple of the teachers know, but you’re scared of coming out to a seven-year-old?”

Milo frowned. “I just...”

“Need time.”

“I’ll...” Milo started hesitantly, “I’ll say ‘hi’ to Melissa as the librarian.”

A warmth spread through Danny at the nervous man’s tiny—*miniscule* even—baby step toward coming out to Danny’s little girl.

Melissa looked up as the men rounded the corner with the energetic Rottweiler in tow. She had filled one of the bags so full of treats that she couldn’t even get it closed with the nearby ribbons.

“I think Bunny will like these, Danny!” And then her smile spread and she cried, “Mr. Swaisbrick? What are you doing here?”

“I’m... buying cat food.”

“You have a cat?” Melissa asked. “We have a dog. This is our dog—her name is Bunny. Can I give her one of the treats now, Danny?”

Bunny pawed at the bag Melissa held, looking back over her doggie-shoulder so that the whites of her eyes showed. It was one of her most adorable begs, but Danny wasn’t falling for it.

“Not until we’ve paid for them.”

“How come you aren’t at the library?” she asked, putting a hand on her hip as if she was offended to see her school’s librarian anywhere except the library.

“It’s Sunday,” he reminded her quietly, as awkward as she was impatient.

Her mouth formed a little ‘O’ and then she said brightly, “Danny, this is Mr. Swaisbrick and he works in the library at our school and he’s really nice and he checks out our books for us.”

Milo smiled shyly. It was the perfect moment to tell her that Milo was someone who would be in their lives. Instead, he shook Milo’s hand, teasing the skin of Milo’s knuckles with his thumb. When Melissa informed them she was going to get another bag, Danny seized his opportunity.

“See. You guys exchanged words and,” his voice dropped low and he leaned in so that his mouth was only an inch away from Milo’s ear, “she has no clue that you and I’ve been...” He trailed off, loving the way Milo’s cheeks turned a brighter shade of red.

“What do you think about Mr. Swaisbrick?” Danny asked when they were in the car with two thirty-pound bags of fancy-ass dog food for the spoiled Rottie and three small baggies filled with dog treats—all green. He imagined what Milo would do if he were in the car to hear the question. He’d probably slap both hands over Danny’s mouth. He’d be so afraid that Melissa might *figure it out* that he’d panic. For a school librarian, the guy was damn uncertain around kids.

Or maybe just Melissa.

Melissa was smiling and sticking her tongue out at Bunny. The dog tried to lick it before she pulled back. She glanced at Danny and shrugged. “He’s really nice. But I like Miss Portwood better.”

Danny’s lips quirked and he glanced over his shoulder as he maneuvered the car out of the parking spot. It was still early enough that city traffic wouldn’t be too bad.

“Yeah, but librarians are cool, right?”

“I do like the library,” Melissa agreed after a minute. “What do you think about Mr. Swaisbrick, Danny?”

Fuck. He’d promised. He never should have promised. But there was that first date and that first breathless kiss in the alley next to the restaurant, when he’d asked Milo if he wanted to go back to his apartment for coffee. Milo had blushed and begged, “*But Melissa... Promise you won’t tell her yet.*”

Damn delicious lips tricking him into making promises he only wanted to break.

“I think he’s cool,” Danny told her. *Think he’s cool, think he’s sexy, think he’s so cute I want to pounce on him every time I see him. Can’t wait to get him alone so we can finally—*

“Danny, I think you need a girlfriend.”

That came completely out of left field, as was the way of the always-thinking seven-year-old. Danny frowned.

“What?”

“Don’t you want a girlfriend, Danny?” Melissa shrugged dramatically, lifting both shoulders all the way up to her ears, and Bunny chose that moment to sigh loudly in the child’s lap. They were a pair.

“Why would I want a girlfriend?”

He’d dated a couple of women since Melissa had come to live with him, but it had been a while.

“So you’re not lonely.” Seven-year-old wisdom. *Lonely? Really?*

“I’m not lonely, kiddo. We’ve got each other, right? That’s good enough.”

He caught her attempt to raise an eyebrow in the rearview mirror.

Chapter 2

Things were finally quiet for the day. Milo Swaisbrick had sorted three carts of books at the desk, but he'd had no time to shelve them. He'd given database classes to the fifth graders that morning and then facilitated a standardized test in the afternoon, which not only meant he had to rove, making certain no one was cheating, but also that he couldn't roll the squeaky carts around putting up books.

Then there was a rash of kids right before the bell rang, all wanting to check out books, and—almost as if they'd planned it—all needing help finding special titles, or having blocked accounts, or wanting assistance with research questions.

Now he was walking the shelves, replacing books, straightening and ordering the general chaos that came with working in a school library. He liked it, though. Putting order to chaos. It was a form of meditation for him.

He switched around some George Washington biographies that had been pulled off the shelves by eager hands and filed back incorrectly. He was scheduled to work a Saturday next month—maybe he could do an inventory and find books the catalog said were missing. He'd once found a small paperback that was supposedly lost in 1997, pushed back between two shelves. In a public library, the records would have eventually been deleted. At St. Vincent's Academy, they had notes about fines from the sixties.

If only the head librarian, Mrs. Anderson, would retire...

The woman was obsessed with saving every book. *This can be re-bound, Milo!* she insisted. Yeah, it could, but it was called *Will the U.S.A. Ever Go to the Moon?* Binding was the least of its issues. Milo had plans for the head librarian position, which, he knew, was cocky. But he was banking on getting it. And when he did, the first thing he would do would be to weed the reference section.

"Excuse me. I need your help, please."

Milo turned his head, straightening from where he'd crouched in front of the biographies. His smile froze in place. Melissa Goode—the little girl Danny was fostering—stood in front of him in her gold and purple St. Vincent's uniform. Her hair was parted into two braids, though curls had come loose, and it seemed like she'd lost one of her ribbons, replacing it instead with a rubber

band. Milo imagined Danny fixing her hair in the morning, the act so sweet and paternal that he flushed at the thought.

“M-Melissa.” Damn. He hadn’t meant to stutter.

Her face brightened and she smiled at him. “You remember my name!” This seemed to delight the child to her core, and it eased some of the tension inside his heart.

“Are you looking for a book?” Small favors that he managed to keep his voice level.

“I need your assistance getting on the Internet.” He was surprised by how well-spoken she was relative to her grade. She flashed him a brilliant smile and said, “I’m in Miss Portwood’s Advanced Group on Tuesdays and Thursdays and we have permission to get on and look at *Amazing Animals of the World* and *MUZZY Online* and *National Geographic Kids* during class. But I’m not supposed to go to any other sites alone. Danny says and Miss Portwood says.”

“Well, what site are you wanting to go to?” He guided her toward the front desk, expecting that she needed to know the exports of Belize or what language they spoke in Zimbabwe. His brain was full of elementary school information.

“New York Dating dot com.” She smiled radiantly as she said this, trotting along. He’d just come around the desk when he stopped.

Milo spent his days helping kids find books. Some kids were shy and had to be coaxed out of their shells, some wanted to talk his ear off, some were smart-asses, and some were precocious. All day, every day, he heard things that made him cock an eyebrow, but this was a first. She didn’t seem to be teasing, either. In fact, she looked earnest. He couldn’t help it, he laughed.

Immediately, her sunny smile faded. She looked upset, and he regretted making her frown.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just... What? *Why?* Why do you need to get on a dating website?”

“It’s for Danny.”

“Danny.”

“Danny’s my friend—do you remember? I live with him. And I think he’s lonely because he only has me and Bunny—you met her at the store. Danny said she could be mine, too, after I had to stop living with my mom when I was four. And I heard Miss Portwood telling Mrs. Snyder that she was thinking about going on New York Dating dot com because she’s really lonely.”

Well, there was one thing for certain, the kid knew how to talk.

“And I asked Miss Portwood what it was and she said that it’s for people to meet other people, but you have to say what you like to do and other things about yourself. So I wrote this.”

She dropped her purple and pink backpack to the ground and started digging through it for a crumpled sheet of loose-leaf paper which—when she found it—she thrust triumphantly in the air.

“Here it is! I wrote this during free time!” She smiled very proudly as she stood and smoothed it out against the clear top of the desk. Graphite smeared across the page, but she didn’t seem to care. “These are all the things I want Danny’s new friend to know about him.”

Milo read through the list as best he could. Despite being in Miss Portwood’s advanced class, Melissa wasn’t the best speller.

Danny is a nice person. Danny is very funny and I like him a lot! I'm 7 years old and my name is Melissa. He is very old. Danny is 35 years old. He doesn't look like he is too old so don't worry. Danny likes football. Sometimes we play football in Central Park. And Danny has a big big dog. She is a rottweiler and she can knock me down but she is not mean. Danny and me like Bunny a lot. Danny is a police officer and sometimes I can ride in his police car and it is awesome! I like his car a lot. Danny helped me out when I was little and my Mom tried to sell me to a reality TV show. Now I live with him.

“Your Mom tried to sell you to a reality show?” Milo asked slowly. He and Danny had talked about Melissa on one of their few dates. He’d told Milo how he was Melissa’s guardian and how he’d been in the process of adopting her for several years, but there always seemed to be setbacks. He’d never said *anything* about Melissa’s biological mother trying to sell her to a reality TV show. Who would do that? And *how*?

Melissa shrugged and nodded as if it weren’t a big deal at all.

Danny's new friend has to:

Be somebody nice!

Like dogs!

AND KIDS!!!

“Look,” she flipped the paper over, “I don’t know if his new friend needs to know what he looks like, but I drew a picture of him.”

Milo blinked at the picture. She’d drawn Danny as a really tall man (relative to the size of the small, pig-tailed girl standing beside him) with muscled arms and an... *eight pack*? Each chiseled dent of his abdomen looked like an oval stacked on the next one. He also had large pecs with what seemed like a nipple ring. Milo flushed slightly.

Melissa watched Milo looking at the picture before she said, “I like art a lot! Danny says I should practice all the time if I want to end up in a museum. Do you think my picture is good?”

“Danny looks like he works out.”

“He loves to exercise! He rides his bike all the time, and he runs, and he walks Bunny, and he’s always moving. He can do, like, a thousand million push-ups. So, will you help me get online, please?”

The picture of Danny smiled up at Milo—his mouth a red “U”, his eyes brown dots, no nose, and short little spikes of orange hair. Melissa shifted impatiently from foot to foot.

From the beginning of their awkward dating relationship, Danny had wanted to tell Melissa the truth. It was Milo that held back. Looking down at the personal ad the little girl had crafted—a personal ad designed to get Danny a *girlfriend*—Milo thought he’d made the right decision in asking Danny not to tell her.

“Um... Melissa. It’s really late. The bell already rang. Isn’t your ride here?”

Melissa’s eyes went wide and she slapped her forehead comically. “Oh my gosh, I forgot! Mrs. Palmer is taking me home today!” She grabbed her bag off the floor, not even bothering to zip it up. “She’s my babysitter,” Melissa explained hurriedly and then, out of nowhere. “She smells like shrimp scampi but Danny says not to tell her that. Can we get on the Internet tomorrow?” She charged toward the door, only remembering to cry at the last minute, “Please?”

Instinctively, he called, “Don’t run!”

After Melissa had gone, and the library returned to its deep, familiar silence, Milo sat unmoving in his swivel chair. He wasn’t worried about coming out to Melissa for himself; he was worried for Danny. The little girl was his world and she adored him. Milo didn’t want to be the reason the loving look in her eyes changed. But part of him selfishly wished...

He imagined the three of them playing a game together, Melissa chattering about her day in fantastic third-grade *non sequitur*, Danny rubbing Milo's foot secretly under the table, the big Rottweiler, Bunny, begging for scraps he'd slip her from his plate. It was all so *domestic*.

Milo stared at the bumps and ridges in the ceiling tiles and daydreamed. He and Danny needed to talk.

Chapter 3

“That the best you got?” Hammer taunted him. “Bring it, McCrea!”

Danny threw his weight into the punch, pummeling the training mitt his partner wore. All the frustration of the long day—the criminals strolling out of the station after their twenty-four hour holds were up, being taunted by fourteen-year-old gang members who were meant for more, being forced to arrest both an abusive fuck and his wife who finally fought back—he poured into his fists.

“Melissa hits harder than this! Throwin’ her little girl punches!”

Danny fell back, bouncing on the balls of his feet, sweat dripping down his face. Hammer grinned at him with a wide, wicked grin. His partner was a born shit-talker.

“You want to do this thing for real? We can, old man.”

“Oh-ho! The kid thinks he can take on the Hammer. Step up your game first, and then we’ll talk.”

Danny threw himself back into his punches, delivering them hard and fast: jab, jab, jab, uppercut, feint, right hook. Hammer grunted, leaning into the barrage and Danny knew if they’d been fighting for real, he’d have knocked his partner on his ass.

Hammer nodded his approval.

“Think you’ve got it, kid.”

They hit the showers. Thick steam lingered as other officers, desperate to hit their numbers for the upcoming fitness review, washed away the sweat and grime of their workouts. Danny wasn’t worried. He never stopped training. He grabbed a free shower, turned the water up as hot as it would go, and let the pelting spray work on his tense muscles.

“Good workout there, Danny,” Hammer said, taking the stall next to him. “I give you hell, but your form is great.”

“Never doubted it for a second.”

“Smart-ass.”

“Aren’t you sweet?”

“I push 'cause I love,” Hammer teased.

“You push 'cause you want me to join the department rugby team.”

“Hell yes, I do. We might have a chance with some young blood.”

Danny grinned and put his face into the spray, testing how long he could hold his breath. He wanted to stay under the showerhead until the water ran cold, which would be the next side of never. And he wanted every bastard out of the showers so he could rub one out in peace.

He finally cut the stream when Hammer—who'd barely stayed in long enough to get wet—called, “You going to primp in there all day, princess?”

“You're a jackass, Hammer,” Danny told him later at the lockers, as he tossed his sweaty gym clothes into a bag and changed back into his uniform.

“Yeah,” Hammer said proudly, puffing out his chest just a little. The man prided himself on it. He'd been around longer than most. Where other men aimed for higher positions, Hammer enjoyed working patrols. He'd had a lot of partners—lost most of them to the climb, some to the stress of the job, one to the streets. He never stopped telling Danny how he didn't measure up to the men who'd come before him, a fact that had pissed Danny off to no end in the beginning. But little by little, he'd earned Hammer's respect. “Hey, you see my new pictures of Elle and the kids?” His whole demeanor shifted, and the man, who hadn't bothered to change out of his towel, grabbed his pants and tossed his wallet to Danny. He flipped it open and saw Hammer's beautiful wife and twins—son and daughter.

“Damn, Hammer, when did they get so big?”

“Dunno, kid. I blinked and they were already driving.”

“Melissa isn't ever going to drive.”

“Oh? You going to lock her in her room?” He barked with laughter. “Good luck with that.”

“Nah, I'm just not going to let her grow up. She's going to stay seven forever.”

“Think you'd have a better chance lockin' her up. Better enjoy this age. Pretty soon she'll be a teenager and then you're going to regret takin' her into your home.”

“Don't say shit like that,” Danny said stiffly.

Hammer snorted. “The first time I wished I’d never had kids, I felt like shit about myself. ‘God, I’m the scum of the earth.’ All that stuff. But you wait, McCrea. One day she comes home with her belly button pierced or some new idiot boyfriend and she’s shrieking at you that you don’t understand and you’ll get over the guilt *real* quick.”

“You know what I like about you, Hammer?”

“What’s that?”

“Your fucking optimism.”

Hammer snorted.

Danny’s phone buzzed. He looked down—new message from the Lieutenant.

My office. ASAP.

“As lovely as your company is, partner, I’ve got more important people calling my name.” He tossed the wallet back to Hammer and headed for the elevator.

“Hey, Lieut, you wanted to see me?”

“Come on in, McCrea. Take a seat.”

There wasn’t really a seat to take. Both chairs were stacked high with boxes of files. He’d have moved one, except there were files on the floor as well and, knowing the lieutenant, there was definitely a method to all that madness. Behind his desk was a large whiteboard with the names of every officer on his watch shift. Danny’s had been starred.

Danny straightened.

“I’ll stand, Sir.”

Lieutenant John Greenley was a giant of a man, a good six foot five when he stood, with hands that seemed like they could crush watermelons. As he sat at his desk, reading reports, with his glasses perched on the end of his nose, he came across as quiet and reserved. When an officer was made to bear the full weight of Greenley’s gray gaze, though, ‘reserved’ was the last thought on one’s mind. In the time Danny had been with the Lieutenant’s office, he’d seen more than one man leave the department with his shoulders hunched, eyes turned to the floor, as if they’d been whipped. Bullies and bastards alike—their Lieut felled them all.

Now, Greenley sat back in his chair, glasses on a stack of memos in front of him. He didn't glare at Danny, *per se*, but his expression was stern.

"Look, McCrea—you know I don't have time for bullshit, so let's have at it."

The asterisk beside Danny's name—was this a reprimand?

"What are your plans for the future?"

Jesus. Fuck. Was it *worse* than a reprimand?

"Give my all to the NYPD, sir."

"You see yourself doing patrol for the rest of your life?"

No. Actually, he didn't. He wasn't a lifer like Hammer. But he wasn't one to bitch and moan, either. They all had to do their stint. Just because his stint seemed to be running longer than he'd planned...

"If I put in my time, do good work, someone's bound to notice."

"Well, someone's noticed," Greenley said gruffly. "And that someone is curious how seriously interested you might be in climbing the ladder. Look, McCrea. You're smart and you're one of the hardest working boys we have in here. I know you're itchin' for more of a challenge, and better pay is always nice."

"Yessir."

"But here's the thing. With the budget cuts, there aren't enough opportunities for good men to advance in the department. You show promise, McCrea. And I want to see you succeed."

"Yessir."

"You've never expressed interest in making detective, though."

"No, sir."

"That's what I thought." Greenley cleared his throat. "I want to recommend you for a position at the RTCC."

"The RTCC?" Danny repeated, confused. The Real Time Crime Center.

"You work your ass off, you could make a name for yourself there."

"But—"

"I'm not going to shit you. You'd be starting at the bottom again. Only a step or two above the *very* bottom. It would be a lot of hard work. But you're

dedicated, Danny, and I see an opportunity for advancement there that I don't see for you here."

"Yessir."

As the lieutenant waved him out of his office, he said, "Think it over. Just don't take too long."

Chapter 4

“You seem distracted,” Milo’s mother said as she set dinner down on the table. Another casserole. He looked from the bubbling pile of cheese and broccoli up at her face. When his father was still alive, she made every meal an event. Salads to start, then the main course, followed up with a homemade dessert. Now, she expertly cut their large casserole into squares with a spatula. “Everything okay?”

Everything okay with you? He wanted to ask. But of course it wasn’t. That’s why he’d moved home after school, because she’d seemed so sad and small.

“Sure,” he told her.

“How was school?”

She’d never stopped asking. From his first day of kindergarten to now, as a librarian at St. Vincent’s Academy. *How was school?*

“Something weird happened, actually,” Milo said, grateful to have a story to tell. “You remember Melissa Goode—”

“Your boyfriend’s daughter,” his mother agreed cheerfully. He laughed, remembering Danny saying that it would be hard to explain ‘just dating’ to a seven-year-old. It was even harder to tell his mother that he and Danny weren’t really boyfriends. Yet. She seemed so happy about it. Her son finally had a boyfriend. “What about her?”

“She came in with this, I dunno, essay that she’d written about Danny. She wanted me to put it up on New York Dating dot com.”

His mother cracked a smile as she scooped a helping of casserole onto his plate. He thanked her.

“So, you’re being replaced?” she teased.

“Ma, you know she doesn’t know.”

Her eyes were kind as she studied her son, but when she spoke, she was direct and firm. “Milo, if I remember right, Danny wants to tell her?”

“Yeah, but—”

“And she’s his daughter.”

“Yes, but—”

“And you’re pretty much dictating what he can and cannot tell his own daughter.”

“Ma, it’s not like that,” Milo argued. He looked down at his casserole and then back up to her. “It’s not like that.”

“Then tell me what it’s like. Make me understand. Why are you scared to come out to her? You were so good with me.”

Milo grimaced as he remembered. “Ma, I wasn’t good at all. I think I shouted, ‘I like boys, okay?!’ when you asked me if I thought some girl on the TV was cute.”

“And then you ran upstairs,” she grinned. “But I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about afterwards, when I knocked on your door and you hugged me and asked me not to stop loving you and I said—”

“That you’d never stop loving me.”

“That I’d never stop loving you.”

“And then you and Dad bought me a cake.”

“We had to celebrate.”

He chuckled despite himself. The cake had said *Happy Birthday*, but his mother had scraped the ‘Birth’ part off with her finger and added letters in frosting, so that it said *Happy Comingoutday*. She’d had to squeeze it all together to make it fit.

“I don’t think Melissa’s going to make Danny a cake.”

“Is that what you’re worried about? Danny?”

“Of course, Danny.”

“I just thought, because of St. Vincent’s...”

Neither one of them had touched their food. He was too worked up to eat and she was, as always, waiting for him. Milo furrowed his brow. “Ma, I don’t know what would happen if they found out at the school. But it’s not that. It’s Danny. What if it upsets Melissa? What if she thinks differently of him? What if they find out at *his* work? I might get fired, but he’d get it a *lot* worse.”

“Milo, your dinner?”

He scooped a bite onto his fork, put it into his mouth, didn’t taste it.

“What would happen to him if they found out at the station?”

“Well, honey,” she said, finally picking up her own fork. “I don’t know. But don’t you think that’s up to Danny whether or not he wants to face it?”

“I just—”

“And as for Melissa. She’s obviously a bright, happy girl. You think finding out her guardian is in a relationship with a man is going to *ruin* her life?”

Put that way, it sounded so stupid.

“So what did you do?”

“Huh?”

“When she gave you the essay. For New York Dating?”

“Nothing. I mean, she went home for the day. I’ve still got the essay. I don’t actually know what I’m going to do.”

“Seems like a good opportunity for a talk.”

“I guess.”

The truth was, he’d been thinking about that piece of paper ever since she’d left. He’d read it several times, looking at the picture on the back, thinking about the Danny he was getting to know and the Danny who—to that seven-year-old at St. Vincent’s Academy, at least—was the greatest guy on the planet.

“Can you help me get a picture onto Facebook?” his mother asked suddenly. “My profile is just this little gray person with no face. And I know there’s a way to make my picture be on there, I just can’t figure it out.”

“Huh?”

“Facebook, I need—Oh, I’m sorry sweetie, did you want to keep talking about Melissa?” To her the answer was so simple that there was nothing more to say about it.

Milo went to bed that night thinking about Danny. He’d seen him many times, dropping Melissa off in the mornings as Milo rode his bike to the school, and he’d always noticed the tall, handsome man. No ring. No woman with him. But to say Milo was shy was an understatement beyond understatements. He couldn’t even manage a ‘hello’ until that day about a month ago.

The weather had finally changed, and the icy chill of winter was replaced with the cool breeze of spring. It was probably still a bit chilly to be eating

lunch outside, but Milo was desperate for sunlight after a whole season spent taking his lunch in the windowless staff breakroom.

That day he stretched out on the steps, devouring a ham and cheese sandwich. The wind played with the tiny new leaves that were just emerging on the trees. Finally, some green to accent the dull, gray street. Cars drove past the school, and he could hear the shouts of children on the playground behind the building. The sky was vast and blue, and it just *felt* like a good day.

Milo was thinking about getting up and going back inside, when the man he had been secretly crushing on all year pulled up in front of the school, parking in a no-parking zone. Milo watched him emerge from the car, a half-grin on his face.

“Hello,” Milo muttered, long before the other man could hear him. He dropped his eyes, stared hard at the last few bites of sandwich. They were alone, outside the school, on this perfect day. And the father was going to walk right past him and when would there ever be another chance like this? In all of time and space, when would he ever get another opportunity?

“Hello!” His second greeting was too loud, too gregarious, and, idiotically, aimed at the ground. Milo lifted his head and looked at the man who had stopped next to him on the step.

“Do you work here?”

Instinctively, Milo raised the photo ID around his neck.

“I work in the library,” Milo told him, realizing that the man might be worried he was some weirdo hanging out in front of the school, waiting for the kids. “Do you have kids here?”

“Yup,” he replied. “Second grader, Melissa Goode. I’m getting her for a dentist’s appointment. Thanks for asking.”

Thinking that was a weird thing to say, Milo cocked his head.

“It’s not going to keep someone from lying, of course, but the more people that are vigilant, the safer the kids will be.”

Milo’s face burned. He hadn’t asked out of vigilance—he just wanted to talk to the man. Putting the rest of his food away, Milo stood and wiped his hands on his pants.

“My name is Milo Swaisbrick.”

“Danny McCrea.”

Danny turned to go inside, and Milo let his eyes follow the man who was dressed casually in jeans and a flannel shirt. He had wide shoulders, a long, broad back that met a trim waist and... Milo swallowed. An exceptionally nice ass. He flushed, hardly believing he had looked.

“Hey, uh...” *Be bold, Milo. Be bold!* If only he’d had a *little* practice at this sort of thing. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

Danny stopped on the top step, raising a dark eyebrow curiously. “Has someone come around saying she’s my girlfriend?”

“No.” Milo quickly shook his head. “Not at all. I just... wondered if you had a girlfriend or...” He cleared his throat hard, unable to believe he was actually about to ask what he was about to ask. He looked down at his hands. “A boyfriend?” Dammit. Milo flushed, glancing up. He was so bad at flirting!

A smile spread across Danny’s face—an easy, confident smile. It made the already perfectly delicious angles of his face even more attractive.

“You asking for yourself?”

If the heat in his face was any indication, Milo was about six shades of red. His instinct was to say ‘no’, to play it off. *Be bold, be bold...* “Maybe.” It was a miracle he’d managed even that one word.

“Not right now. Neither girlfriend nor boyfriend.”

“Really?” Milo smiled and bounced one leg nervously. God, he was going to say it, wasn’t he? He wasn’t able to stop himself.

“I don’t either. Have anyone. But if I did, it’d be a boyfriend.” Milo finally managed. He cleared his throat, feeling certain that the second he let the information fall, Danny McCrea was either going to roll down the stairs in hysterics, or be totally disgusted. Forcing himself to meet the older man’s eye, he opted for full disclosure, “I haven’t actually ever gone out on a date before. So, definitely no boyfriend.”

“You’re young,” Danny said, without missing a beat. “There’s still time.”

They looked at each other for a while, Milo uncertain how to end the conversation. He opened his mouth to say, “*You better get Melissa or you’re going to be late...*” when Danny pressed:

“So, are you asking me out?”

Milo blinked, his nerve-endings on fire.

“I... well...”

“Or do you want me to ask you?”

Here it was. The moment he'd been waiting for the last twenty-four years. It was way more awkward and uncomfortable than he'd imagined it would be. He said, “Would you like to go on a date with me?”

Danny studied him for a long moment before he said with a smile that knotted Milo's recently unknotted stomach, “Sure. Tomorrow night? Seven thirty?”

Milo nodded eagerly, unable to control his smile. He felt tremendous relief at not having been shot down.

“Yes.”

“Give me your address. I'll pick you up. But let's get one thing straight.”

As quickly as the relief had come, it evaporated.

“Even if you beg, I'm *not* putting on the sirens.”

“Sirens?”

“I'm a cop,” Danny grinned.

Milo laughed. As easy as that, he had a date.

Chapter 5

“May I speak with you, Danny?” Melissa’s babysitter, Mrs. Palmer asked that evening as Melissa darted in front of her and into the apartment. Danny looked down at the small Englishwoman, expecting her to ask for another raise. Even though he knew that her apartment was rent-controlled, she was constantly complaining about the price of *everything*, haggling with him for a five-cent raise here, a ten-cent raise there.

“Danny!” Melissa butted in loudly. “Do you want to see what I can do?” She slid wildly across the hardwood floors in her knee-socks, her arms out. “I’m skating! Isn’t that great?”

He glanced back at Mrs. Palmer who looked very displeased.

“Sure, Mrs. Palmer.”

“No!” Melissa cried, almost frantically. “I... I’m sorry. I’ll tell you the truth!”

Mrs. Palmer looked grumpy and let a little chuff escape her lips. It wasn’t the first time Melissa had gotten in trouble while staying at her babysitter’s.

“What’s going on?” Danny asked. It had been a long day, he had a lot to think about, and if he had to pay for another broken Union Jack lamp he was probably going to lose it. Bunny whined on the floor near Melissa, rolling over on her back and showing her belly. The dog always got a treat when Melissa got home, and it had been a full two minutes and no one had given her one of the green biscuits she so loved. “Well, one of you’d better start telling it.”

“Melissa and the school librarian—” Mrs. Palmer started, but Melissa quickly interrupted her. She declared in one single breath:

“I went to the library today because I needed to get on the Internet and you said don’t ever get on the Internet by myself and Mr. Swaisbrick is very helpful and I knew he could help me and I asked him if he’d help me get onto a website and he said yes and we’re going to get on the website tomorrow. And I wasn’t going to tell because it was going to be a surprise and then I accidentally told Mrs. Palmer and I really, really, *really* wish I hadn’t.”

“What website?”

Melissa was silent, her eyes wide, her bottom lip trembling. Next would come the tears. The girl was tenderhearted, yes, but she also knew he was weak against her tears. He turned to the babysitter.

“What website?”

“Some *dating* site.” Mrs. Palmer puffed up as she spoke, triumphantly delivering the news.

“Melissa?” he asked levelly. It was his police officer voice. The one he used with little kids caught in the middle of domestic disputes. It was firm, but kind. A *let me get you out of this situation* type voice. It was the voice he’d used on Melissa the first time he’d met her, when her mother—strung out and raving—had tried to barter the child for drugs. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

She shook her head quickly, the tears starting to fall.

“I’m... I’m... sorry!”

And she bolted for her bedroom. Bunny hopped up and trotted along after her, the dog loving few things more than wet, salty faces.

“This has got to be a joke.”

“If you ask me,” Mrs. Palmer said loftily, adjusting her glasses. “This librarian must be a pervert. And you’d do well to arrest him. Immediately.”

Chapter 6

He arrived in uniform.

It wasn't the first time that Milo had seen him in uniform, but it was so unexpected that he straightened involuntarily. There was something about the dark navy blue and the crisp lines of the fabric that made Milo feel like he was in trouble. In trouble *and* aroused. Even though Danny wasn't smiling as he strode up to the desk, Milo's heart skipped a beat. Danny was there to see him.

When he was doing the practicum for his Master's in Library Science, Milo had no less than three cops come in and try to strong-arm him into giving up customer information without a warrant. It had been scary, but exhilarating, to tell them all to come back with the proper paperwork. He'd even quoted the American Library Association on multiple occasions. But *this* officer in his crisp navy blue uniform, badge polished and gleaming, gun holstered at his hip, was more than a welcome sight. After a night spent thinking about Danny, his dreams had been... heated.

St. Vincent's ancient secretary followed after Danny.

"Milo!" she called to him, a little too loudly. Her hearing aid was out again. "Milo, dear, this officer is here to see you! I couldn't get the damn intercom to work, so I'm announcing him to you directly."

"Thank you, Ms. Reynolds."

"Eh?"

He waved at her and smiled.

"You." Danny faux-scowled. The old, faded scar on his cheek almost made him look mean when his mouth turned down at the corners. Milo tried not to grin.

"How can I help you today, Officer? We have a fine selection of juvenile fiction books."

"You and I need to have a talk. Where's your office?"

He didn't really have one—another reason he longed for that head librarian position—but there was the small breakroom. Almost a closet, really. Milo locked his computer and then the cash drawer, yanking out the key and putting it into his pocket.

“Follow me.”

They'd barely gotten a step through the door when Danny grabbed him around the waist and swept him into a deep kiss. Milo wrapped his arms around Danny's neck and snuggled into him tightly, relieved he was there.

“You got my text last night?” Danny murmured against his lips.

“Yes.”

“Does that door lock?”

“No.”

“Damn.”

“You wanna see your personal ad?”

Milo turned, thrusting his hip just a little bit and reveled in the feeling of Danny slowly slipping his hand inside the pocket. He closed his eyes, wishing Danny would dig deeper. Instead, he found the note Melissa had written. Milo hung onto Danny as he read it.

“I'm especially fond of the big bulky muscles and the nipple ring.”

The muscles, at least, were true to life. The officer's biceps strained against the short sleeves of his uniform.

Danny snorted at something he read on the page, shaking his head.

“She obviously thinks you're pretty great.”

“Yeah, well,” Danny said, looking up at Milo. He brushed the pad of his thumb over Milo's lips, following the gesture with a lingering kiss. Goddamn, he wished the door locked. “So...” Danny teased, lightly shaking the piece of paper. “You worried my little girl's going to hook me up with some woman on the Internet?”

“Maybe,” Milo admitted.

“Just a little?”

“I may have had a very long talk with my mother about it last night.”

“So...” Danny tried again. “Would you say that you're worried enough about it to meet Melissa?”

“I've met Melissa, Danny, I—”

“You know what I mean. Can I finally introduce you as my boyfriend?”

Instead of answering, Milo asked quietly, “There’s one thing I’ve been curious about. Did Melissa’s mother *really* try to sell her daughter to reality television?”

“That’s what I told Melissa,” Danny said tracing the line of Milo’s chin, sending a chill up his spine. “She actually tried to sell her to her dealer. God knows what he would have done to her. He won’t do anything now, I made sure of that.”

“You... *killed*... him?” Milo groaned as Danny nipped at his earlobe. He could feel hot breath on his cheek and the sensation was making him way too hard.

“I love that you think being an officer is just like it is on police procedurals.” Danny’s tone was light, and teasing. “I *arrested* him. And I arrested the mother. They won’t be getting out until Melissa’s in college, at the earliest.”

“Are you ever going to tell her the truth?”

“If she asks,” Danny murmured into Milo’s ear. “So far she seems content with the reality TV thing.”

A sharp knock at the door interrupted their conversation, and Milo practically leapt away from Danny, running the back of his hand over his mouth. Danny, who never seemed flustered, opened the door. The head librarian and the principal stood there. Both women looked in suspiciously.

“Is everything all right here, officer?” the principal asked. The librarian, Mrs. Anderson, scowled at Milo. That was nothing new. She was always scowling. He was pretty sure he wouldn’t recognize her if she didn’t scowl. He looked from Danny to the women. Did they know what they’d been up to? Could they hear through the door? For a moment, his dreams of being head librarian and getting his chance to weed the reference section flashed before his eyes.

“Of course,” Danny said amiably. Completely different from the seductive man he’d been minutes before. “Just stopped by to see if the library might want to host a children’s safety program. Something the NYPD likes to do from time to time. Since my little girl goes here—”

“Oh,” both women said together.

“Well, Officer, these sorts of matters usually go through me or Mrs. Anderson—as she’s the head of the library.”

“That’s what your librarian here told me. Sorry about that.” And he flashed them both a smile that would have melted ice.

Milo’s hand twitched and he fought back a wild impulse. The impulse to take Danny’s hand and tell both of the severe-looking women, “*This is my boyfriend.*” But that would probably be the end of his career in the religious private school. Instead, as they walked away, Milo looked at Danny and said:

“Tell Melissa about me.”

Chapter 7

“I had a talk with Mr. Swaisbrick today,” Danny told Melissa as she climbed into the back seat of his patrol car. She liked to pretend she was a ‘bad guy’ and that he had arrested her for her horrible crimes. They usually involved stealing pies from windowsills. It didn’t matter that the kid had never seen anyone in New York City leave a pie out on the windowsill; that was her crime of choice.

“Am I in trouble?” Melissa asked, sniffing hard. She was giving him her most dramatic *I’m sorry!* look—the one with the wide blue eyes and the painful pout. She’d cried so hard the night before, he hadn’t gotten more than three words out of her in an hour.

“No,” Danny said after an unbearable minute of her pitiful expression. Damn kid knew how to get right at the heart of him. Always had. “But you’ve got to be more careful about stuff like that, kiddo.”

“I didn’t get on the Internet by myself!” she pointed out. “I was just getting help. And Mr. Swaisbrick is really nice and you always said that someone is a stranger until you’ve met him, but you met Mr. Swaisbrick at the pet store. Remember, Danny? So he isn’t a stranger.”

“Yeah, and that’s good, I guess.” *Fine line.* “But, you could have gotten him and yourself into a lot of trouble.”

“I’m sorry, Danny. I just wanted you to have a girlfriend.”

“Well, let’s just cool it on the trying to help Danny find a ‘girlfriend’, okay? I’m okay, kiddo. I don’t need you going on the Internet to find anyone for me.”

She mumbled something he couldn’t hear.

“What was that?”

“You haven’t had a girlfriend come over in a really, really, really, really, really long time. You never have anybody. Not even a friend.”

“What’re ya talking about, kiddo? Branden comes over all the time.”

She didn’t look convinced.

“Branden isn’t a *girl* and he isn’t even your *friend*. When you play cards, you always yell and use bad words.”

He chuckled. That was true. The building's maintenance man, Branden, stopped by sometimes for a hand of rummy. It usually got heated.

"Sorry about that. Shouldn't curse around you."

She nodded emphatically—the potty-mouth police of apartment 7B.

"Danny, the website isn't for *that* kind of friend anyway." Melissa was conspiratorial as she said this. Danny wondered if she thought he didn't know what NewYorkDating.com was all about. "I think it's for getting married."

"Married, huh? You want me to get married?"

"You could have a girlfriend who likes dogs and kids and she could take me shopping and we could play and—"

"Are we getting this girlfriend for me?" he teased. "Or are we getting a friend for *you*?"

"Both?" she asked hopefully, smiling brightly. She twisted one of her ponytails in her hand.

Maybe it was time to be honest with her.

"What if I told you I am seeing someone?"

Her eyes went as wide as saucers and she hugged herself with dramatic expectation. He tried not to laugh. "*Do you* have a girlfriend, Danny?"

"No. But... I'm going on a date with someone."

"Oh my gosh..." she whispered. "Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh! Who is it? Does she have blonde hair? Did you meet her on the website? Did she see my picture I drew of you? Do you think she'll like me? Does she like dogs? Are you bringing her over here? Is she—?"

Usually Melissa ran out of questions after a minute, but she was so wound up about his mystery date that she simply started over, repeating questions she'd already asked. She hardly breathed as she charged through the list again.

"I bet she has blonde hair! Does she have blonde hair?"

"Nope," Danny finally cut in, ready to reveal everything. "*He* has black hair."

Danny and his young charge had run the gamut of conversations during their three years together. Sometimes he thought that there wasn't anything else they could possibly talk about, and then Melissa would come home from school and ask him why more spiders weren't purple or what would happen if there

were *two* Presidents at the same time, and they'd talk until she finally fell asleep. Melissa had a brain with no off-switch and a mouth without a mute button. But despite *all* the conversations they'd had, they'd never talked about his sexuality. She'd taken it for granted that he only liked girls, and he'd had no reason to correct her on it until now.

Danny waited for her to process the fact that his date was a man. She stared at him, cocking her head just a little, her brow furrowed in thought and then she said:

"I like blonde hair."

And that was it. Danny liked both girls and boys and Melissa wasn't at all concerned about it, except that she'd envisioned a blonde for him. He snorted.

"What is his name?" she asked.

"Actually, it's Mr. Swaisbrick."

She thought about this for a long time and then, too smart for her own good, she said, "I guess it's really bad that I asked him to help you find a girlfriend, huh? Because if he likes you then he might be sad if you had a girlfriend."

"Yeah, I think he'd be pretty sad about it, kiddo."

"So... can I come on your date?"

"No."

"Why not? Are you going to kiss?"

"I don't know."

"Then why can't I come?"

"Because it's a grown-up date."

"Why?"

"Because he's a grown-up and I'm a grown-up."

"But what if I'm really, really, really quiet?" As if that would ever be a possibility.

"If you come, I'll be distracted and want to talk to you all night," he argued. "And then he'll feel really left out."

That almost got her. *Almost*. But then she hit back hard.

"But if I don't come, how will I know if he really, really likes me or not?"

Chapter 8

It wasn't their first date, of course. Not even their second or third. But all their others had been short meet-ups. Coffee shops, delis, a quick bite and hurried conversation, and stolen kisses that were far too public to go deeper, more intimate. They chatted through text messages, but it wasn't the same as sitting face to face together. All because Milo had been so scared of Melissa finding out.

Tonight felt like more of a first date than ever, all crackling anticipation and nerves. Except, instead of trying to impress Danny, Milo was trying to impress the little girl who stared at him curiously and sipped her soda. He worked with children all day, every day, and yet tonight, he could hardly think of anything to ask her.

The three of them sat at the very back of a small restaurant called *Italiano!* There was a checkered tablecloth and candles, and after a moment of silence, Melissa pointed out that it was just exactly like *Lady and the Tramp* and that if they'd brought Bunny and had another dog, they could have seen if two dogs really would kiss over a spaghetti noodle.

"I'd meant to ask you," Danny said quietly, reaching across the table for Milo's hand. Milo eyed it suspiciously and kept his fingers locked together under the tablecloth. They were in front of Melissa! "How is it that you got to be twenty-four years old without ever going on a date?"

Melissa blinked at him owlshly.

"Not for lack of want or trying," Milo answered into his glass of wine. "I'm pretty much the shyest person on the face of the planet."

"My friend Dawn is really, really shy," Melissa said helpfully. "She gets red every time Mrs. Campbell calls on her to answer a question and she does this." Melissa sank down in her chair so far that only the top of her head showed above the table. "And then she mumbles."

"Sounds about right," Milo agreed, feeling his own cheeks going red. "I... uh... I was always shy. And when I was thirteen, I knew I was... *like that...*"

"Like what?" Melissa asked.

Danny smiled encouragingly and nodded his head a little at Melissa as if to say, *go ahead, tell her.*

“Well... I like boys.”

His flush grew hotter.

“Danny likes boys *and* girls.”

“He told me that,” Milo said quietly. “And... you’re okay with that, Melissa?”

Melissa stared at him like she didn’t understand the question. Maybe she didn’t. Maybe the concept of *not* being okay with it was so foreign she just didn’t know how to respond. He was suddenly charmed by her.

“I was scared to ask out any of the boys in my class, so I tried asking out a few girls.”

“Didn’t go well?” Danny guessed.

“Yeah, no,” Milo chuckled. “And then in college I had no practice at all with dating, so I just sort of shrank into the shadows. I even got asked out—by a guy—and I totally froze up. Stared at him until he walked away. Jeez.”

He laughed. He’d *never* been able to laugh about that, but sitting here with Mr. Police Officer and his little girl, Milo was finally able to laugh.

“But you asked me out.”

“Well, technically you helped.”

“I did,” Danny grinned.

“Hey, do you guys want to see what I can do with this spoon?” Melissa asked, oblivious to what was growing into a very warm moment. She put her soup spoon on the end of her nose where it promptly slid off and clattered to the floor.

“Got to breathe on it, kiddo,” Danny said as Melissa dove to the floor after her lost silverware. While she searched the carpet, Milo finally gave Danny his hand and smiled as the other man planted a kiss on his knuckles. “Glad we could work out this whole date thing, Milo the Librarian.”

“Are you going to kiss him goodnight?” Melissa asked, drowsily from the backseat. Most kids fought to stay up an extra hour or more every night, but Melissa was good with her bedtime. She was up with the birds, of course, but she always went to bed on time and their date had kept her from that tonight. She’d chattered the whole evening, even more than usual. It was a miracle the

kid didn't run out of breath or things to say. "I think you should kiss him goodnight. Will you?"

Danny grinned and looked over at the handsome younger man in his passenger seat. Milo was looking back at him.

"I dunno, kiddo. I guess it depends on whether Milo wants me to or not."

They passed under a streetlight. Color flushed Milo's cheeks.

It wasn't really a question. Mostly, he just wanted to tease his date. But Milo nodded, just a quick jerk of his head. Yes. Yes, he'd take that goodnight kiss.

"I'm sleepy," Melissa informed them.

"We'll be home soon," Danny promised.

"I'm going to wear my princess pajamas to bed tonight."

"Sounds good, kiddo."

"So, Danny..." Milo started quietly. "You said at dinner that you're up for a promotion?"

"More like a demotion," Danny laughed. "With the possibility of a future promotion. Yeah, with the RTCC. I told my Lieutenant to give me the rec."

They spoke in low tones, Danny hoping Melissa would be asleep by the time they got home. He reached across the center console, laying his hand, palm up, near Milo's. Milo intertwined his fingers with Danny's.

"Sounds like a good opportunity."

"I'm suddenly flush with good opportunities," he murmured, tracing the back of Milo's hand with his thumb.

"What's that mean?" Melissa asked from the back seat, perking up just a little. Dammit. Danny squeezed Milo's hand and then pulled his fingers loose, gripping the steering wheel.

"What's what mean, kiddo?"

"Flush with good opportunities'?"

"Means I've got a great little girl and a great potential job and—"

"And a great new boyfriend?" she asked happily. "Milo. I liked our date. Are we going to have another one?"

Danny chuckled.

Chapter 9

“She asleep?” Milo asked, pulling himself to the edge of the couch.

“Yup,” Danny said. “She needed two chapters tonight. And a glass of water. And two kisses. And I promised I’d give Bunny a kiss, too. She’s excited you’re here.”

Milo grinned.

“Can I get you something?”

“Well, since you’re handing out kisses...” As soon as the words had left the younger man’s lips, he was flushing. “I, uh, we just talked about goodnight kisses before.”

Danny raised an eyebrow. Bold. He liked it. “You ready to go home then?”

“Not... really.”

“Well, we could get that kiss out of the way now,” Danny agreed with a grin. He was excited about it. Excited to finally take his time with Milo’s mouth. All their encounters had been so rushed.

Danny had always been attracted to men, to the way their bodies differed from a woman’s. All hard lines and strength. Handsome. But he’d never been with one. Circumstance. Nothing more. He sat down next to the entrancing man.

Danny reached out, caught Milo under the chin, and turned his face so they were looking at each other.

“What do you think?” he pressed.

He wanted to hear Milo say it. *Yes. Kiss me.* He wanted to watch Milo’s lips form the words, curve over them, and then he wanted to pull their bodies together and satisfy a longing that had been growing in him all night.

Milo blushed and flustered, “I... mean, yeah. But...”

“But?” Danny asked. He’d started to stroke his fingers along Milo’s jaw. Featherlight touches that traced the skin there.

Bunny huffed on the floor, knocking Danny hard in the leg. His fingers stilled and he looked down. His Rottweiler stared back at him indignantly. She’d been waiting, didn’t he know? *Patiently* even. He grinned, and lifted his legs so that she could crawl beneath his feet. She loved playing footrest.

“Dogs, right? What’re you gonna—” He didn’t get the ‘do’ out because as he turned back to Milo, he found that the younger man had moved, was right next to him, kissing him with delightful inexperience. The kiss was misplaced. It hit the corner of Danny’s lips. He grinned.

“All right, then,” he said, and moved his mouth so that he and Milo were kissing properly. His lips teased and gave and sought, and Milo—wonderful, warm, giving, Milo—molded into the kiss. Quickly, he figured out how to give more with his mouth. They kissed like that for a long time. Hard, passionate kisses, closed mouths.

When they mutually broke for breath, both men grinned. They were moving through the stages of kissing together. The awkward—misplaced—playground kiss. The frantic, but closed-mouthed kissing—suitable for a middle school dance. But Danny wanted more, and from Milo’s high color and glazed eyes, he thought the other man did too. It was time for a full-on high school make out.

“You okay?” Danny stopped to check.

Milo nodded. “Hell yes.”

He started slow with the next kiss, working Milo’s lips, teasing them, torturing them lightly with his teeth, running the tip of his tongue along the seam. He was about to give instructions, but Milo’s mouth came open on a delighted sigh. The kiss went deeper, lips moving, tongues touching, wrestling. Danny pulled Milo against him, practically on top of him.

In that moment, he forgot everything.

Forgot Melissa was asleep in the next room.

Forgot he had work in the morning.

Definitely forgot they weren’t technically boyfriends yet.

In that moment, there was only Milo. Milo’s mouth, Milo’s tongue, Milo’s heat, and his scent filling Danny’s nostrils.

“Jesus,” he gasped as they broke again.

“Glad...” Milo swallowed, slightly wobbly. “Glad we got that out of the way.”

“Yeah.” Danny nodded. “Yeah, it’s good, right?”

“We should... uh... do something.”

Hell yes, he wanted to do something. He wanted to do multiple somethings. He wanted to do something all night long.

“Checkers.”

Danny chuckled. “Checkers?”

“It’s the only thing I can think of,” Milo admitted. “‘Something’ to do.”

“Oh, I can definitely think of other things.” But he wasn’t sure Milo was ready for that yet. The more space Danny put between them, the more he remembered that everything that was happening was a first for Milo. But, goddamn, he wanted to take the handsome young man to bed.

“No checkers, but we could play cards. Talk a little more. Or... are you ready to go home?”

“Cards,” Milo agreed, letting out a shaky breath.

“Want something to drink?”

“Sure.”

“All right, there’s a deck in that little bin by the table. Set up a game, I’ll go pour us some drinks.” *And stick my head under the tap.*

“So now that she knows...” Danny said quietly, after he pulled up in front of Milo’s brownstone. He wanted to talk all night, but Melissa was asleep at home and he had to get back to her quickly.

Milo grinned and looked at him. “And the world didn’t end or anything.”

“When do I get to see you again? We don’t have to steal dates while she’s at gymnastics anymore. We can do it anytime.”

Do it.

It hung there between them and even though it wasn’t what Danny had meant exactly, he didn’t try to correct it. He’d been thinking about getting Milo Swaisbrick into his bed since their first date. After tonight’s delicious kisses, his need was more desperate than ever.

“So I didn’t screw up the making out too bad?” Milo joked. God. Remembering it made Danny hard.

“Definitely not.”

“Okay then. Yes. Absolutely. Tomorrow?”

Danny’s lips quirked.

“Oh crap, that wasn't cool was it? Am I supposed to be chill about it?” he adjusted his glasses uncomfortably. “Let me try again. Uh, sure, maybe. Let me check my calendar.”

“Come here.” Danny tugged on Milo's jacket, pulling him the small distance over the gear shift and stealing a not-so-chaste kiss. “I want to see you every damned night this week. What do you think about that?”

“Yes.”

“Tomorrow at seven o'clock? Movies at my place?”

“Yes.”

“And when Melissa goes to bed—?”

“More kissing,” Milo promised against Danny's mouth.

Chapter 10

“Tomorrow” turned into the next day and the next day and the next until, like Danny had said, they’d seen each other every night that week. Milo was sure if movies and TV were anything to go by, they weren’t doing this dating thing right. They were moving too fast. But he didn’t care, when he was with Danny and Melissa and Bunny, he felt whole and happy. And when he went to work in the mornings, he practically danced across the floor, humming as he pulled books off shelves, grinning to himself and browsing the Internet for family-friendly date ideas.

They made dinners together and watched movies and played board games. Melissa taught him how to do tricks with Bunny. And on Saturday morning, after a Friday night date and some delicious kissing and touching, Milo woke up to a text message from Danny.

Wanna go with me and the kid and the dog to Central Park?

Two hours later, they were there.

Melissa insisted that she was definitely big enough now to handle Bunny’s leash, but every time someone jogged past with their own dog in tow, Bunny whined and jerked against her harness, trying to get at her new ‘friend’.

“She’s too damn friendly for her own good.”

“Swears!” Melissa chided Danny with a severe scowl.

It was a fantastic morning, warm enough for short sleeves, but still cool enough that they could play. Milo sat on a bench, Bunny between his knees, patting her head as Danny and Melissa threw a football to one another. Danny had great form. When he pulled back to throw, Milo trailed his eyes over the taut muscles in Danny’s forearms. Wished he could see more of his biceps. He looked great in the blue and white button-down shirt. Casual. Sexy. But the sleeves covered way too much of his arms.

Danny let the ball fly, and Melissa leapt after it, shouting with glee.

He must have played ball in school. Maybe he still did in some neighborhood league. Quarterback, maybe.

Bunny whimpered below him, and Milo looked down at her. She wanted to play football, too. Truth was, so did Milo, but someone had to watch the dog, and besides, it was a little early in the relationship to show Danny just how

uncoordinated and unathletic he really was. He was still nervous about what would happen when he took off his shirt for the first time.

Hot color seared his cheeks, and Milo scratched the dog's head.

Danny had been cool about waiting, though he hadn't been shy with his interest. The kissing was hot. More than hot, even. And Milo was definitely interested. But it would be his first time and... well, it was a little nerve-racking.

"You think we're ready for that, Bunny?" Milo asked the dog who quirked her little tan eyebrows at him and yawned. "I was almost ready last night. I think. Maybe. If he'd asked, I would have said yes."

"Asked what?"

Milo startled upright to see that Danny and Melissa had come to stand near him.

"Who won?" Milo asked, pretending he wasn't flushing.

"Kiddo, of course."

"You looked good out there. You could be a starter for the Jets if you keep at it," Milo teased.

Melissa crinkled her nose and stuck her tongue out.

"We're Giants fans in this household," Danny told him levelly and Milo laughed. He patted the bench with his free hand and Melissa clucked at Bunny to get her up and moving.

"If you guys want to be alone to kiss," Melissa giggled, "I'll take Bunny for a walk."

"Or," Danny reasoned, "Milo can hold the leash and you can play with her. We can still kiss."

She harrumphed and planted herself in the grass where Bunny came to try and stand in her lap. Two huge licks to the face, and Melissa was all smiles again.

"So," Danny murmured. He took Milo's free hand in his, intertwining their fingers. Warmth spread through Milo's palm, up his arm, filling his whole body. He could feel the steady pulse of Danny's heart between their two hands. "So, what was it that I was supposed to ask?"

"If..." Milo swallowed. "If I'm... *ready*."

“I’m nervous,” Milo whispered. The innocent sound of his words made Danny hard. He licked at his lips. “What if Melissa hears? Wakes up?”

“Door’s locked. We’ll be quiet. Besides, kiddo can sleep through a bomb going off.”

“What if I’m no good?” That was the real question, the real fear. Danny pulled him close, kissing him with gentle passion, teasing his lips. The feel of Milo near him set Danny’s whole body on fire.

“We’ll learn together.”

“You’ve never...?” Milo asked, drunk on kisses and lust.

They’d started out slow, just kissing and touching. But it wasn’t long before the kisses deepened, before the seeking hands moved up under clothing, before their bodies were pressed together, need moving them ever closer so that they moaned and rubbed against one another.

“I’ve always been attracted to—” Danny sucked in breath between his teeth as Milo ran the tip of his tongue over Danny’s ear. “*Milo*,” he groaned, trying to shake the haze out of his brain. “Attracted to *both*,” he groaned. “Girls. Guys. But I’ve only ever dated women. Only ever been with women. Wasn’t a thing I planned. Just how it worked out.”

Danny pulled his shirt off over his head, and Milo let out a deeply appreciative, “*Oh*.”

“What?”

“The muscles... and the...” Gently Milo nudged the ring that pierced Danny’s left nipple, the one he’d gotten in college when he was drunk. “Melissa’s picture wasn’t a lie.”

“You like?”

Milo definitely seemed pleased, if the way he lunged at Danny was any indication, his mouth full against Danny’s, his tongue seeking, his hands wild on him. Eager virgin. God, the things Danny wanted to do to Milo’s body.

“We’re going to learn all this together,” Danny promised, tugging at Milo’s clothing, undressing him with the excitement of a first-timer. Every inch of bare flesh made Danny more and more delirious.

Milo clung to Danny, embarrassed as Danny helped him out of his shirt.

“Can we turn off the lamp? I... I don’t want to disappoint you and—”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he growled lustily, knocking Milo’s hands away from the lamp. Didn’t want to disappoint? Honestly? Danny placed hungry kisses on Milo’s collarbone, his neck, his ear, the side of his face.

“You’re phenomenal. Don’t cover yourself up like that.”

“Says the muscled god.”

“Shut up and let me show you what I think of you.”

Each deep kiss made Milo more desperate and less inhibited until the lamp was obviously forgotten and he was pulling Danny down with him, running inexpert hands over his body, pressing up against him, trying to move closer.

“I’ve got something for you, Milo.” Danny’s voice was thick, foreign to his own ears.

It took the officer a full minute to untangle himself from Milo’s desperate hands and a very real part of him didn’t want to stop. But he *had* to give the other man the choice. He reached into the drawer next to the bed, pulling out an envelope and a box of condoms. Placing both on Milo’s bare chest was enough to still the younger man in his desperate pawing.

“What’s this?” Milo murmured, his lips swollen, his eyes glassy. It was an awkward stop to what was shaping up to be excellent lovemaking. Danny was silent, letting Milo take in the paper that he’d awkwardly pulled out of the envelope.

“Test results?”

“Thought I’d be responsible. I’m clean. Wanted you to see. I wanted to be able to tell you I’m clean. It doesn’t mean we have to—I just wanted to give you the option.”

“Option?” Milo repeated.

“To use a condom or not.”

Milo’s grin was deliciously sweet as he picked up the box and paperwork and then, very deliberately, set both items far away on the side table. “Is it okay?” he asked.

Yes. God. Yes, it was more than okay.

Danny swallowed and nodded.

Chapter 11

Danny was running late after a rough morning.

He'd woken up alone in his bed with painful morning wood and only the lingering memory of having been inside Milo. He regretted letting the other man leave the night before. He should have insisted that Milo stay. Every morning for years, Danny had woken up alone, but today, this morning, the cold side of his bed pissed him off.

Melissa didn't make the morning any better. She was being stubborn about getting out of bed, hiding her head under the pillow, lazing long after she should have been awake. When she did finally get up, she dragged herself around, stopping to play with Bunny instead of jumping in the shower, and organizing her dolls after he'd told her to get her shoes on. Once he'd finally gotten her out of the house and to school—just before the bell—he realized he'd left his wallet at home and had to turn around and head back.

By the time he reached Hammer's house, his partner was more than pissed. If glares could murder...

"You realize it doesn't matter which of us is driving the damned carpool, we're both going to get it for showing up late."

"I'm sorry," Danny grunted. "Crap morning."

"All those late nights. You been on the prowl?"

On the prowl? No. Staying up late watching movies? Laughing? Cuddling? *Kissing*? Definitely. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. Some of those thoughts must have showed on his face, because the Hammer came down hard and he didn't let up all the way to work, grilling Danny like he was a witness to the crime of the century.

They parked and reported for duty. Only three minutes late, but the two of them had an almost perfect attendance record for the time they'd been partners and the three minutes would be noted. Their morning briefing had already started, too, and Sergeant Miller—the dickhead—made a point of calling them out as they slipped into the back of the conference room.

He doubted being out on patrol was going to help matters. He needed to run laps. Punch something. Jack off.

The lieutenant popped out of his office and pointed at Danny. His gut clenched. Greenley looked like someone had pissed in his coffee. Danny slapped Hammer on the shoulder and followed the lieutenant into his office.

“Where the hell have you been?!” Greenley roared before Danny even had a chance to close the door. Some of the guys out near the coffee pot turned and looked at them. “I told you yesterday to be here an hour early. Did it fall out of your brain?”

Shit.

Right.

“The interview.”

“Damn straight, the interview!” The man ran a frustrated hand over his balding head. “I sing your praises this, that, and every which way to the head of HR at the RTCC and you don’t even bother to fucking show up?”

“I’m sorry,” Danny said as respectfully as he could manage. He’d meant to write it down or put it in his phone and then he got to thinking about Milo and... Goddammit, every thought went out of his head when Milo was in there. And after last night? Jesus. Interview? *What interview?* There was only Milo Swaisbrick.

“I’ve pulled a lot of strings for you, McCrea. You told me you were ready for this. That you wanted it. But shit like this makes me wonder.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” Danny swallowed hard, keeping his eyes focused straight ahead while his supervisor railed against him. “I do. I want it.”

“You’re going to have to work double hard now if you want that job. I can reschedule—*maybe*—but the guy you’re interviewing with, Jones, he’s a hard son of a bitch and he’s riled you missed your interview.”

“I understand.”

“I want an assurance from you, McCrea.”

Danny nodded sharply. Any damned thing Greenley needed, he was prepared to give.

“Pull your head out of your ass and make a decision: is this your priority?”

“Yessir.”

“‘Yessir’ it’s your priority?”

He thought about the opportunity being presented to him. The lieutenant was right, it would mean a lot of hard work, a lot of late nights, and starting almost at the bottom again after years on patrol. But it also meant better pay, better chance for advancement, and it meant being safer for Melissa.

Sometimes, when he tucked her in at night, she asked him off-the-wall things. Things she shouldn't have to think about.

Did you shoot anybody today, Danny?

Did anybody shoot at you?

And once, just once: *If you die, Danny, where am I going to go?*

He knew his priorities. *Melissa* was his priority. And that meant he had to get his head in the game. But what did that mean for him and Milo?

Can't make it tonight.

Milo looked down at his phone, disappointed. He'd been thinking about Danny all day. He'd never been a daydreamer, but he found himself losing track of time as he thought about their night together. He was looking forward to more of that. Plus more of the other, sweeter stuff. Looking forward to sitting close to Danny, cuddling into his shoulder while they watched a movie with Melissa, cooking together, cleaning up, doing dishes side by side. The ridiculously domestic stuff. And the sexy stuff.

It had become so easy and familiar so fast. When he was dealing with an irate parent on the phone, yelling at him that *their* child couldn't *possibly* have lost a *library book!* he would think about Danny's deep voice murmuring in his ear. His sweet kisses. The safety of his arms.

But it was just one cancellation. Nothing to freak out about. Just because it came right after they'd had sex... That didn't mean anything. Milo could catch up on some reading, see some friends, grab a movie maybe.

It's cool :) Next time?

For a long time there was no reply and Milo thought that was that. He'd put a question mark at the end of his text, but it wasn't really a question, was it? Then his phone buzzed.

Sometimes I think I like you too much.

Milo grinned at the message.

Why?

He definitely thought he liked Danny too much, as well. He just wasn't concerned about it.

Work. Promotion. Melissa. My life is just full right now. You're in my head all the time.

Playfully, he typed out:

Is that a bad thing?

Chapter 12

“Do you think that you might stay over at Danny’s house tonight?” His mother seemed more curious than usual. Milo flushed.

“Ma!”

“Well, you are dating, right?”

His first instinct was to agree that they were, but then he thought about his phone. It had been over a week since he’d written that last message. *Is that a bad thing?* And there had been no reply. No text, no phone call, nothing. He’d tried to be chill about it, because he still didn’t quite know what was ‘normal’ for dating. But that didn’t work. He and Danny had never been normal. From the beginning. Danny helping Milo ask him out, the weird, secret hour-or-less dates, hell, meeting in a pet store to steal a kiss. And then once Melissa knew, the week of intense family-time and first-time gay sex for the both of them. Danny suddenly not calling or writing or communicating with him in any way...? Something was off.

Maybe he’d been dumped and he was too damned naïve to tell.

“I don’t know if we’re dating anymore.”

For a moment, emotions conflicted on her lovely face. Concern and... something else. Concern won out and she came to sit beside him, laying an arm over his shoulders.

“What happened?”

Milo shrugged. “I dunno. Honestly. It was going really well. I think he’s just... got other priorities.”

She tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. Twenty-four years old and she was still treating him like he was five. But in that moment, Milo didn’t care. He laid his head on his mother’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry you’re hurting, Milo.”

He sighed, long and low. “I’m trying not to,” he told her reasonably. “Maybe it’s nothing. I don’t know. I’m a little scared to find out.”

She pressed her lips together. The look of concern was still there, but that something else he’d seen before crept back into her eyes.

“What?” he asked.

“What-what?”

“What’s that look?”

She grinned uncomfortably and squeezed his shoulders. “What I’m about to say has no bearing on my sympathy.”

“O... kay.”

“But do you think maybe you could go out tonight anyway? Not with Danny, if you guys are having problems, but with another friend possibly?”

Milo lifted his head and saw that his mother was actually flushing, just a little in one cheek.

“It’s just that I’m... having... a friend over for dinner.”

“A friend?” Milo repeated, pulling back so he could look at her. She was always having friends over and she’d never kicked him out before.

“A... a... male friend.”

Oh. *Oh!* “Ma, you’ve got a date?”

She smiled nervously and fidgeted, finally shrugging like a little kid who had been caught in a lie. “Yes?”

“That’s...”

“It’s okay if you’re upset. It’s... it’s very sudden.”

It wasn’t sudden, though. Dad had been gone for almost two years. But who was this guy? He needed to know. He began to grill her, forgetting to assure her that he wasn’t upset.

“Who is he?”

“His name is Paul.”

“Do I know him? Where did you meet him?”

“You don’t know him. I... well... actually,” she tittered. “New York Dating dot com.”

Milo blinked. The dating site? And how in the world did she get on there? His mother who couldn’t figure out how to put her profile picture on Facebook had met someone on NewYorkDating.com!

“Show me.” The words were out before he could consider how childish they sounded. But his mother rose from the couch without hesitation, leading him to

the old computer she used to play Solitaire and balance her checkbook. She had the page bookmarked, along with hundreds of recipes she hadn't used in years.

Paul Hewett. He was sixty-two years old, from Teaneck, NJ. A data-analyst who worked in NYC. Grown daughters, the loves of his life. A widower. He was handsome enough, silver-haired, a bit of extra weight on him.

“We’ve been talking on the phone,” his mother admitted.

“How long?”

“Well, just since you mentioned the website.”

“That’s only been like two weeks ago.”

She turned and looked at him, concern gone, something more peaceful in her eyes.

“I’m not marrying the man, honey. I’m just having a friend over.”

Milo studied his mother for a long time. The silvery wisps in her auburn hair, the tired lines beneath vibrant blue eyes, the trace of a smile about her lips. She’d been sad for so long. She deserved to be happy.

“What are you fixing?” Milo finally asked.

“Well, I thought we’d have a garden salad with those cherry tomatoes that Lisa from down the street brought me yesterday, and then Chicken Parmesan with baby carrots, and I’ve got a cobbler ready to go into the oven.”

Not a casserole. She was making a *real* meal again.

“I’ll call somebody,” he promised her without hesitation. “I’ll definitely make sure I have plans tonight.”

He wasn’t supposed to have his cell phone out while he was on the circulation desk. Mrs. Anderson said it set a bad example for all the students. But he couldn’t help sneaking glances at the screen. Maybe Danny hadn’t even received his message. Maybe he thought Milo was ignoring him. But Danny could have called... *You could call too, y’know*, the reasonable side of Milo argued back.

Milo suddenly realized there was a heavy gaze on his face and he looked up, expecting to find a grade-schooler with a pile of books. Instead, Melissa Goode stood in front of him, her braids pushed back behind her shoulders, her hands on her hips. There was a fierce little scowl on her face, and her bottom lip protruded in a small pout. She actually stamped her foot.

“Melissa?” Milo asked dumbly. He didn’t know why he hadn’t expected to see the little girl again. Just because he and her guardian had maybe-possibly broken up didn’t mean she wouldn’t use the school library. He smiled weakly at her. Her expression did not change.

“Why haven’t you come over to play?”

She did not whisper.

Kids at the study tables looked up, and he tried to get her to drop her voice by dropping his.

“Melissa, not so loud, please.”

“No!”

She was usually so sweet and rule-abiding. But the little girl who stood before him now in her knee-socks and pleated, plaid skirt looked as sassy and petulant as a teenager.

“You and Danny were supposed to take me to the movies last Sunday.”

Jesus. They were, weren’t they? That new Disney movie was out. It had been in his phone, color-coded green. All his plans with Danny and Melissa were in green. But it wasn’t like he could just swing by their apartment and pick her up if he and Danny weren’t together. He’d counted on Danny to handle this—to explain it to her.

“Danny...” he said, his voice barely a whisper, “and I aren’t seeing each other right now.”

Her brown eyes narrowed.

“*Why?*”

What was he supposed to say? Because Danny didn’t want to see him? Because Danny’s life was too busy for him? Because maybe Danny felt like he couldn’t balance both a relationship with Melissa and a relationship with Milo? Jesus, or because Milo had been shit in bed? Or given it up too easily? Or maybe... because... probably... Danny was scared.

“I don’t know.”

“Milo!” She finally dropped her voice, though it was a stage whisper. “You’re my *friend*. And you’re *Danny’s* friend. And Bunny misses you too! Please...” Her eyes welled with tears, and he was struck by how immediately he was affected by them. “Please don’t fight with Danny anymore.”

“I’m sorry, honey.”

She screwed up her face and let an angry huff of air out through her nostrils.

“I’m coming back tomorrow,” she told him defiantly.

“Melissa...”

“I’m *coming back*,” she said.

The next day she returned, marching straight up to the checkout desk, her eyes serious, her mouth set in a straight little line. She placed a white envelope on the counter, nodded once, and then walked away without a word.

In her distinct handwriting, Melissa had written:

To: Mylow

From: Danny

Chapter 13

Fuck.

It had been over a week. Too damned long to casually reply now and yet the text stayed there at the top of his messages where he'd starred it. The lieutenant had called Danny into his office and delivered the good news personally. Things had piled up quickly after that. He'd gotten the job at the RTCC. That meant three separate after-hours celebrations with the guys, dinner at Hammer's one night, Melissa's gymnastics, paperwork, double shifts, and all the shit he'd been putting off to spend time with Milo, came back on him hard. There hadn't been time to think. To breathe. He was lucky when Bunny got her daily walk and Melissa made it to school with her hair in braids. The text message... He hadn't forgotten, he just hadn't wanted to answer that dangling message with an emoticon. It deserved a real, face-to-face conversation

Is that a bad thing?

No. Of course not. It was the exact fucking opposite of a bad thing. It was an amazing thing. Milo Swaisbrick was in Danny's bloodstream. He wanted him in his house, on his couch, at his table, in his bed. He wanted to go on more dates: him, Milo, Melissa, and Bunny.

A bad thing?

It was the best goddamned thing that had happened to Danny in a long time.

He'd always been crap at dating. Every relationship he'd ever had always ended when he'd done something, or, more often, *not* done something. Like not showing up for dates. Not returning calls. Putting work before his lover. And there was Melissa to consider, too.

Except that was crap, wasn't it?

Because before, the women in his life had been frightened of Melissa. The cute, precocious, super-smart kiddo. Melissa ran the show and his girlfriends had known that fact and they were apprehensive. But Milo had never tried to get between him and his little girl—in fact, Milo encouraged family time. He seemed content to wait for kissing until Melissa had gone to bed, thought up things they could do together with her, spoke to her like she was an adult, and never tried to push her into the background.

Danny smirked and rubbed at the knot of tension that was forming in his neck.

Hell, if anything, Milo could stand to be a little more selfish.

It wasn't Melissa that was the problem.

And it wasn't work. Danny would have to put in the time at the RTCC, but he wouldn't be on call. He'd have a regular shift—he'd have set times off. Time he could spend with Milo.

"What's the matter, princess? Girlfriend neglecting you?"

Hammer.

Danny looked up, his lips quirking. "Last time you're gonna get to call me that, Hammer."

"Don't remind me. I'm heartbroken." He clutched at his chest, stumbling dramatically. But Danny knew better. Hammer's wife had confided to Danny, during one of his celebratory meals, "*He's really going to miss you.*"

"Chance for you to break in another rookie."

"Do like breakin' rookies."

For a moment the older man was silent and then, clearing his throat, he thrust his hand out toward Danny. Danny took his partner's hand and shook it.

"This is going to be good for you and Melissa."

"Yeah."

"Not going to have to worry so much about getting shot."

"It'll definitely put her mind at ease."

"Melissa? Nah, I was talking about you. I'm sure you cry yourself to sleep every damned night. Maybe they'll give me a partner with some real experience this time."

Danny couldn't help himself. He laughed.

"And don't worry about that girlfriend, kid. Whatever you did to screw it up, flowers'll make it better."

"And you know this from twenty years married to Elle?"

"Nah, I saw it in a movie once."

"Hammer?" Danny laughed. "The girlfriend's a boyfriend."

"Christ, kid. You're waitin' 'til now to tell me?"

"Wasn't anything to tell until now."

Might still not be anything to tell. Jesus. He hoped it wasn't too late.

“Well, try the flowers anyway.”

“C'mon!” Melissa cried, dragging Danny up the hall by his hand. She'd met him in the inside hallway of their apartment complex when he got home. Before he'd had a chance to even say 'hello', she was tugging on him, begging him to follow her *faster*. “I've got something to show you! I brought something home from school!”

“Okay,” Danny said, trying not to be terse with her. His head was so consumed with thoughts of Milo that he could barely get any rest, and Melissa's exuberant personality was wearing him down. Flowers. Shit, a phone call might be a better start.

Melissa threw open their front door, skirted around Bunny who had come to welcome whatever intruders might be breaking into the apartment, and threw her arms wide, shouting, “Ta-da! This is an in-ter-vention!”

Danny stepped over the threshold, closed the door, and stopped. Mrs. Palmer was in one chair and Milo Swaisbrick was sitting on the couch looking as miserable and run-down as Danny felt. Miserable and run-down, but beautiful.

“Milo?”

Goddamn, how he'd wanted to see him.

“Got your letter.”

Milo held up a sheet of notebook paper, the edges all crinkled from having been torn out of a spiral. Even from that distance, Danny could see Melissa's labored handwriting. Milo smiled at him sadly, “You said to come 'very, very, very soon'. I figured three 'very's meant it had to be important.”

“Can I see *my* letter?” Danny asked, reaching across the coffee table. Melissa tried to grab it out of Milo's hand, but Danny caught it and swung it up in an arc away from her. She hopped around him like Bunny when someone had a treat for her. “Settle,” he told Melissa, though she ignored him.

“You don't need to read it!” she begged.

Dear Mylow,

*Please come to my house. I am sorry for being mean to you.
Melissa is sad. She wants to see you. And I want to see you.*

And Bunny wants to see you. Because I think we should be boy friends again. Please come to my house very, very, very soon.

Your friend,

Danny

“You can see why I couldn’t stay away,” Milo said quietly.

Danny looked down at Melissa who had stopped jumping. She hung her head, knowing she was about to get in trouble. Instead he just tousled her hair and took a seat next to her babysitter, Mrs. Palmer.

“So... an intervention, huh? How do you even know what that means, kiddo?”

“Me and Mrs. Palmer watch *Intervention* at her house all the time.”

“Mrs. Palmer and I, chickee,” she corrected in her loftiest accent. “And I’ll have you know that’s untrue, Mr. McCrea.”

Danny raised an eyebrow at the babysitter.

She worried the beaded purse in her lap and adjusted her kitschy cat-eyed glasses.

“Maybe *I* watch it, but Melissa knows she’s not allowed.”

“You can’t fight with Milo anymore, Danny!” Melissa cried, saving Mrs. Palmer from further scrutiny. She came to kneel right in front of Danny, grabbing his hand and squeezing it.

“We’re not fighting,” Danny promised, looking up at Milo who smiled weakly back at him. How could Danny have been so stupid? Leaving the text for as long as he did? “I just...”

“Don’t you like him anymore, Danny?” God, she had no tact. “Because *I* like him! He’s really fun and he likes Bunny. He’s nice and he likes kids! And I think he likes you too. Don’t you, Milo?”

Milo nodded slowly. “I do.”

“I like you, too,” Danny admitted. “But—”

“I figured I’d come hear it from you,” Milo said with a quiet smile. “Since you never answered my text. I figured you’re not the kind of guy who just ‘forgets’ to break up with someone so... if it doesn’t work out, it doesn’t work out. But... shouldn’t we at least *see*, y’know, if it’s going to work out?”

Danny looked around the room, at Mrs. Palmer's stern expression, at Melissa's hopeful gaze, at Bunny who quirked her doggie eyebrows at him, and at Milo who stared with nothing but warmth in his eyes. As his smile crept out, Danny's heart melted. He walked slowly over to Milo and reached for his hands, taking them both in his own and squeezing them.

"I wanted to look you in the eyes when I told you. It's not a bad thing that I like you too much. Not at all."

"What are you saying?" Melissa cried. "I can't hear you, Danny."

"Cause I'm talking to Milo now, kiddo, not you."

Milo looked around Danny's legs and promised the little girl, "We're good, Melissa."

"Friends again?" she asked excited.

"Friends again."

Danny stroked the backs of Milo's hands and looked down at him. "I've 'frigged' up every relationship I've ever had," he warned Milo. "I mean, totally, royally 'frigged' it. And I didn't really care before, because I had my job and I had Melissa, but with you—"

"You don't want to mess it up," the librarian said, astutely. "Well, I'm pretty much exactly the opposite. I've never had a relationship *to mess up*. I don't even know what I'm doing."

"You're wonderful," Danny assured him.

"I've missed you. I wanted to call, but I figured you didn't want me—"

"I was an ass."

"Danny!" Melissa chided harshly and stuck her thumb toward the swear jar on the entryway table. Unconsciously, he dug in his pocket and tossed her a quarter.

"I was a... *jerk*," he corrected. "I should have called, should have talked to you about it. Time just got away from me and I really wanted to say it to your face—"

If Danny ever thought that Milo was a shy wallflower, he'd only have to remember this moment to know how wrong the sentiment was.

"I like being with you. I like talking. I like spending time with you and Melissa. I... like kissing," Milo said very quietly, but not so quiet that Melissa didn't hear him.

“Are you guys going to kiss *again*?” she nearly squealed, running back over from the jar. “You can’t kiss if you’re not going to be boyfriend and boyfriend!”

Danny wondered where the child got these rules about love and dating.

“And I kinda like *you*,” Milo finished quietly. “A lot. You’ve got a stressful job. I get that. You ever try being a librarian? Three hundred tiny, very demanding readers coming at you all day long?”

“So I guess we’re doing this.” Danny pulled Milo off the couch. “We can’t kiss unless we’re boyfriends. So...?”

“Not ‘just dating’,” Milo agreed. “*Boyfriends*.”

“I approve!” Melissa cried in such an adorably adult voice that neither man could hide his grin.

“I guess you want to weigh in on this too, Mrs. Palmer?”

“Only to say that if you’re wanting Melissa at my house tonight, I’ll be charging the evening rates.”

Chapter 14

Their first time had been so hurried. Tongues and hands and a desperate need. Danny had barely slowed down enough to ease himself inside of Milo so that he didn't hurt him. And then their bodies had writhed against each other, rocking, pounding, swelling to the point where they both broke over that edge and came. Hard and fast. And it was over and then Milo had gone home.

Now, Melissa was gone for the night. They could be as loud as they wanted, go as long and hard as they wanted. They could do it anywhere they felt like. He could carry Milo buckass naked into the living room and have him on the couch or the kitchen table or in front of the ornamental fireplace. He could learn how to give head, teach Milo how he liked it. They could play with each other, experiment, luxuriate in one another. And they could do it as many times as they wanted. The anticipation of it went straight to Danny's cock.

But there was more.

As they undressed one another, pulling clothing off over their heads, tossing shirts, unbuckling pants, feeling the delicious lines of each other's bodies, memorizing the muscles, the skin, the freckles, the moles, the hair, caressing one another, there was something more. As wild as they made their second sexual encounter, after it was all over, Milo was staying the night. He'd curl up into Danny's side and fall asleep, and Danny would hold him, and in the morning, he'd wake up to that gorgeous sight in his bed. It was almost enough for Danny to say screw the sex and pull Milo down for an early bedtime.

Almost.

Milo moved close to Danny, shuttering out the last little light between them. He stretched up, twining bare arms around Danny's neck and when he kissed him, it was open mouthed and hungry. He felt Milo's hard member pressing against him. Brave, bold Milo.

"Condoms?" Danny murmured.

"You never have to ask," Milo said.

Danny's brain was shorting out on him. All he wanted was to feel Milo, to grind his stiff cock against, and then into, the other man, but something flickered at the back of his brain. Something that he needed to clarify.

"You're my boyfriend," he said.

“I know,” Milo murmured. *Shut up, Danny*, Milo’s kiss demanded.

“No, I want you to know.” He pulled his mouth away from the tantalizing kiss and the intoxicating taste of Milo Swaisbrick. “When I’m with someone, I’m *with* them.”

Milo smiled. “I sort of took that for granted. I guess I’m still dumb about all this dating stuff.”

“Don’t worry,” Danny promised, kissing the pulse at Milo’s temple, the soft flesh of his earlobe, the delicious expanse of neck, his collarbone, and then up again, over his chin, back to those swollen lips. “We’ll figure out all those details together.”

They moved to the bed, Milo pushing Danny back against the cool mattress. Danny grinned up at his lover, liking the way he took charge. He bent his knees, his manhood rigid and waiting. “Come here,” he said. He wanted Milo on top of him, wanted to be able to dig his fingers into Milo’s hips and control the rhythm.

Milo was shy as he climbed on top of Danny, bending over him to kiss him. He straddled the other man, his knees digging into Danny’s hips.

“How do I...?” Milo’s voice came out low and raspy. He tilted his hips just enough so that his backside rubbed against Danny’s quivering cock. Danny longed to fill Milo, and he was just cognizant enough to know he needed to loosen the other up first. He molded and stroked and teased Milo’s penis until the younger man’s dark brows furrowed and he groaned in pleasure and need. With his free hand, Danny reached up and played around Milo’s mouth, working two fingers between his lips, glorying in the way Milo began to suck at them.

“Uhn!” Danny groaned, each slurp making him harder, more desperate for Milo. Liquid beaded on the head of Danny’s cock, and he reluctantly pulled his wet fingers free, reaching around Milo until he found that waiting hole. Gently at first, he worked one finger inside, coaxed and probed until Milo was moving up and down on it. Then the second finger followed the first. He went to the second knuckle and teased that spot inside of Milo that made the other man cry out in pleasure.

“More?” Danny asked. “Deeper?”

“Yes,” Milo begged. “Please, God, yes, Danny!”

He pushed his fingers inside until they physically wouldn’t go any further and still Milo seemed desperate for him, desperate to be filled.

“You’re beautiful, Milo Swaisbrick,” Danny whispered, gently pulling his fingers in and out. He could easily make Milo come just from those fingers and the way he stroked and played with his cock. “I thought you were beautiful the first time I saw you. I wanted you the first time I saw you.”

“More,” Milo breathed, his eyes glazed over, his cheeks flushed. “Please—! Please—!”

Danny was happy to oblige. He replaced his fingers with his aching member, shoving hard inside of Milo, whose entrance stretched and gripped him. Words disappeared. Thoughts disappeared. There was only the place where they were joined, there was only the rhythmic act, and the groans and the sweat and the building pressure in his balls. There was only them and this moment and this lust and—

Milo came first, grinding down hard against Danny’s cock, hot liquid squirting out between his fingers and splattering Danny’s chest. The gripping pulse of his hole sent Danny splurting over the edge. He grabbed the back of Milo’s head and pulled him down into a desperate kiss as he filled his lover.

When the pleasure ebbed away and all that was left was the delicious sensation of floating, Milo collapsed next to Danny, pressing against his side. In that moment, neither man cared about the mess.

Chapter 15

They heard Melissa bounding up the hall the next morning. Her footfalls were hard on the floor, and she chattered loudly to Mrs. Palmer who shushed her almost as loudly as Melissa spoke.

“Child, it’s not gone nine o’clock! Behave yourself.”

Danny was there to scoop Melissa into a hug when she ran through the front door.

“Did you have a good sleepover?” she asked happily, and then peered around him into the small kitchen where Milo was eating breakfast in one of Danny’s robes. “Milo! Did you have a good sleepover?”

Danny turned to see the blush on his boyfriend’s face. *Boyfriend*. It sounded good in his head. *Trying* sounded good. As for the sleepover? Best one of his life. Followed by a delicious good-morning quickie.

After he’d paid Mrs. Palmer and sent the Englishwoman on her way, Danny joined Melissa and Milo in the kitchen. Melissa had helped herself to a biscuit and two pieces of bacon. She sat in the chair, kicking her legs, and chattering happily.

“Where are we going today?” she asked, munching on the burnt end of the bacon.

“Are we going somewhere?” Danny teased, looking at Milo and smiling. “What if Milo already has plans?”

Melissa frowned deeply. “You guys got to have a sleepover last night. Today we’re going to play! Milo’s my friend too, Danny. You have to learn to share.”

“Well, the kid’s spoken.”

“How about Central Park?” Milo asked.

Melissa broke into the widest grin. “Can I walk Bunny?”

The dog’s little nub of a tail wagged wildly when she heard her name.

“No,” Danny said firmly.

“What if we walk her together?” Milo suggested and Melissa looked triumphantly at Danny. He could tell that the pair of them were going to be trouble.

His life had just expanded in new and impossible ways. It was going to be a challenge. But as Milo Swaisbrick smiled up at him, his eyes glimmering with mischief from behind his glasses, Danny knew it was a challenge he was excited to take on.

“I get to walk you, Bunny!” Melissa cried, abandoning her barely touched food, and tossing herself onto the floor with Bunny. Both of them rolled onto their backs together.

Danny leaned over their breakfast and lingered on the first of a million kisses to come.

The End

Author Bio

Raine O'Tierney is an always-writing, boundlessly enthusiastic, exclamation point addict! (!!!) She is known for declaring every day "the best day EVER!" and everything her "all-time FAVORITE!" Despite this (obnoxious?) exuberance, she still somehow manages to have a wonderfully encouraging husband (who also writes M/M rom!) and an amazing group of friends and colleagues who continue to support (read: put up with) her. Raine spends her days working as a library lady, fighting the good fight for intellectual freedom.

Raine tumbled headlong into the world of M/M romance after discovering yaoi back in 2004. A new passion was immediately born and her writing life became dedicated to men who love men! Raine frequently changes genres, but she always tries to imbue her stories with what she calls "The Sweetness" of which there are five Fs (first loves, first times, fidelity, forever-type endings, and... friskiness?).

After twenty-plus years of writing and dreaming, a decade spent working on M/M, and a year of being a lionheart, Raine is so pleased to finally be able to tell people, "I'm a published author!"

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If you enjoyed these stories and want more, be sure to look for the other sixteen volumes in the Love's Landscapes Anthology series, as well as the five special bonus volumes, available for free download at M/M Romance Group.com

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