

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



LOVE'S LANDSCAPES  
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 17

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance Anthology*

## Volume 17

### 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 17.

### 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.

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## Ebook Layout and Navigation

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

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

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

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

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# WET DREAMS AND ADULT REVELATIONS

By Tara Spears

## Photo Description

That's me, with all the tattoos, at my twenty-first birthday party. The guy next to me is my best friend, Josh, and the one taking the pictures... let's just say I have a bit of a crush on Eric, and I know I shouldn't. He's only seventeen after all, but he drives me crazy with the way he looks at me, like he'd ravage me given the chance. God, I hope when he's legal, I can give him the chance to do just that.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*Do you see the black man on the end? The one with all the hot tattoos? We used to be co-workers at a fast food place when I was in high school. He was a little older than I was, so he was the assistant manager and I was just a skinny white kid. I had such a crush on him and he was so sweet to me. We even went out one night with a group to celebrate his twenty-first. I wasn't twenty-one yet, but that's never really stopped anyone, has it? After I graduated I moved away and I figured I would never see him again. Recently I moved back to my old town and one morning I visited the local coffee shop, surprised to find it remodeled and with a new owner, my old assistant manager. He's still got that great smile and now I'm old enough I'm ready to make a move.*

*Tell me what happens when we reunite and give us our HEA.*

Sincerely,

Shanna

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** sweet, first time, interracial, tattoos, barista, engineer, family drama, reunited

**Word Count:** 14,751

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*Acknowledgements*

Thank you for the lovely prompt Shanna, I hope I did it justice. A special, heartfelt, thank you to the M/M Romance group, and the faithful, ever-fabulous volunteers who donate their time to put this event together. Without you, there would be no stories to write!

# **WET DREAMS AND ADULT REVELATIONS**

**By Tara Spears**



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## Chapter One

“Ma...” I told her not to unpack my suitcase, yet she did, and now I couldn't find a damn thing. “Ma!”

“Eric, I'm not deaf, so no need to yell,” she called back in the same voice she used to use when I was a kid. Booming and slightly irritated.

*And what exactly was that, if not yelling?* Annoyed, I stepped out of my room, and glanced at her in a frumpy housecoat covered in bluebirds. Since Dad passed on, she'd kinda let herself go. *Kinda?* Fifty pounds wasn't that... yeah, it was. It was a lot on her frame. Her face was still the same though, always looking slightly put out, no matter the situation. Like now, her hands were on her hips—at least I assumed they were on her hips, it was hard to tell—and her brows were raised beneath those perfect salon-blond bangs of hers.

I gave her a daringly sweet smile. “Where, might I ask, are my work shirts?”

“Oh... well...” She waved a dismissive hand. “They smelled funny, so I washed them.”

I gave her a suspicious glance. They had been clean when I packed them. “Funny how?”

She gave me the once-over, just as she had ever since learning her son preferred the beauty of the male form over the soft curves of a female's. “Like perfume,” she said, with a huff of indignation.

God forbid her son should smell good. “Like my lilac laundry soap... great,” I said, exasperated, pinching the bridge of my nose, an ache forming behind my eyes. “Are they at least in the dryer?”

“Mmm...”—glancing over her shoulder, her lips pressed together—“no, not yet.”

I tossed my hands up. “Fabulous! You knew I had to be at the site this morning.” I dove back in my room to find a button-down, and the lanyard that, hopefully, had my badge on it. I reminded myself I loved my mother, I really did, and that strangling her, no matter how lovingly I did it, would probably be taken wrong.

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Walking into my old coffee house haunt, I glanced around, taking in the bland interior, and walked right back out. I stared at the sign for a moment, making sure I was in the right place, not that Long Beach was a mecca of coffee houses. There were two, along with a few drive-thrus.

I headed back in to what had become part of the establishment... establishment of *boredom*. Gone were the mismatched comfortable chairs and loveseats, antique bistro tables, and the small black stage in the back corner. Everything was now in varying tones of tan, and it was like walking into *nothing*. Well, the chairs were these uncomfortable looking, sea-green and chrome things... I guess they provided a smidge of color.

The order counter was the color of sandstone, and the Torani bottles looked out of place in this ocean of drab. The shop wasn't totally deserted. There were two silver-haired folks, probably retired tourists, tucked at a table in the back corner. I rang the bell, since the counter *was* deserted.

A man came through a swinging door, wiping his hands on a towel. "Sorry, just catching up while it's slow."

I couldn't help wondering if it was like this at eight thirty in the morning, when, and what, constituted a rush. The swart guy dropped his towel over the edge of a stainless sink, and turned to face me, a smile in place. I blinked as my pulse rocketed, that smile still able to affect me like no one else's.

"What can I get for you?" Taz didn't appear to recognize me, but even after five years I remembered him, and my body seemed to, too. That last part came as a bit of a shock, actually.

I hadn't been exactly chaste in college. I had been so keen on losing my virginity, that the first guy who showed any interest got the job. And it was so spectacular I couldn't have recalled his name if someone held a gun to my head. Rough, cold, and painful would be better adjectives to describe my deflowering, but, oh no, I hadn't stopped there. Stupid and needy, my days as a lackey were something I preferred not to think about. Yet despite having left college quite insensate, I felt my whole being basking in the glow of Taz's smile—as I always had. Maybe first crushes were never really forgotten.

I looked at him, practically willing him to remember me as I placed my order. He wouldn't though. Back when he knew me, I had been a pale, skinny kid, all sharp angles, and lacking any form of coordination. I had followed him like a lost pup begging for scraps, or in my case; a soft look, his fabulous smile, or God forbid, a touch. Those rare touches had been hormonal lightning to a

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seventeen year old. Most times, I couldn't get home from work fast enough... and other times—if it was early in my shift—home proved much too far away. I couldn't even imagine what that beat-up Honda smelled like back then, with the multitude of sex-smearred napkins shoved hastily under the driver's seat.

I ducked my head, afraid Taz would see my thoughts. Then squared it back on my shoulders, remembering I wasn't that meek, unknowing kid anymore.

“Four dollars and twenty-five cents.” Taz canted his head as I paid, and for a second, I thought he might have figured out who I was, but then he closed the cash drawer, and set to making my drink.

A few minutes later, he set it at the end of the counter where a sign read: pickup.

“Enjoy,” he said, with another winning smile as he turned, and began wiping the sink down. Retrieving my vanilla mocha, I headed out the door, feeling foolish for not introducing myself. Today, however, wasn't a good day, with everything that needed to be checked at the site before the environmental impact statement could be filed. Maybe tomorrow... or next Friday might be better... yeah, I was sure I could get the courage up by then. I sighed as I climbed into my truck, the ghost of my teenage self clinging to me like damn Saran Wrap.

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## Chapter Two

Thankfully, I had grown out of my slovenly ways, and sex wasn't the end-all-be-all anymore. Although a date would be nice. Maybe dinner, handholding, and even a goodnight kiss would be deeply appreciated. I enjoyed kissing, and cuddling, and even sleeping with guys—sleep being the optimum word there.

Pulling out of the small parking lot, I sighed and shook my head beratingly. I was the most pathetic male on the planet. When had I gone from having a jack-in-the-box living in my pants to cringing whenever a guy gave me a salacious look? Back in California there had been plenty of guys interested, but like a scared mouse, I had always run home, preferring to date the untouchable men on my laptop. At least I could say I practiced safe sex, even if it was the cowardly version.

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Arriving home in the dark, the porch light off—*thanks, Ma*—my head was pounding out a pretty decent rendition of: *Oh my God, kill me now*, the equalizer completely out of whack, causing my left eye to twitch. It wouldn't be long until people figured out who I was, but right now my anonymity was proving useful against the onslaught of irate citizens. It was a given that the company I was working for were slime. They had bought out Mr. Grimes' cottages, and evicted some longtime residents from their homes in order to build a resort that would encompass the marshlands—an area many were set on preserving.

That was precisely why I was here. Eric Houge, environmental engineer. More like environmental wizard, since this project would require some magic, and a hell of a lot of luck. I rubbed my tired face as I stepped into the house.

Ma beamed at me from her recliner, *Jeopardy* on the television. "How was your day?"

"I wish I was Irish." *Because I could use a boatload of luck about now.* How the protestors had found out about the fucking boardwalk was beyond me... And now, I had to figure out a way to make the thing pretty much invisible to every living creature in order to keep everyone happy. *Woohoo, yay me!* Yet, no matter how I sliced it, I couldn't visualize a way to do that without pissing off a crapload of people.

My mom's face scrunched up. "What?" she asked, confused.

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I flipped my hand, giving her a low-energy head shake. “Nothing. I’m beat and not very coherent at the moment.” I took in my mom’s expectant expression, and decided I wasn’t up for a cheery chat about my day. “I have some paperwork to do, then I’m going to hit the hay.”

Her face fell. “There’s some casserole in the fridge,” she said hopefully.

I turned so she wouldn’t see me blanch. She was an okay cook—I hadn’t gotten food poisoning growing up, anyway—but her casseroles had always been questionably edible. Not enough cheese, not enough salt... I never could figure out what was missing. “Thanks, but I picked something up on the way home.”

She nodded stiffly as I headed to my room, wondering again what had possessed me to accept her invitation to stay here. Without even thinking, I knew the answer. Ever since Dad lost his battle with cancer, she had been slowly turning into a recluse, and it wasn’t in her nature to be antisocial. I hoped my presence would nip that problem. Of course, I probably had to spend time with her in order for that to actually work.

I would, just not tonight. It had been a day of placating the public, and trying to keep them from tramping around the site. People didn’t seem able to comprehend the no trespassing signs, or the fact James Brothers Inc. now owned the marshlands, as well as the long stretch of beach adjacent to them. It was a logistics nightmare, and I had been assigned the tasks of mediator and security guard, even though neither were part of my job description.

With a rather woe-is-me sigh I sat down at the small desk—the same small desk where I had spent so many hours of my youth doing homework, chatting online, and after my parents had retired for the evening, behind the added security of my locked door, discovered the wonderful world of gay porn. I hadn’t *exactly* been one of those teens who hid their sexuality; there just hadn’t been many options in our small town for a hormone-crazed gay boy. A homophobic father might have had a small part in my chosen sedentary life too. Yet I preferred not to give him the power of having affected any part of my life. I managed to screw it up all on my own, thank you.

I opened the folder containing the plans for the boardwalk that meandered around the marshlands to the tide pools, and stared at the blueprints for the twentieth time today. An hour later, I was still staring at them, having written down, and rejected, a few ideas. None of them worked. They all required a system of pylons that would disturb the blue-winged teal’s nesting grounds.

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Hell, the construction alone would more than likely chase off the one pair of sandhill cranes who had been returning here to nest for the past six years. I couldn't even think about what this project would do to the local butterfly population... they were a bit too close to my heart. Leaning back, the chair groaning threateningly, I closed my eyes. Maybe taking this job had been a mistake.

I fully expected the butterflies that had befriended me in my youth to be fluttering angrily behind my eyelids, however, the image of Taz's sexy smile flashing through had me snapping forward, cracking my knees against the low desk. "*Fuck...*" I hissed, rubbing at the sharp pain.

Where the hell had that come from? I'd dreamed about it plenty, but he'd never *actually* flashed that sexy smile at me. The first time I saw him unleash that bad boy had been at his twenty-first birthday bash. He'd allowed me to tag along, although I've never understood why.

I'd only been seventeen at the time, yet that hadn't stopped me nipping—or guzzling, for that matter, from people's unguarded beers. Taz had been working his way past tipsy when he let that smile out to play, aiming it at Josh and his girlfriend. I stared unabashed, mesmerized by his wavering aim and the slight blush that lit his dark skin every time it landed on Josh.

I almost fainted when I caught Josh returning a playful smirk. Of course, the beer had completely gone to my head by that point, and afraid I might do something idiotic—such as blurting out I was gay—I turned to flee, and literally crashed onto a couch, my face landing in some girl's lap. She shoved me off to the side, and I did pass out then. I awoke hours later, the apartment quiet, my upper body slumped over the arm of the couch.

Noisy breathing caught my attention, and with a slight lift of my head, my teenage world shifted. Josh and Taz ground against each other in every imaginable fashion. Lips to hips, their bodies undulating to an erotic rhythm only they could hear. In that moment I would have given anything to be Josh. It was all so sensual, sexy, beguiling, and invigorating.

It was also false. Since that magical early dawn, I had come to understand what I witnessed had been nothing more than alcohol-induced bewitchery. Passion seemed to be a myth of the mind, something we searched for that didn't truly exist. A bit like an environmentally friendly fucking boardwalk.

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I could have stayed a few minutes sipping coffee, eating Eggos, and spending some quality time with my mother, but I hadn't. I awoke edgy, and fled the house before she even had a chance to say anything to me. Maybe it was guilt for not coming home after Dad died, or maybe it was because I couldn't stand her looking at me as if I had grown two heads. She'd been doing that since I told her I was gay, two years ago, after Dad died. She didn't do it all the time, but enough to make me feel as if I had changed in some inexplicable way I was unaware of.

More than likely, however, it was my own guilt. I felt helpless when I looked at her now, always in housecoats or loose-fitting sweats, rarely leaving the house—and it bugged me that I didn't know how to fix her.

I turned the truck off, and stepped out into the biting wind. Jesus, it felt more like winter than spring. As I closed the door, I glanced up, and blinked. *Huh. How'd I get here?* Best's Coffee squatted directly in front of the chrome bumper of my truck. I'd heard people talk about driving somewhere and not remembering how they got there, but it had never happened to me. I was a damn precise person who paid attention to his surroundings. Or at least, I thought I did.

There was no denying Taz had drawn me here. Teenage fantasies had returned to taunt me through the night, leaving me with damn impressive morning wood, and thankfully a dry crotch. I seemed to have finally outgrown the sticky reaction those dreams used to have on me.

The same flurry of giddiness that had ruled me in my youth returned to wreak havoc on my insides as I approached the entrance. As I opened the glass door, the wind gusted through, sending a few dry leaves skittering across the sandstone tiles, and making it feel as if I were being shoved from behind. Napkins lifted off tables, taking flight, and were captured by patrons before they could truly escape. With a lift of my shoulders, I smiled apologetically as I made my way to the short line.

The coffee shop was busier this morning, but still far from crowded. Somewhere around ten customers occupied tables, while an additional three stood before me in line. Taz whirled behind the counter, taking orders, and making drinks efficiently. He had always had an air of calm about him. Even when all hell would break loose at Shoreline Burgers, he kept his cool. I guess that's the reason he was the assistant manager and I was a fry cook. Of course, he was four years older than me, and truth be told, I was his biggest troublemaker. Why he never smacked me upside the head, I'll never know—God knows I deserved it.

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I perused the pastries while Taz finished the previous customer's drink order. Through the clear case, I had a tantalizing view of blue boxers and a splash of dark skin along his back where his shirt had ridden up. His red long-sleeve tee covered his tats, but I knew they were there, having stared at them enough whenever I caught him shirtless on the beach. My eyes registered movement and instinctually flicked up, colliding with the warmth of Taz's thousand-watt smile.

"Handsome stranger's back. I must have done something right," Taz said in his soft, raspy voice. God, I'd forgotten how sexy it was. *Wait...* he just called me handsome.

I cleared my suddenly dry throat. "Um, yeah." *Smooth, Houge.* Four years of college and *so* articulate. "I don't know about the handsome part, but I'm not as strange as you think." *And that was sooo much better!*

He laughed. If he only knew how much I had stalked him, or how many wet dreams he had starred in, I doubted he'd be laughing. His laugh was infectious, however, and I found myself chuckling.

I scratched my cheek. "Mmm, maybe I am strange," I admitted, then leveled my gaze on his dark, dancing eyes. "You don't recognize me, do you?"

A slight smile remained, yet his brows vee'd giving away his confusion. "I wouldn't forget a guy like you." A smear of color painted his neck, and his eyes flicked down. *Wow*, Taz was flirting with me.

I leaned towards him. "You did though. We used to work together at Shoreline Burgers."

Chocolate eyes rose and narrowed, while the bridge of his nose scrunched up. He leaned on his hands, his head tipping like a dog trying to figure out if I was friendly or not. My fingers twitched in my coat pocket, wanting to smooth the lines from his nose and brow. God, he was cute right now. *I did not just call Terrence Best cute.*

"Eric..." I said, ignoring my internal eye roll. "Houge."

His eyes narrowed further, challenging the validity of my statement. "No way..." he breathed, blinking slowly, as if trying to see what he didn't believe.

Smirking, I glanced down, removing my hands from the safety of my pockets, and running them over my shirt. "I was when I looked in the mirror this morning." I nodded assuredly. "Yep, I appear to still be him."



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Taz chuckled. "Cute."

I raised my eyebrows. "First handsome, and now cute. I think I'm on a roll."

He opened his mouth, then hesitated, color infusing his cheeks. "Cute," he said again.

"You already said that," I pointed out, enjoying his discomfort. I had always been the one stammering around him, so this role reversal was... entertaining, to say the least. I offered my hand. "It's good to see you again, Taz."

His smile returned as he clasped my hand. "Likewise." Although his grip was firm, I felt a tremble in the tip of his fingers, saw his eyes warm, and I shifted uncomfortably over the instant reaction his touch could still evoke. Releasing my hand, he stepped to the register. "So, Eric, what can I get for you?"

The laughter came unbidden, from a crevice where it had been hiding for some time. I wasn't exactly sure what lured it out. Possibly the flirty tone Taz had used, or the knowing warmth lingering in his eyes, or the hilarious fact my body still reacted as if I were a teenager around him. Whatever the reason, it rolled out of me until I was breathless. The other patrons probably thought me a mental case, but Taz only looked on with amusement.

Once I managed to straighten up, I shook my head apologetically. "Sorry, I don't know what that was about..." I dabbed my eyes with my palms. "Yeah, okay, a tall vanilla mocha, and..." I leaned over, looking in the case again. "Does that cranberry thing have nuts in it?"

"Pecans, actually."

"No nuts, I'm allergic—"

Taz snorted softly, then quickly cleared his throat. "I'll have to remember that."

A smile was fighting for control of my face, but I refused to succumb, afraid another bout of ridiculous laughter might escape. I could feel it right there, effervescing happily beneath my skin, making me all tingly.

"The lemon cake doesn't contain any... ah, nuts." Taz gestured to a dainty little yellow slab coated in powdered sugar, and my nose crinkled at the mention of lemon. "Hmm..." he frowned in concentration, then his eyes snapped wide, "Oh, the blueberry strudel." He tapped the shelf where a few fat, oozy, streusel-coated, frosting-oppressed calorie monsters hunkered.

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God, the things looked sinful. “I’ll take one of those then, and no whipped cream on the mocha, or I’ll go into sugar shock for sure.” I pulled out my wallet.

“Boy, no nuts and no whipped cream...” Taz tisked under his breath, probably assuming I couldn’t hear him since he was tucked behind the case.

I handed him the cash, and took the pastry bag. “I’m not against whipped cream... on *certain* things.” Taz’s cinnamon-skin came to mind, lighting my face on fire, and further hardening what was already pretty damn hard from just being around him. Taz’s chest rose and fell in rapid succession, hinting he just might be up for that. At least, I hoped that was the case, or I’d be too embarrassed to show my face in here again after all my shameless flirting.

The card he slid into my hand when I retrieved my coffee, gave me hope that we were, indeed, on the same page.

“My cell’s on the back. Maybe you’ll call me sometime, and we can catch up.”

Grinning stupidly, I pocketed the card, and practically floated out the door. Once outside, I gulped the salt-seasoned air, feeling the panic of what I’d just done settle in. It had been two years since I’d flirted with a sassy blond, sporting teal and black streaks through his hair, and jeans so tight no man could comfortably wear them. It had been at a house party off campus, and we’d ended up in one of the rooms, in someone’s unmade bed, and that was where the fun ended. I blamed alcohol for my lackluster interest, but honestly, sex had become a source of anxiety for me, and the fact he wanted *me* to fuck *him*, something I’d never done, terrified me. From then on, I’d avoided anyone who might be interested in me that way.

I glanced through the window, catching sight of Taz with his elbows on the counter, head tucked, hands roaming over his tight curls. Maybe he was having second thoughts too.

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Regardless of my insecurity, I found myself at Best’s Coffee the very next morning. A pert redhead gal manning the counter gave me an expectant look, and I mumbled my order. It took two more trips before I found the nerve to ask her where Taz was. A clipped *family emergency* had been my answer. Her cool tone didn’t encourage further inquiry, and I decided to take my coffee at home the rest of the week. Maybe I’d call him over the weekend... or maybe not.

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## Chapter Three

“Ma, I ran into Charlotte today...” Shrugging out of my wool coat, I hung it in the small coat closet. “Ma?” Hearing the TV on, I ambled around the corner, wondering why she hadn’t answered me.

She flailed her hand dismissively when she saw me. “I heard you.”

“She told me you’ve refused every invitation to rejoin your pinochle group.” She made a face over that, and I ignored it. “It sounds like they miss you, and really want you back.” I’d been trying to get her out of the house this past week, but she had been more than stubborn, refusing my dinner invitations, and even a trip to the library, a place she used to love. She sat in the recliner under an afghan, concentrating on *Animal Cops* as if I wasn’t even in the room. My blood began to simmer.

I yanked my tie free, just about strangling myself in the process. “Get off your ass before you root to that fucking chair.” I pointed a menacing finger at her, my burgundy tie lassoing my wrist, and draping demurely over the outstretched digit, completely ruining the effect. She scoffed, and hunkered deeper into the chair. God, she was being ridiculous! “You’re going to your pinochle group tonight, and if you’re not ready in ten minutes, I’m dragging you there *as you are*.” I stormed from the room, hoping she heeded my threat, because I wasn’t sure I’d be able to drag her anywhere if she refused to move.

By the time I had changed out of my suit into jeans and a T-shirt, what I had said—how I had talked to my own mother—sunk in. She wasn’t the enemy here. I was. My less-than-amiable mood the result of a day full of exasperating meetings with the city council, the planning commission, my boss, and to top it all off, I found my truck decorated with some lovely artwork—letting me know what the people in this town really thought of me. The bass head speared on my antennae had been a nice touch, but the egg-glued seashells had been the crowning glory. An hour at the carwash, and you could still see the swirl of a bingo dauber that had spelled out traitor along both doors. My mom had just been the icing on a shitty day.

I headed out to apologize to her, and found the family room dark, the TV off, and the afghan folded, hanging on the back of the recliner.

“Where are your shoes? You’re going to make me late!”

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Startled, I spun around. “Jesus, you’re going to give me a heart attack.” A quick breath through my nose calmed me. “Ma, I’m sorry. I had a bad day and shouldn’t have taken it out on you. You don’t have to go...”

She lifted her chin, running her hands down a linen pantsuit I’d never seen before. But then, any of the clothes I remembered wouldn’t fit her now. She looked nice.

“Maybe I want to.” Her voice carried a speck of indignation. I turned to get my shoes, and she laid a hand on my arm. “It’s a start, isn’t it?”

I smiled, and kissed her cheek. “A big one, Ma.”

Dropping her off, I watched as she was engulfed by her friends and dragged into the house. She had forgiven me, but I still felt like shit for yelling at her, even if it had gotten her off her ass.

On my way back to the house, I slowed as I passed my father’s old watering hole—or rather his home, since he spent more late nights here than with his family. Walt’s still looked the same as when I left, one of the few places that hadn’t changed. I went around the block and parked behind the rectangular ocean-battered structure.

“Watch this you sonofabitch...” I muttered, climbing from my truck. I hoped the alcoholic homophobe was watching his gay son walking into his favorite bar from wherever he was in the afterlife. Of course, he hadn’t known I was gay when he died, but I assumed he did now, and was turning over in his grave.

The scene hadn’t changed much, Walt’s daughter, Julie, was behind the bar tonight, rather than Walt. The same old drunks huddled on their stools at the shadowed end of the glass-topped bar, spending their fisherman’s pensions just as Dad had.

Julie made her way towards me, a smirk on her pretty face. “Heard you were in town.” She tucked her dark hair behind her ear before indicating the passel of stooped bodies at the end of the bar. “I could probably find a drunk who needs a ride...”

“That’s a low blow, even for you,” I retorted.

“It was, but you once told me the only time you’d ever step foot in a bar was to pick up your old man.”

I shrugged. “Things change. People grow up.”

She nodded, then reached out, stroking down my fingers. "Eric, I don't want to know if you're heading down that road."

I let out a cynical laugh. "I'm not my father, and I never will be." I promised myself *that* long ago—back when I used to clean up his puke from my truck after collecting his drunken ass from this very bar.

Julie smiled sympathetically, and I huffed at her. "So... are you going to take my order, or be Miss-high-and-mighty, and refuse me service?"

She shook her head, her hair falling from behind her ear. "Nope. What can I getcha?"

"A beer, whatever's decent on tap." I tossed a fiver on the bar, and received an approving smile in return. *Told you I wasn't my dad.* I couldn't stand whiskey or gin. Beer or wine worked just fine.

The wind gusted through the door as Julie set the glass in front of me. She looked over. "Hey boys. How's Maimie doing?"

I caught the waffle of dark fingers, indicating so-so, and my head tipped just enough to recognize the owner. Taz came towards the bar, sexy as hell in a skintight grey T-shirt. The discouraged look on his round face didn't fit him though, and Josh—as handsome as ever—was rubbing his back.

I gulped down half my beer before plastering on a cordial smile and turning to face them. "Taz, Josh, how nice to see *both* of you." There was a bit of snark there, but damn, seeing Taz with Josh wasn't setting well with me. What had all that flirting in the coffee shop been anyway? *Just flirting, you moron.*

Taz's dark eyes widened for an instant before he averted his gaze, a shy smile making its way across his face. Josh's green eyes narrowed, as he tried to work out who I was.

He shifted on his feet. "Do I know you?"

Taz laughed. "That's Eric Houge." Josh's mouth fell open. "I didn't recognize him at first either. Kinda grown up isn't he?" Taz's voice held a hint of perplexing admiration.

"I'll say..." *Did Josh just wink at Taz?* Josh snaked his arm around Taz and offered his hand. "Good to see you. God, what's it been... four years?"

Clasping Josh's hand, my knuckles grazed Taz's side, and I swear he pushed into the touch. "Five, actually." Josh leaned over Taz's shoulder, indicating he hadn't heard, and I cleared my throat. "Five, actually," I managed to say above a stage whisper.

Taz was swaying in the space between me and Josh as if he wasn't sure where he wanted to stand. Josh noticed and gave him a little shove. *Huh.*

Taz spun on his friend. "Stop it..." He glared up at Josh, but I didn't miss the look that flashed between them. Something was up, and it obviously involved me.

Josh shouldered Taz out of the way, retrieving two drinks off the bar Julie had evidently set there during our introductions.

He handed a cola and something to Taz. "I think I'm going to play some pool. You boys have fun." That time, the wink was unmistakable—and aimed right at me.

"I, um... thought, maybe..." Taz sighed, dropping his chin to his chest. "Damn," he breathed, then his head snapped up, eyes locking with mine. "I can do this... I really can."

The doubt in his voice made me smile. "Can you really?" I could feel the smirk tugging my lips.

He scratched his cheek, trying not to grin. "You were going to call me."

My brow pulled tight. "Yes..."

"But you didn't." His brows rose, but the warring grin remained.

"No. I was going to this weekend."

His hands found his hips. "Were you now?"

I battled my lips for control. "Yes."

"And?"

"And what?" I asked.

"What were you going to say, when you called?"

"Um..." I frowned at the scuffed floor.

"I'm waiting."

I shifted uncomfortably. I could do this, I could ask him out. "So, you're... would you..." I hesitated, rubbing the back of my neck.

"Yes..." Taz tipped his head, biting off his amusement.

"Jesus, get on with it already!" Julie blurted. A bar towel hit my face, and I flung it back at her. Taz started chuckling behind his hand. The towel flew

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back, and I gave her a *do you mind* look. She had her hands on her hips, her astute, cerulean eyes rolling.

I tucked the towel under my arm. "I think I'll keep this. I might need it later." That sent Taz into hysterics, and succeeded in sending her away, her nose wrinkled in disgust. I turned back to Taz. "So, what do you say?"

"To what?" His eyes gleamed.

"You're not going to make this easy are you?"

He moved until only inches separated his chest from mine. "No."

The smell of coffee wafted around me. I laughed, that teenage giddiness taking over. "Okay. I can do this..." I stared down at his white sneakers toed up to my brown loafers for a moment before meeting his teasing eyes again. "Would you be interested in going out to dinner with me?"

His index finger tapped his chin thoughtfully, drawing my eyes to the quirk of a smile taunting his agile lips. "Depends on when."

Man, they looked so smooth and soft, and I wondered for the hundredth time what it would be like to kiss him. "Tomorrow," I said, transfixed.

Warm fingers propelled my chin up, dragging me away from my sensuous thoughts. I felt my face warm, just as it had when I was a teenager and Taz caught me staring at him.

"Pick me up at the shop at six thirty."

I nodded. "Six thirty... I can do that."

He leaned in, his warm breath feathering my neck, and raising a plethora of goose bumps across my shoulders. "Don't be late. You've kept me waiting long enough." His lips pressed beneath my ear, sending a jolt straight to my groin. That minute touch took a moment to recover from, and by the time I did, he had already returned to Josh. His eyes caught and held mine as Josh leaned down to say something to him. Taz smiled softly, his chin dipping down once. Josh rattled him with a rough one-armed hug, and a quick grin thrown my way. My phone vibrated, indicating it was time to pick up my mother. Laying the towel on the bar, I left Walt's for the first time in history with a grin on my face. Damn, I had a date with *Taz*.

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## Chapter Four

The coffee shop was dark when I pulled up. I was a few minutes late, but not *that* late. Yanking the note off the door, I opened it, fearing he had left. I blew out a sigh of relief. I drove to the back of the building, and honked, as the note requested. He stepped out the rear door, and locked it behind him.

“You’re late...” he said, as he slid into the passenger seat, the scent of citrus and coffee following him in.

“Ten minutes... I suppose I could have called.” I stared at him, drinking him in. He was stunning in a black V-neck sweater, and grey leather jacket that matched the slacks hugging his hips. I had this insane desire to lick from where the V settled against his sternum, all the way up to the hollow at the base of his throat. I swallowed, yet my eyes stayed riveted to the way his chest shifted as he breathed, giving me a peek of the tattooed rosary I knew lay between his sinuous pecs.

He shifted under my steadfast gaze, running a thumb across his lips. “I thought you might have changed your mind.” His eyes finally rolled towards me.

“Not on your life.” I dragged my eyes from him, and headed down the alley.

“Really?”

“Really. I have a confession to make.” I shot him a quick glance.

“Yeah?” He glanced out the side window as I turned onto Pacific. “What’s that?”

“I’ve wanted this for a long time.” It wasn’t as hard to admit as I had thought it would be.

He turned towards me. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“You look nice.” Fingertips traveled over my shoulder and down my arm, sending goose bumps skittering across my skin. *What was it with the damn goose bumps, anyway?*

My grip tightened on the steering wheel. “You look amazing...” I breathed.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.



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The remainder of the short trip was spent in tense silence, our scintillating conversation seemingly coming to a halt.

I pulled into The Depot, and found a spot along the south side of the building.

“Good choice. I like this place.” Taz flashed me a grin and some of the tension evaporated.

“I wasn’t sure... It wasn’t here when I left, but the reviews seemed promising.” I hefted myself out of the cab, as Taz did the same.

While we waited to be seated, Taz kept his shoulder pressed against mine. I wasn’t sure what was up with that until we were led to a table that could be deemed nothing short of romantic—and very secluded. The large, fake plants completely hid us from view. I wasn’t sure if I should be thankful or offended. As I sat down in the little nook, the bustle of the restaurant dimmed considerably. Definitely thankful.

I perused the menu without really seeing it, despite the gentle rumbling of an empty stomach. This stagnation was beginning to bother me, but for the life of me, I couldn’t think of anything intelligent to say, ask, talk about. Every time I snuck a peek at Taz, he appeared deep in thought, his black brows knitted together, his rich lips pulled thin. The pilsner I ordered hit the table with a *thunk*, Taz’s pinot noir arriving more gently. We both looked up at the bright-eyed, smiling waitress. I didn’t know about Taz, but I felt guilty sitting here like a nervous high school kid in what was really a lovely, quaint restaurant.

I ordered the sea bass and Taz chose the planked salmon. Once the waitress had left, Taz, elbows resting on the table, wine in both hands, dropped his head, and let out a lengthy sigh.

“I need to get something off my chest.” His head came up, and after a hearty sip, he set his wine glass down. *He is seeing Josh, or worse, he’s not gay.* “I know who you are. Julie told me.”

I blinked, confused. “I told you who I was, and I’d be pretty devastated if you didn’t remember me, even a little.”

“That’s not what I mean. I almost cancelled tonight.” He took another more moderate sip of his wine, then tilted his head to the side, his nostrils flaring as he exhaled. “My nana was one of the elderly your company evicted. Forty years she lived there—”

I held up my hands, already knowing where this was going. “Wait. First of all, it’s not *my* company. I’m just an engineer, and have nothing to do with

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acquisitions.” Taz was practically glaring at me. Settling back against the chair, I ran a hand through my mousy hair. “I don’t... I don’t agree with how they acquired the property. I don’t agree with a lot of the things they do. But I took this particular job, so I could guarantee no corners were cut.” I shook my head, unsure what else I could say to wipe the scorn from Taz’s face.

“Losing her home was a pretty big corner. She’s eighty years old, and she hasn’t adjusted well to the move.”

“Taz, I’m sorry.”

He gave me a tight-lipped smile, his eyes anguished. “You told me it wasn’t your fault,” he said flippantly.

“It wasn’t. But that doesn’t mean I can’t feel remorse for their sins.”

He stared past me, nodding acceptance. “That’s almost like admitting guilt, you know?” *Whoa, not so accepting.* Pinning me with dark, accusing eyes, he swiftly shifted, leaning over the table. “Why did you take the job? It’s not as if you love this town. You left without even a wave goodbye. You didn’t even come home when your father died. What’s up with that?” He slumped back in his chair. “Why did you come back, Eric? Was it to rub—”

My mind buzzing over the onslaught, I slammed a hand down on the table, causing Taz to jump. “Wait... just hold on.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to stop the reeling so I could think. Taz was just another pissed off part of the populous, and I had provided him the perfect opportunity to slash me in person. That realization cut more than anything else had. I stood, and retrieved my wallet, feeling the shock settling in.

With shaky fingers, I tossed some bills on the table. “I’ll take you home.” I spun around, and strode from the restaurant, unable to look at one of the few people I never thought would turn on me. The one person I hoped would still be here when I returned. Terrance had always been a rock, he loved everybody, and I guess I hoped maybe he’d love me too. Obviously I was still that kid fawning for his attention, and maybe it was time I grew up.

He grabbed my arm, as I opened the door to the truck. “Eric—”

Shaking my head, I yanked free. “Don’t. Just... I made a mistake, I’m sorry.” I ducked into the cab.

As we crossed into Long Beach, Taz broke the silence. “Turn left at the next road.” I did, and he instructed me through a few more turns before the roar of the ocean came up on our left.

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I took in the newer two-story homes less than a block from the beach, homes I couldn't afford on my best days. "You live out here?" I asked. He didn't answer, except to point me down a sand-covered single track. I parked where he told me to, and peered into the darkness, unable to make out anything but scraggy dunes and a footpath.

He reached over, and turned off the truck, taking my keys in the process. "I'm not leaving us like this." The door slammed, driving the statement through the slurry that was my mind at the moment. *Us?*

Taz waited at the top of the dunes, his outline framed by the moonlight bouncing off the unseen ocean somewhere behind him. I opened the door, knowing I wouldn't get my keys until he was ready to give them back. He'd pulled this shit on me several times before, not letting me leave work until I was calm enough to drive. He'd spent many a late night listening patiently to me rant about my father as only an angry misplaced teenager can.

Huddling against the damp cold, I trudged up the loose sand until I was flush with his shoulder. The tide was in. We both gazed at the blackness of the ocean as angry breakers slammed the shoreline.

Taz's head bowed. "You'd been gone so long, changed so much, I didn't even recognize you when I saw you again. How screwed up is that? I thought we were friends... I thought..." He hesitated, squeezing his eyes closed for a moment. "I waited for you, Eric. Every Christmas, every summer... I searched for you, hoping maybe..." He had to speak over the distant roar, and his voice wavered through the biting wind. "I went to the funeral, sure you'd be there to see him go into the ground." His fingers found mine, and I tipped my head down, the simple touch skittering up my arm and across my shoulders like an energetic sand crab. His dark hand enveloped mine, blocking out my alabaster skin. "But you never came home, never called—I figured I had been wrong about what I saw, what I felt—that the moment you arrived at college, everything here had become a bad memory." He heaved a sigh. "When I found out who you were, and why you were here, I used it to turn my hurt at being forgotten into anger."

"I could never forget you." I turned to face him, my body filling with accusations. "Why didn't you say anything before I left? Do you have any idea how much I liked you, how much I wanted you... how much I needed you to see me?" My thin hand sailed through my hair, giving a yank before traveling down my face. If he had shown even a smattering of interest... I would have... what?

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“And if I had? Eric, I wasn’t going to be your regret.” That brought my eyes to his. He canted his head, his jaw soft under the moonlight. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to punch him or kiss him. All that time, and not once—and I hadn’t exactly been cautious with my gawking. “You needed to go. To make something of yourself, find all those pieces you were scrabbling for.”

“I wasn’t broken, you know.” I blurted, knowing people thought my distance was the result of a heavy-handed father, when in fact it was the opposite. He chose to ignore his “sissy” son when he realized I became seasick just standing on an unmoving boat. What good was a son that couldn’t fish? Evidently none, whatsoever.

Taz cupped my face, and I jerked away, not wanting his pity. “Hey, I know. But you weren’t whole. This place—”

I glanced out at the beach. “I love it here, I always have. There just wasn’t room for both my father and me.”

“And now?” Taz asked, and even in the dark I could see the doubt lingering in his eyes.

“I’m not chic enough for So Cal, so I came home.”

“And?”

I smiled at that. “Hoped to find you. I don’t know...” I shook my head.

“What did you think you’d do with me once you found me?” The doubt was gone, replaced with a challenge.

“I, ah...” I sucked on my lower lip, and Taz’s eyes darted to my mouth, his pink tongue appeared, stark against his lips. “This...” My hand found the back of his neck, and I pulled his mouth to mine. Taz’s stout body collided with my chest, and a hand came up to grip the back of my head. My mind spun over the fact I was actually kissing Taz... and he was kissing me back. A hint of wine, and that same citrusy-scent from earlier, teased my senses. I slid my arm around his waist, tightening my hold in an attempt to ground myself to something solid. And, oh God, was he solid.

Hands explored, tongues met, bodies hardened. I’d never kissed anyone like this—nor had anyone respond with such fervor. It was frightening and exciting all in the same staggered breath. The wind whipped up from the water a second before the sky opened up, the rain bitter against our faces. Taz broke first, rolling his head back, and squinting into the deluge. Droplets slid off his jaw,

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and found the hollow at the base of his throat, hunkering into the depression as if hiding from the very storm that had birthed them. It was a temptation I couldn't resist. A chuckle rose from his throat as my lips suckled the water out. The laughter died on a broken moan when my teeth nipped up his neck.

A flash lit the bruised sky, and Taz's hands clamped onto my shoulders. The angry rumble of thunder followed a second later, causing Taz's body to twitch.

I pulled him tight, recalling his dislike of the more volatile components of our spring and fall storms. "Time to go?"

He nodded, his wide eyes scanning the sky.

To Taz's relief, the storm moved south, and by the time we reached the coffee shop, the rain had stopped. I glanced at the empty alley. "Where's your car?"

"I don't have one."

I frowned. "Why didn't you have me take you home then?"

"You did. I live here." He shrugged sheepishly. "Sandy, the old owner, had a small apartment built into the back, years ago." He grinned, shaking his head. "The ceilings are only like six foot four, so it's a good thing I'm only five-eleven."

"Is it legal?" *Why did I ask that?* It was Taz's business, not mine.

"Yeah, I made sure before I bought the place. All to code, and the apartment was built so long ago it falls under a grandfather clause." He eyed me under a fringe of dark lashes, a finger running over those pretty lips of his. "Do you want to come in?"

I fought a losing battle with the grin working to take over. Jesus. Hell yeah, I wanted to come in. "You have no idea how much I want to. But I'm not interested in casual."

He nodded. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For forgiving me." The lines of his face softened in the blue light from the dash.

I shook my head slowly. "I don't know if I have. I might still require some ass-kissing."

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He chuffed a laugh. “Oh Jesus...” Fisting my shirt, he dragged me towards him, and planted a hard kiss on my lips. He bounced out of the truck, and I waited until the door closed behind him before touching my tingling lips. That teenage crush was still in full swing, trolloping through my veins, making my head spin, and my chest ache. Maybe this was more than a crush.

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## Chapter Five

Over the next few weeks work was hell, but Taz made walking through the gates bearable. He was my rock. My solace. I spent more and more time in his quirky apartment, not coming home until late most nights, and my mother noticed.

“Where do you go after work?” She turned in her chair, inspecting me. “There aren’t any other gays in town,” she snorted, “so it’s not a booty call.”

“There are more than you think, Ma.” I smiled smugly behind the rim of my coffee mug as I watched her squirm over that tidbit. Actually, I only knew of two, other than myself. Taz and Sora, his redheaded snarky employee who had yet to warm up to me... even a little. To my surprise, Josh married and now had two slender boys that looked just like him. I had the pleasure of meeting the little hooligans when they found me *attacking Uncle Taz* in the storeroom after-hours. Josh couldn’t stop laughing—what, after all, was a little frottage among friends—and in the end, Taz repossessed the key he had given him, just to shut him up.

“Who?” She waved her hand quickly. “Never mind. I don’t want to know.” Her eyes narrowed on me. “So... *are* you seeing someone?”

I lifted my eyebrows at her. “If I say yes, are you going to get all weird?”

“Nooo,” she said slowly. I shot a pointed look at her. “Maybe... but I’ll try not to.”

“I’ll take that, Ma.” I kissed her forehead, and headed out.

“Was that a yes?” she called after me.

“It was.”

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“What’s wrong?” Taz had made manicotti, that I had devoured, and now we were lying on his couch watching a movie I wasn’t really paying attention to.

“Who says anything’s wrong?” Everything was wrong. Well, everything but this.

He nuzzled my ear. “I do. It’s as if you’re not here.”

I smiled. God, he’d figured me out quickly. Of course he had always had a sense about me, and other than being more confident, I really wasn’t much

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different than I had been back then. When things weren't going well for me, I still got sulky.

"The planning commission shot down my new plans on the boardwalk. They want six less pylons. How the hell am I supposed to remove six pylons when the whole thing is less than a quarter-mile long?"

Taz leapt over me, padding to his computer. "Do you have the plans with you?"

I looked at him curiously as he fired the desktop up. "Yeeaah."

"Go grab them. A quarter-mile you said?"

I nodded, sliding my feet into his slippers so I could run out to the truck.

"Don't forget to disarm the alarm," he called after me. I punched in the code, and then proceeded to disengage the myriad of locks installed on the rear door. I shook my head as I slid over the last bolt. This was Washington, for Christ's sake, not New York.

When I returned, he pointed at the table. "Lay them out on the table. It will just take a sec for me to find this again."

"Find what again?" I laid out the ragged site copy.

He shook his head. "God, you're suspicious."

"I have a right to be. People keep decorating my truck, and I think someone threw up in the bed yesterday."

Taz's nose wrinkled. "That's still going on?"

I rubbed a tired hand over my face. "Yes, and they keep getting more and more creative. I had a dead seagull for a hood ornament last week."

He swiveled around in the black leather office chair. "No fucking way." I nodded, wishing it wasn't true. He swiveled back to the screen, clicking the mouse. "Assholes." *Click-click-click*. "Okay, how wide does the bridge have to be?"

"Thirty feet, to account for spring runoff." I walked up behind him, my eyes narrowing on a site completely in Japanese.

He clicked through several links. "I didn't bookmark it, but it's on this site somewhere."

"What are you looking for?" I asked again.



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He smiled up at me, wagging his naturally perfect eyebrows, something that would take me a painful hour with a set of tweezers to achieve. “The answer to your prayers.”

I ran my hand over his soft, tight curls. “I already got that.”

“Pffftt.”

I chuckled. “Okay, the answer to my dreams then.”

“And what dreams might those be?”

Heat scorched my neck, ears, and cheeks. When I didn't answer, he turned. “Hmm...” Shooting me a leering smile, he spun back around. “I've had those dreams.”

“About me?”

Taz let out a raspy laugh. “Maybe.” He straightened in his chair. “Here it is. It's a suspension system built by a gardener, if you can believe it. It's the only one I've ever seen like this.”

I stared at the wooden suspension walk wending around huge trees, and over wide creeks and gullies. The supports looked like fans, there were so many cables, but they were sparse and incredibly far apart.

“What do you think?” Taz rubbed his jaw, his shoulders tight, as he waited for my answer.

“What's the largest gap?”

“Fifty feet.”

“No shit?”

He scrolled down and clicked on a tiny picture of a waterfall. As the section in question appeared, he held his hands towards the screen; *Tada. I am your savior.* As he always has been. “No shit,” he replied, smug in his prowess.

Just looking at it, I knew it would go over budget, but it was a solution. And if they didn't accept it after everything I'd done for them, they were going to have one pissed off engineer to deal with.

I clapped Taz's shoulders. “Answer to my prayers. How the hell did you know about it?”

He shrugged. “At one point I wanted to build bridges... I still see the beauty in the unusual.”

“I guess that’s why we seem to work. You’re beautiful, and I’m unusual.” I planted a kiss on his temple, bending to avoid his joking smack.

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The instant the door of my truck latched closed, I let out a *whoop*, drumming my hands on the steering wheel. Taz was the one who deserved my commission. He’d found it, he’d helped me design it, working well into the wee hours of the morning right by my side, while drowning us both in high-end caffeine.

I waved at the beige concrete structure, hoping I never had to step foot in the city building again. I headed straight home, not even bothering to wash off the new crustaceans that had found their way onto my truck. The rotten crab should fly off somewhere en route.

My mother was backing out as I pulled up. I honked at her, and she sidled her car up to my truck, rolling down her window.

“Where are you off to?” I asked, trying not to sound surprised she was *driving* somewhere, at night no less.

“It’s Thursday. Bridge night,” she said as if I should know that.

“Oh.” I grinned, and winked at her. “You look nice, Ma.” Her salon-blond hair was swept back, held by ornate combs, and she had made up her face.

“It’s just bridge with the gals.”

“Have fun.” Pinochle, bridge, and her book club... what was next? I was proud of her, though. She was getting out there again, and I’d like to think I had a hand in it, even if I wasn’t proud of how I had played that hand.

Munching down a microwaved burrito, I plopped onto my bed, and dialed Taz. “Hey!”

“So how’d it go?” His voice came through tired.

“Good. I think I owe you a big fat dinner at a really nice restaurant, maybe a walk on the beach, a movie... choice is yours.” I owed him so much more than that, but for now, it would have to do.

“So they liked it?”

“Maybe not liked, but yes, they accepted it.”

“That’s that, then,” he said quietly.

“Are you okay?” He didn't sound okay. I shuffled onto my side, propping myself on the pillows.

“Just tired. I had to clean graffiti off the building today, and that always takes forever.”

I frowned. “What kind of graffiti?”

“Teenage shit. It's not the first time. Listen, I'm really tired. I was actually getting ready for bed when you called.”

Something wasn't right. “Tell me you're okay, Taz.”

“I'm fine. Eric... congratulations.”

“Thanks, I couldn't have done it without you.”

“I doubt that. Night.”

“I'll see you tomorrow.” But he'd already hung up.

Despite the bone-weary exhaustion, I tossed throughout the night, worrying about Taz's melancholy mood. It wasn't like him to be sullen. That was my deal.

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*Damn.* A honk had me jerking the wheel and peeling my eyes from the pale ghosts still visible on Taz's building. *Small-minded fuckers.* And honestly, *fag* wasn't all that creative. I was partial to butt pirate myself. Something about the way it spit from one's lips.

Taz was busy wiping down the counters as I walked in. He glanced up, the smile on his face drooping once he realized it was me. I tromped behind the counter, leaning in to keep the conversation private. His shoulders tensed beneath the red Henley he wore.

“Why didn't you tell me?” I whisper hissed.

His brow hunched. “About what?”

I rocked my head back, noticing a water spot on the ceiling, before dropping it again. “The walls? The graffiti?”

His fingers flipped towards the front of the shop. “They're just teenagers blowing off steam. It's happened before, and it'll happen again.” At my indignant huff, he gave me an exasperated look. “It's no different than what we did in our youth.”

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I pointed to the front wall. "I never did anything like *that*."

His smooth brows rose. "I remember someone taking a baseball bat to every garbage can along the pier late one night."

My arms came across my chest. "Not the same. Besides I was angry with my dad."

Taz rubbed my arm, then squeezed my shoulder. Something he had done that very night, only this time, he clasped the back of my neck, his thumb caressing softly. "And maybe they're mad at the world. Did you ever consider that?"

I shook my head. "What if they go further... try to hurt you?"

His hand dropped, and he turned to organize the already perfectly aligned spices. "They won't. Several of them come in here for coffee, actually."

"How do you know that?"

He pointed to the front and back of the shop, looking like a gunslinger covering the exits. "Security cameras. Both doors, in case someone tries to rob me."

"Oh... smart." No one was getting through the back door without a battering ram, but knowing he could see who was out there before he opened it, made me feel better about his safety. An older woman drowning in a grey raincoat, several sizes too big for her, came in, and I stepped from behind the counter so Taz could take her order. Retrieving a napkin from the bundle under the deli case, I rubbed off the finger smudges from the arched glass while I waited.

"Now I won't have anything to do when it gets slow," Taz teasingly admonished.

"I'm sure when I get back I could find a way to keep your hands busy."

"I think I'll pass." Taz's dark lashes dropped like a veil, the tenseness returning to his shoulders.

I squinted at him, trying to figure out this hot and cold routine he was running this morning. "Hey." I gathered his face in my hands without any concern for the handful of patrons in the shop. They were probably too absorbed in their electronic gadgets to notice anyway. "Obviously something other than the defamation on the building is bothering you."

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He wouldn't look at me, his chin pushing down into the cup of my hands. He hadn't shaved this morning. The barely there scruff along his jaw tickled my palms, and I had an urge to run my tongue over the rough surface, but I felt, in his current mood, he might not appreciate that.

His hands hung limp at his side. "When are you going home?"

"I don't know. I thought we'd celebrate tonight. Whatever you want to do, my treat."

"I meant California." His voice was so low and quiet, but once I strung the words together, his mood came to light.

"You thought I was going back to California... God, I feel so stupid." I forced his chin up until his eyes were level with mine. His lashes remained stubbornly down. "There's no home to go back to."

The spidery fringe slowly raised, his head becoming lighter in my hands.

I leaned my forehead against his. "I sold almost everything, and moved up here hoping... Anyway, I've applied at a few places in Kelso and Astoria, but I haven't heard back yet. So after tomorrow, I'm just a bum without a job."

Wide, dark eyes blinked. "What were you hoping?"

I shook my head, battling a smile. "I don't know what I was thinking. It was just an idiotic teenage fantasy." His eyes warmed, and I wanted to kiss him so badly, knowing he'd taste like caramel, vanilla, and coffee. Propriety won out, though, and I settled for running my thumb over his full lower lip, feeling the silkiness my lips couldn't. The cowbell on the door clanked. Reluctantly, I released him and stepped back.

His finger stroked along my ribs. "I have one of those, too." With his lip trapped between his teeth, he turned to his customers, then threw over his shoulder, "Sora's in at four. I'll cook."

"You don't have to. I'm not a pauper yet."

The sharp-edged, carnal look he threw me had my pants tightening, and me backpedaling. "I love your cooking. Four, then. Yeah, I'll be here. Okay, then." I shot out the door, fanning my face ineffectively. *Whoa*. Yeah, never seen that look before.

I spent the rest of the day tidying up any loose ends, sweating over Taz's look, and trying to hide my semi that refused to go down. I should have worn a longer coat.

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## Chapter Six

Arriving at the coffee house, I could feel the tension pulling on my bones, but I wasn't panicky. Not yet, anyway. Since the shop was still open, I went through the front door, so Taz wouldn't have to disarm the alarm and unlock all the locks on the rear door.

Sora glanced up from the magazine she was reading. "He's in the apartment." She popped her gum and went back to her magazine. As I cleared the storeroom, she yelled, "Don't forget we're open until six thirty, so keep it down." What did she think we were going to do? Oh, sex, right. Maybe she knew something about Taz, I didn't? Now, I was anxious.

Taz had his door locked, so I pushed the buzzer and waited, juggling the wine I had brought back and forth between my hands. The door flew open. Taz was wearing a "Kiss the Cook" apron over caramel skin. Well, he had pants on, but still. Despite the red gingham—red always looked good on him—and the ruffles, the thing was sexy as heck. His naked appraisal of my snug jeans and cardigan—which, without an undershirt on, showed a healthy expanse of chest along with a splash of mousy hair—might have been contributing to my desire to kiss him senseless. He took hold of the wine as I took hold of the front of the apron, tugging him to me.

"God, this is..." My lips crashed down with more force than I intended, knocking our teeth together. Taz's free hand fisted the side of my cardigan as he melted into the kiss, his back arcing into me. After annihilating his lips, and in a surprising twist, my anxiety, I pulled back, disengaging my hand from the apron, and smoothing it against his chest. "Sexy."

He sucked on his kiss-swollen lips, his chest rising and falling rapidly beneath my hand, then Taz cleared his throat, a smoky smile playing in his eyes. "I'll... mmm... yeah... maybe." He blew out a slow breath. "It used to be Nana's," he finally blurted.

"You haven't mentioned her for a while. How's she doing?" I felt like a cad for not having asked about her over the past week.

"I think she's going to be okay. When I called her two days ago, she didn't have time to talk to me because I'd make her late for Wednesday night bingo. I took it as a really good sign." His eyes twinkled with relief, and I kissed his cheek, knowing the toll worrying about her had been taking on him.

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“Maybe I can meet her someday.”

He smiled at that. “I’d like that. Just don’t tell her you used to work for the sharks. She’d probably club you to death with her cane.”

I chuckled. “Good to know.”

I watched him while he cooked—that damn apron too much of a distraction to pay attention to what he was doing at the stove. His muscles bunched and slid smoothly beneath his swarthy skin, and the tantalizing view made me salivate more than the rich smells his cooking produced.

“Ow, damn.” A finger flew into his mouth, his cheeks hollowing as he sucked on the appendage, and one of my appendages jerked hard, wanting to be that finger—without the burn, of course. He glanced at me over his shoulder as I came up behind him. “I’th yur falth,” he mumbled around his finger.

“How so?” I huddled against him, giving my body a taste of what it craved. Retrieving his finger from his mouth, I squinted at the tiny white line on the pad.

“Because you keep staring at me.” He yanked his hand away, and flipped on the faucet, sticking the tiny burn under the stream of cold water.

He squirmed when I licked his neck. “I stared at you for years... and you never burned yourself.” My lips clamped onto the smooth skin beneath his ear, sucking gently. I wasn’t sure who this person was with his lips latched onto Taz, but I didn’t dislike him, not one bit.

His head fell back onto my shoulder. “Oh God, why does that feel so good?” Strong hands found my thighs, and fingers flexed into the back of my legs. My teeth nipped, and he practically purred, his throat vibrating against my lips. The slightly acrid scent of food threatening to burn tickled my nose, taking me out of the moment. That was more like my anxiety-riddled self, damnit.

I squeezed his waist. “I don’t think you’d forgive me if I made you burn dinner.”

He sighed. “Probably not.” Running his hands down my thighs one last time, he turned his attention back to the stove. I tugged on the waistband of my jeans, and when that didn’t help, a kick of my leg, and shove with my palm, straightened out my problem.

My hands trembled as I set the table, sweat trickled down my back, and every nerve was aware of Taz a few feet away. It had been two years since I last attempted sex with a real live consort, and my body seemed to be berating

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me for that. But this was Taz, the man my mind had put on a sensual pedestal, conjuring up scenes of total wicked abandon that left me shaking in my bed, damp with sweat, and sticky with cum, long before I knew what sex really involved.

The hand on my back startled me as Taz leaned around to set a platter of shrimp linguini in the center of the small maple table. The smile he gave me was soft and reassuring, and I wondered how much he thought he knew. And could he feel the nervous perspiration hiding in the knit of my sweater?

“Sit. I’ll turn the heat down.” *I guess so.*

After piling my plate with linguini, he handed me the bread basket. “How was your last day?”

I shrugged, adding two pieces of cheese bread to the pile. “Blissfully uneventful.”

He laughed, spooling noodles onto his fork. “No more creative fuck-you art?”

My eyes rolled divinely as I chewed. Taz felt life was too short to eat crappy food, but if he kept feeding me food like this, I was going to have to buy bigger clothes. “Nope, and let me tell you how nice it was not to have to hit the car wash on the way home.” I filled my mouth again with creamy perfection. “*Sooo good...*” I said in a bad Homer Simpson impersonation.

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Taz bumped and slid against me while we washed dishes, letting me know sex was definitely still part of his intended menu. When had we gone from heated groping and grinding to the point in our relationship where actual sex came into play? With everything going on, I realized our relationship *had* marched forward without my knowing it, and the desire, the need, the want for something more was there. Although anxious, I could feel it resting in every part of me. His hands traveled suggestively up my thighs, his hard-on pressing into the seam of my jeans. A plate clattered into the sink, splitting into three pieces. “Shit... sorry,” I muttered.

Taz let out a throaty laugh, his thumbs brushing the sides of my stiffy, sending sensual jolts straight up my spine, and leaving my dick straining against the confines of my tight jeans.

“Do you want to see my bedroom?” The whispered question was accompanied by a hand palming my jerking boner. I pushed against it,



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breathing out an obscenity or two. He could take me right here against the kitchen counter if he was so inclined. The reverberation of a groan shook my chest, and I couldn't even find any shock when I realized I was humping his hard-pressed palm.

"I'm taking that as a yes," Taz breathed against my neck. A moment later he was dragging me through the green-beaded curtain at the end of the short hall, and up a dim, narrow stairwell. It took every bit of my concentration not to stumble on the steep stairs.

The stairs ended at a snug bedroom, the queen-size bed taking up over half the space. A long, narrow window cast the room in peach and lilac light from the setting sun, the shimmering horizon barely visible from up here.

My back hit the wall, a picture toppling off a corner shelf across the room and onto the slate carpet. Taz ignored it. His mouth landed on mine, hot and insistent, while his hands fought to shove my sweater up. *Jesus*. Somehow his ass ended up clasped in my hands, our crotches grinding against each other. God, this was so similar to my dreams. So wild, so out of control, so—*Dear God*. Taz's calloused thumbs grazed my nipples again, and my head hit the wall, my hips bucking forward. "Damn," I muttered. He chuckled against my throat, but thankfully, slid his hands down, leaving my oversensitive nubs alone. I left my head there while the muscles in my back untwisted.

Taz took advantage of my dazed state to wrestle me out of my sweater. As he moved, the ties on his apron brushed my fingers. Grabbing hold, I yanked, and the bow unraveled. I watched as I slid the checked straps off his broad shoulders, exposing the ink across his chest. Impatiently he shuffled the rest of the way free. His sex-ramped eyes studied my face, his throat working as his hands explored my chest. My own hazel eyes fell, watching, as my fingers languidly traveled across his torso, mapping every muscle and cut.

Intent on my task, I didn't realize he was in a losing battle with my jeans.

"Jesus, how the heck did you get these on?" He yanked at one side, and my jeans gave him the finger, staying stubbornly caught on my angular hips.

"What? Oh, I had to lie down on the bed." Feeling his exasperated tugging, I laughed. "They weren't that tight when I put them on. I blame your cooking." I hooked my thumbs into the waistband and began shimmying out of them. Damn, it took a lot of shimmying.

"And it would have nothing to do with that engorged piece of... of... of," he stuttered, as my cock sprang free of the imprisoning fabric. I gave it a few

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strokes, working away the prickly sensation, and vowing never to wear those jeans around Taz again. “Okay...” Taz nodded, looking away. “Okay...” His hand clasped his forehead as he began pacing the small room, his mouth an O as he sucked air.

I kicked free of my jeans, and took a concerned step towards him. “Is something wrong?”

His head shook vigorously as his eyes faded back to my cock. “Perfect...”

I glanced down. “Actually it kinda kinks to the right.” Tugging on it, I let it go, showing the imperfection.

I heard the groan half a second before I found myself on the bed, a flushed and naked Taz on top of me. *Shit, how'd he get out of his pants so fast?* I didn't have time to ponder that. His kiss went from zero to scorching in a millisecond, his fingers digging into my ribs as his whole body slid against me. I felt his cock hot against mine, and groaned into his open mouth. Dream Taz disappeared in the wake of the real thing.

Taz rolled onto his back, propelling me on top of him, and I took advantage of my position. Drawing his leg up, I caressed the back of his thigh while my tongue and mouth played over every inch of him, every plain, every valley, every bit of ink as he writhed beneath me. When I suckled the pre-cum off his belly, he let out a squeak, and began panting.

Keeping my eyes on his flushed face, I nuzzled lower, completely enamored with the smoky color of his rigid cock. I always figured it would be the same color as the rest of his body, but no, the head was the color of soft coal, the slit a ribbon of mauve. The contrast was mesmerizing. My tongue flicked out, traveling along that tantalizing ribbon.

“*Ohhh, Go-hod,*” Taz moaned, wriggling onto his hip. He fumbled under his pillow, producing condoms and lube. He let all but one condom flutter away, then, with hand shaking, he passed them to me. *What?* Nooo... I stared at them as if I'd never seen either before.

“Taz, I... I'm not a top.”

He looked at me, dazed, then leaned onto his elbow, and reached down to touch my face. “Every time I've dreamt of you”—his lashes fell, the color deepening on his cheeks—“you were making love to me. And I, um... I can't imagine it any other way.” His fingers traced my jaw, his thumb gentle across my cheek. “Love me, Eric.” I licked my lips and nodded slowly, hesitantly. I could do this. For him, I could do this.

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Not willing to hurt him the way I'd been hurt, I used too much lube preparing him. I choked up on my dick in an effort to keep it from slipping off course.

With pulse-pounding anxiety, I carefully pushed my cock against him.

Taz hiked his knees higher. "You'll have to push harder than that, babe." Kissing me gently, his hand carded through my hair. "You're not going to break me."

I knew I wasn't going to break him, but I didn't want this to be like the fucks I'd experienced. My hips flexed more forcefully, sending my head through the tight opening and inside Taz. He hissed a breath, his face contorting with discomfort. I went slowly, slipping in inch by agonizing inch, my natural instinct wanting me to drive into him, but knowing how much that fucking hurt. I swear I was breathing like a woman in labor, as I watched Taz's expression closely.

Taz's eyes flashed open, his head pushed against the pillow, and his hands dug at the skin on my back. "More... not... almost." His hips thrust, and mine answered with a kick. Taz grunted, and bit down on his lip, hard. His body tensed, his ass clamping down and locking me into place.

Sweat broke out across my back. With Taz wrapped around me, I understood why some men were the way they were. Why they were so driven towards their own culmination. Yet as I felt the emotions surging through me, felt my heart beating for him, I knew I'd never be one of them.

Delicately, I kissed his neck, stroking my tongue against the corded muscles there, sucking them into submission. My hands softly caressed his sides, his thigh, his hip. I felt him uncoil, releasing his hold on my shaft. I kissed his mouth, tasting him, teasing him, until he opened for me, greedily sucking in my tongue. My buttocks flexed, sending my cock the rest of the way home. Taz stalled, his eyes going wide, then they floated shut, and his mouth began feasting on mine.

The feel of sweat rolling down my back, the shivery ache of his nails biting into my skin, his full lips under my control, the tightness of him... the muscles corded in my back, a sound rumbled up my throat as my hips began to move. Short, tentative explorations turned into long, satisfying strokes. He moaned, his head rocking on the pillow, and my kiss deepened along with my thrusts.

His legs came around my waist, his feet digging into my ass. He whimpered, and I rose onto my hands to look at him. He began panting, his eyes screwed tightly closed.

“Look at me,” I said, and his eyes fluttered open. I drove into him, watching his eyes widen with each thrust. God... so good... so tight... so fucking beautiful.

“Ahhh... mmm.” His legs trembled. I glanced down where we were joined, watching as my cock slid back into him. *Oh, damn, that's beautiful.* I couldn't take my eyes off the contrast as I fed my cock in and out of him.

My pale hand kneaded his dark haunch. “God, you're beautiful,” I said, and he blinked up at me, appearing stunned by the compliment. “So beautiful.” I dropped onto my elbows, and claimed his kiss-swollen mouth again.

His arms and legs cinched down around me, hugging me tightly, as his pelvis rocked up to meet my thrusts. A high-pitched whine rose from his throat, and he wrenched his mouth from me, burying his face into the crook of my neck and shoulder.

I felt the muscles in my back bunch, the nerves at the base of my spine tingle. His cock let out a few happy jerks, tapping against my stomach.

“Eric... Eric... ahhh... it's... I'm...” He shook around me, holding on for everything he was worth.

I forced my arm between him and the mattress, so I could hold him. His hips twitched, then went still as he let out a faint curse against my shoulder. Taz's dick jumped, decorating my stomach with his warm cum. His ass clenched around me, over and over, trying to milk my orgasm right out of me. Goddamn, if it wasn't working.

The scent of Taz's sex mixed with that of our sweat hit my senses, forcing a groan out of me. The first wave hit me hot and hard. I grunted, burying my face into Taz's neck, and driving deep into him. I pushed my pelvis against him, shuddering uncontrollably as I came.

Through the lusty haze, the feel of Taz stroking my back came to me first, then the soft brush of his lips against my neck, the rise and fall of his chest beneath me, the feel of his heart against mine. I lifted myself onto my elbows and gazed down at him.

He extricated one of his arms, and brushed a mousy tendril of hair from my eye. “Welcome back.”

“Are you okay?” *Please tell me you are.*

He shook his head slightly. “Why wouldn't I be?”

I brushed my lips against his. “No reason.”

His smile was soft and wondrous. "I never imagined..." He stretched languidly beneath me.

"You doubted my abilities?" I teased.

His smile brightened, and the flush on his cheeks darkened. "No. I just... I never got around to it." His eyes darted off for a moment before coming back to rest on mine. "I think I was waiting for you."

I blinked, confused, flabbergasted, shocked. "You've never?" I asked, receiving a shrug. "I was your first?" It came out a surprised whisper. He sighed, and nodded. "Well, say something before I freak out."

He grinned, his eyes gleaming, full of mischief. "I think I'm in love with you, Eric Houge."

I grinned back. "Wow, I must have been good."

He rolled his eyes. "I had no idea you were conceited. I'm afraid that forces me to retract my prior statement."

Reaching down, my fingers dug into his ribs, causing him to yelp. "Yeah? Well, I was an idiot, stupid really..." My hand flattened against his ribs, then trailed down his side. "And I'm sorry, but I just can't accept your retraction. Because I've been crazy in love with you since I was seventeen, and there is no way I can walk away from you again. So I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

He turned his head away, his eyes squeezing closed. The breath he took shuddered in his chest. With a slow nod, he turned glossy eyes back to me. "I guess I don't have a choice. I'll have to find a way to put up with your ego then." His arms came around my neck, pulling my mouth to his. Our smiles merged, and melted beneath the sweetest of kisses.

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Floating in the blissful afterglow of another round of lovemaking, the revelation hit me. Passion was real. And for me, it lived within the amazing man I held in my arms, and even though I had missed all that time with him, I wasn't sure I could have appreciated him or what we had together, until now. I drew Taz tighter into the protective cradle of my body, knowing what we shared was rare and precious, and needed to be protected.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Tara Spears is rooted in the damp PNW, calling slugs her friends, and letting moss take over her yard. She had a rather wild youth and now has quieted considerably. However, you wouldn't know this by her books.*

*She clicks out tales of realism, fantasy, and young love. Her works include; The Darker Side of Trey Grey, Six, and a currently dormant serial: The Gift.*

*She has several due out in 2014, including: Trey Grey; Out of the Dark, her Love's Landscapes story for the MM Romance Group, as well as a YA romance: You're Always In The Last Place You Look. (And she hopes to get back to that serial!)*

*She has been called evil and sinister, as well as a seriously skilled new author with a fresh voice.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# WHAT FAMILY IS FOR

By **T.T. Kove**

## Photo Description

Two men holding hands.

## Story Letter

The picture shows Tim and Connor as they are standing outside an airport somewhere in Nebraska, waiting for Connor's family to pick them up and drive them to Connor's family home.

*Dear Author,*

*We live in New York City where Connor and I met four years ago. My parents still reside in the same Brooklyn brownstone where I grew up and we often go there to help out with gardening or repairs on the house since my Mom and Dad are getting older and can't cope like they used to. Connor loves my family. I know the feeling is mutual; my parents love him as their own son.*

*Somehow we've never come around to meeting his family. I know very little about them. According to Connor, the small town in Nebraska where he grew up is the ugliest town east of Hooker County, and when I suggested we should go see them on our next vacation, he was very persistent saying there were absolutely no reasons for us to go there.*

*I asked him if he didn't miss his folks. If maybe his parents would like to meet me, the guy their son married one month after it was declared legal in New York. But he just laughed.*

*"I'm proud of you baby, never doubt that, but you have no idea what my family's like. You don't want to go there if you don't have to. There's Cousin Albert who thinks the microwave was invented by the Russians to spy on him, and Aunt May who hasn't left her house for twenty years, and angry Uncle Donald who says he will kick any democrat in the balls, and Uncle Stephen who considers Nebraska made the biggest mistake ever when the state repealed all sodomy laws in 1977, and he's not hesitating to tell anyone who cares to listen. And they all live in the same town, total population 287 people, it's like a bee's nest. I got out of there as soon as I turned eighteen, and you won't miss them either. Trust me."*

*I had a hard time believing parents weren't important.*

*"But what about your parents?"*

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*“They’re not so bad. They claim to have accepted I’m gay, but they won’t ever understand why I choose to live with you, or any man for that matter. Tim, please, let’s forget about them. I’d prefer to live my life here and now, with you.”*

*And there was the end of the discussion. We did fine with letting my family be his, too. Everybody needs a family of some kind.*

*But one Saturday morning in March when I was lounging on the couch, Connor rushed into our living room, stopped and stared at me.*

*“What’s the matter?” I asked and put down the book I was reading.*

*“My brother called.” He looked clearly distressed.*

*“You have a brother?” I asked surprised. Four years and he never told me?*

*“Yeah,” he said. “Tim, you and I are going to Nebraska. Dad died last night.”*

*Connor almost fell down on the couch, landing heavily beside me; I had never seen him this frustrated, he was always so cool and...*

*“Shit!” he cried out. “Why the hell couldn’t they have told me he was ill?”*

*I was in shock.*

*Dear Author—I grew up in New York in a loving accepting home, I have no idea what to expect when we arrive in Nebraska. I’ve known Connor for four years, still I might get to see a whole new side of him and I’m not sure if it scares me or not. And something must have happened with his brother that is so bad he won’t even talk about him.*

*The only thing I do know is that I stand by Connor no matter what. That’s what family is for, right?*

*Sincerely,*

*Amelia*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** death of family member, established couples, family drama, homophobia, hurt/comfort, sweet/no sex

**Word Count:** 6,904

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## WHAT FAMILY IS FOR

By **T.T. Kove**

I was lounging on the couch when Connor came rushing into our living room. He stopped just inside the door and proceeded to stare at me.

“What’s the matter?” I put the book I’d been reading down on my chest, open so I wouldn’t lose the page I was on.

“My brother called.” He was clearly distressed.

“You have a brother?” That came as a complete surprise to me. We’d been together for four years, and this was the first I’d ever heard about a brother.

“Yeah.” He ran his hands through his coarse brown hair. “Tim, you and I are going to Nebraska. Dad died last night.” He came over to the couch and nearly fell down next to me. I had never seen him so devastated. Connor was always the calm one. “Shit!” He pulled on his hair. “Why the hell couldn’t they have told me he was ill?”

I didn’t know what to say. I was still shocked about the fact that he had a brother.

Connor and I met over four years ago, right here in New York City where we still lived.

My parents lived in the same Brooklyn brownstone where I grew up. We often went to visit them, and to help out with gardening and repairs on the house since both Mom and Dad were getting older and couldn’t cope with everything like they used to.

Connor loved my family.

The feeling was mutual. My parents loved him too, just like he was their own son. Or son-in-law, but that was basically the same.

We never got around to meeting Connor’s family though. I knew very little about them, since he wasn’t sharing much. According to Connor, the small town in Nebraska where he grew up was the ugliest town east of Hooker County.

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When I suggested we should go see them on our next holiday, he was persistent that there weren't any reasons whatsoever for us to go there.

I asked him if he missed his folks, because I knew I would've if I hadn't seen my own in four years. Maybe his parents would like to meet me? I was the guy their son had married, after all, just one month after same-sex marriage was declared legal in New York.

He laughed it off. "I'm proud of you, baby, never doubt that, but you have no idea what my family's like. You don't want to go there if you don't have to." He sighed heavily. "There's Cousin Albert who thinks the microwave was invented by the Russians to spy on him, and Aunt May who hasn't left her house for twenty years, and angry Uncle Donald who says he will kick any democrat in the balls, and Uncle Stephen who considers Nebraska made the biggest mistake ever when the state repealed all sodomy laws in 1977. He doesn't hesitate to tell anyone who cares to listen, either." He kept making movements with his hands as he spoke, a testament to just how upset he was. I'd never heard him speak so much about his family before. "And they all live in the same town, with a total population of 287 people. It's like a bee's nest. I got out of there as soon as I turned eighteen, and you won't miss them either. Trust me."

I had a hard time believing parents weren't important. Mine were the most important people in my life, after all. "But what about your parents?"

"They're not so bad. They claim to have accepted I'm gay, but they won't ever understand why I choose to live with you, or any man for that matter. Tim, please, let's forget about them. I'd prefer to live my life here and now, with you."

It was the end of the discussion. I wanted to know more about his family, and it was upsetting that he shut it down, but at the same time it was flattering to hear he preferred his life exactly as it was. With me. My family was his family, and we did fine with that. Everybody needed a family of some kind, after all.

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Now here we were. Standing outside an airport somewhere in Nebraska, waiting for Connor's family to pick us up and drive us to his family's home.

Connor's hand brushed mine. "I've been debating the whole trip whether to tell you we shouldn't be affectionate with each other while we're here. But you know what, babe? We're married. I'm not going to pretend we're not, just to

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please them. I'm going to treat you exactly like I do when we're at home, or with your parents, and they can deal with it. I'm not going back into any kind of closet for them."

I squeezed his fingers. "Are you sure? What if this alienates them even more?"

I still hadn't gotten him to tell me more about his brother. He clammed up every time I tried to bring it up. He stayed silent on anything family related.

"They can deal."

I saw a truck heading our way and I felt Connor tense up next to me. I watched him out of the corner of my eye.

Having known him for four years, I was pretty confident I knew him quite well. But being here, I might see a whole new side to him. I wasn't sure if it scared me or not. There was a reason he hadn't been back there in four years, after all.

Not to mention that something must've happened with his brother that was so bad he wouldn't even talk to me about it. Me, who knew everything about him—except for his life back here in this small town. It was frustrating—and truthfully also hurtful that he wouldn't open up to me about it.

I knew one thing though, and that was that I would stand by Connor no matter what. Because that's what family was for.

The truck stopped at the sidewalk, and I felt Connor tense up further. He grabbed our stuff, and all but threw it in the back.

I blinked, surprised at his violent reaction.

"Get in, Tim." Connor held the door open for me and motioned for me to slide into the front seat before him.

A man, maybe a couple years older than Connor and I, sat stoically at the wheel. His head didn't turn towards us. The only reaction I could see was his hands gripping the wheel tighter.

"Joseph." Connor sat down next to me and slammed the door shut.

"Connor."

That was it. Their names. All the greeting they did. It was terse, and I really couldn't feel the love between them. I knew who this had to be though—this could only be the brother.

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It was like I didn't even exist though. I was definitely hurt by the lack of greeting, but judging from the greeting between the two of them, they'd only done it grudgingly. Maybe I should be happy I didn't receive such a terse greeting as well.

The atmosphere in the truck was tense all the way from the airport to Connor's family home.

Connor's brother kept his eyes on the road at all times. His lips were pressed tight together. Connor was staring out the window, all broody. And I was sitting in-between them, wondering what the hell to say to relieve the tension. It was uneasy, to say the least. I was afraid to move in case it would slice up the tension and something would erupt.

I couldn't come up with anything, and the whole ride had been spent in silence until we pulled up in front of a nice-looking house with a wraparound garden that seemed to be well tended.

"Mom's with the funeral director. She should be home soon. She made up your old room for you." I didn't know if he sounded angry or upset. Maybe a bit of both. But with that said, Connor's brother got out of the truck and headed inside without a single glance back.

Connor got out as well without a word.

"So that was your brother."

I jumped down from the truck after Connor. I watched as he reached back for our bags and took mine once he held it out to me.

"Yeah. That's Joseph."

"He was... rude." I couldn't find another word to describe him. He hadn't even greeted me. It'd been like I was invisible.

"He's still angry with me." Connor put his hand on the small of my back and gently pushed me towards the stairs up to the house.

"For what?"

"For being me."

Connor led me quickly up the stairs and into what could only be his room. I turned in a slow circle to take it in. It was sparsely furnished, only with a bed, a desk, and a bookcase.

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“I see they’ve redecorated.” Connor chuckled, but it wasn’t a happy kind of chuckle. More bitter than anything. He pointed to the walls. “I used to have posters up there, of half-naked guys.

“I bet that wasn’t popular.”

“Not at all. I used to have posters of girls, before I came out, just for cover, you know. But once I did come out, I covered these walls with posters of half-naked, fit guys. My parents didn’t like to come in here after that.” He dropped his bag on the bed. “This bed is made for one. If she thinks I’m going to sleep away from my husband, she’s sorely mistaken.”

I scratched awkwardly at the back of my neck.

He’d had an argument with his mom the day after he’d told me we were going to Nebraska. Apparently I hadn’t been very welcome, but he’d refused to go without me. I couldn’t help but wonder if there even was a room made up for me or if I was supposed to find some other form of sleeping arrangement.

“Let’s go downstairs. I need something to eat.”

I followed Connor out of the room and back down.

We walked into a big, brightly lit kitchen, only to find it occupied by a young woman. I almost walked right into Connor when he stopped dead in his tracks.

“Jess?”

The woman turned with a big smile on her young face. “Connor!” She came out from behind the counter, and my eyes instantly fell to the pregnant belly jutting out.

Connor saw it too, because he took a step back when she reached out to hug him. “What’re you doing here, Jess?” He had an expression on his face I couldn’t decipher.

She gave up trying to hug him and instead crossed her arms. “I’m helping your mom out. This isn’t easy for her.”

Connor was still staring at her belly. He wasn’t saying anything, and it didn’t seem like she was going to be volunteering information either.

“Hi. I’m Tim.” I stepped in front of Connor and held my hand out to her.

---

She regarded me with deep, brown eyes for several moments but eventually shook my hand. "I'm Jessica. Nice to meet you, Tim. So, you're the guy who stole Connor's heart?"

I liked her. I think. She didn't seem hostile or anything, at least. "I guess I am."

"He's my husband," Connor said from behind me, putting a heavy hand on my shoulder. "And I expect him to be treated as such."

Her lips pinched as her eyes found Connor again. "I made my peace with you a long time ago, Connor. But I can't make promises for anyone else."

Peace with? Peace with what?

When Connor didn't say anything, she turned back to the counter. "I've made sandwiches. Feel free to take what you want." She motioned towards a heaping plate.

"Thanks, Jess." He said it grudgingly.

She leaned against the counter while we both took a sandwich.

"These are real tasty." It wasn't a lie either; they really did taste good. I got a smile in return for it.

"So..." Her focus rested on Connor. "Aren't you going to ask?"

"Ask what?"

Her eyes widened a bit in irritation. She motioned to her belly. "Aren't you at least a little bit curious who knocked me up?"

"Well, since you're here, apparently to help my mom, I'm guessing Joseph did. And I've got nothing to say to that." He shook his head as if he was disappointed.

"Connor—" The front door opened and closed and footsteps could be heard coming towards the kitchen.

I knew it was Connor's mom the moment I laid eyes on her. They had the same eyes, a mix of gray, blue, and green, and the same course, brown hair, though hers had a bit of silver in it now.

"Connor." She was terse.

"Mom." He eyed her, then turned to me. "This is Tim. You remember I told you about him? My *husband*?"

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“Yes, hello.” Her nod was just as terse as her voice. “May I speak with you? Alone?” She turned and walked out, and after throwing me a glance, Connor followed.

I was left in the kitchen with Jessica.

“So how do you know Connor?” I asked, hoping to avoid another tense and awkward silence.

“He’s my ex-boyfriend.”

My whole body froze for a second, and my eyes again went to her belly. Connor’s ex-girlfriend, and now she was apparently with his brother? Why hadn’t Connor mentioned that to me? Why did *she* mention it? Did it even matter that they’d been together? Maybe it did to her... I couldn’t help but think that maybe she was trying to have Connor through his brother?

“Don’t worry. We never did anything,” she said. “It was an innocent teenage romance. I realized once he came out that I was used as his cover. But it’s okay.” She shrugged, like it wasn’t a big deal. Maybe it wasn’t now, but I was pretty sure it had been. Why else would she have said she’d made her peace with him earlier?

“How long were you together?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

I’d never thought of myself as jealous, but then I’d never found myself face-to-face with Connor’s ex before either.

“For most of high school. Until he came out.”

Silence descended. I tried not to look at her. I didn’t want to seem like I was staring.

“Look, Tim. It was Tim, right?”

“Yeah.” Short and easy name, not too hard to remember.

“All of this.” She motioned around the room, but I had a feeling it wasn’t the room itself she was referring to. “It’s not as bad as it seems. I mean, Connor had some bad experiences once he came out, but who doesn’t?”

I hadn’t.

“We really aren’t so bad, any of us. Grace is grieving, so is Joseph. But they’re not bad people. They’re just a little... they don’t understand.”

“Don’t understand what?”

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“How he could stay away for four years. Grace is okay with the whole gay thing, even if she can't quite comprehend the fact that he married another man.”

One thing was missing from that sentence, and it bothered me. “His brother's not okay with it?”

Her lips pursed again. I took that as a no.

“His extended family's a bit crazy. Has he told you about them?”

I nodded. The paranoid uncle, the aunt who didn't leave her home... Yeah. “They seem like a weird bunch.” Maybe that word wasn't the best to use, but it was all I could come up with.

She chuckled. “They are. But then don't we all have something weird about us?”

I'd made up my mind. I liked Jessica. She seemed like a decent person, and she had humor. If anyone else didn't welcome me around here, at least she seemed to be okay with me. I guess it was better than nobody.

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Dinner was tense.

Joseph was still flat out ignoring me, and Connor seemed to be ignoring his brother. Grace kept her head bowed through most of dinner; she didn't say a single word. Jessica tried to keep a conversation going, but no one seemed inclined to speak with her.

I was relieved when Connor and I escaped up to his bedroom.

“Mom admitted to wanting us to have separate bedrooms.” Connor grabbed both of our bags. “But I set her straight. So we've got the guest room now.”

“Oh.” I followed him across the hall, into a room that was even more sparsely furnished. There was only a double bed and a nightstand on each side, as well as a closet.

He sat down on the bed and glanced up at me. “Do you regret it?”

“Regret what?” I went over to stand in-between his thighs. I looped my arms around his neck and leaned down to press a kiss to the top of his head.

“Coming here with me? They haven't exactly been very welcoming.” He wrapped his arms tightly around my waist.

“They've never met me before.”



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“Your family welcomed me with open arms the first time I met them,” he pointed out. “Why can’t my family be normal?”

“I don’t think my family’s normal, babe. I’ve been extremely lucky with my parents. Your family is maybe a bit more normal, when it comes to reactions. Someone’s always going to take issue when there’s two gay men around. Not everyone’s going to be supportive.”

“They could try to be a little bit nicer. You’re not fucking invisible. You’re a big part of my life.”

I hugged his shoulders. “Maybe they’ll realize that these few days we’re here.”

“I doubt it. You know what Mom said when I asked why they hadn’t told me Dad was ill?”

“No.” I looked into his eyes.

“She said she didn’t think I wanted to know. That I’d left them and never bothered to come back.”

“That’s...” Jesus. That was cruel. He’d been Connor’s *dad*, of course he’d deserved to know the man had been ill.

“Yeah.” He sighed. “I think Dad’s the one who was the most okay with me. It’s weird, really, but Mom seems to be a lot more hostile towards me now than she’d been when Dad was still alive.”

“Why is it weird? Wasn’t she like this before you left for college?”

“Not quite so bad. Usually it’s the father that minds having a gay son the most, but I think it’s opposite for me. Dad didn’t like it, but he accepted it as long as he didn’t have to get it shoved in his face. Like all the posters in my room. That’s why he never went into it anymore.”

“Maybe it’s just because she’s grieving. He did just die.” I didn’t like the thought of Connor not being accepted by his family. Maybe it seemed so far-fetched to me because I’d always been accepted.

“I wish I could’ve seen him one last time. Or at least talked to him.” Connor’s voice grew thick. He was fighting his emotions. “I should’ve come back here. For Dad.”

“None of them told you anything. Not even your dad. So you couldn’t have known.” I put my free hand on Connor’s chest, caressing him. He was wearing a T-shirt to bed and the fabric bunched under my hand.

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“At least you’re here to say a final good-bye to him,” I whispered. “At least you get that.” They could’ve chosen not to tell him about his dad’s death too. After seeing what I had, and hearing what he’d just said, I wouldn’t have put it past them.

“Yeah.” He reached over to me and pulled me in close. His strong arms wrapped around me again. “At least I get that. And I’ve got you here with me, too.”

“I’ll always be with you, whatever happens.”

“I love you so much, Tim. Don’t ever doubt that.”

I smiled against his chest. “I don’t. I don’t doubt it for a second.”

I never had.

“No matter what, babe, you mean everything to me. You’re my family.” He kissed me.

I straddled his lap and sat down, enjoying the way his tongue teased me. I loved kissing Connor, had since our very first kiss four years ago. He was an excellent kisser—always had been. I had to wonder though where he’d learned it, considering he’d only ever been with one person in this town, and that person was a girl.

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The funeral was the next day, and it seemed the whole town’s population of 287 were gathered in the church.

Connor kept his hand on the small of my back, almost like he was afraid of losing me if he didn’t have his hands on me at all times. I found it quite endearing. Everyone else didn’t, if I were to judge by the long glances we got from each and every direction.

“This row is for family only,” Joseph snapped once we reached the front of the church.

My stomach clenched tight.

Connor’s jaw clenched dangerously. “Fine.” He took my hand and dragged me with him further back.

“Babe.” I sat down gingerly next to him on the hard bench. “I don’t mind sitting here. You should be with your family.” I knew I was his family too now, considering we were married, but he should be up there close to his dad.

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“You’re my family, Tim.” His eyes were sincere when he looked at me.

Butterflies erupted in my stomach. They always did when he gave me that look. That was the look I’d fallen for in the first place. It was the one he’d had on his face when he’d asked me out.

I wanted to lean in and kiss him, but I restrained myself. Kissing another man inside a church wouldn’t be viewed well, I could imagine. I wasn’t religious, but I bet most of the people in the church were. Not to mention his family.

I could tell he was agitated, no matter how fine he tried to seem about the situation. His hands were clenched; his jaw was tight. He was upset and he had a right to be. This was his dad—apparently the only person who’d accepted him for who he was.

I reached over to hold his hand. He gripped on tight.

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Connor had to wipe away a few tears when the coffin was lowered into the ground. I stood by his side the whole time, not sure what I could do to make him feel better. Not much. He’d just lost his dad, and I couldn’t imagine what that must be like, even if he hadn’t seen him in the past four years.

It was emotional for the rest of his family too. His mom was crying through the whole thing, while his brother kept an arm locked tightly around Jess’ shoulders. It seemed she was his rock—even if he wasn’t reduced to tears.

The family gathered back at the house after the service was done. Those who weren’t family were giving their condolences to those who were.

I didn’t feel part of anything, so I went to the bathroom just to get some time alone to myself.

I didn’t regret coming with Connor, not at all. But I understood why he didn’t want to come back here. It wasn’t like the welcome, his or mine, had been anything to brag about.

I ventured back out to the crowded house. Connor wasn’t where I’d left him, so I walked through all the rooms looking for him, until I spotted him out back.

It wasn’t until I was out on the porch that I noticed he was facing off with Joseph.

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“What’s your deal, huh?” Connor said, arms hanging by his sides, but his hands were clenched into fists.

“You’re my problem,” Joseph spat. “You bring that man here and expect to sit with us up front in church? No fucking way am I ever going to let that happen. He’s not family.”

“He’s my *husband*. He’s more my family than you are.”

Joseph spat on the ground again. I took a step back, debating whether to go back inside or not. This was their fight, but Joseph was posing as a danger. Maybe even a little bit unstable, with his blatant homophobia. It was very unsettling. I bet it must feel even worse for Connor, who was his brother.

“Yeah, I imagine he is. You can go play faggots together.”

Connor’s knuckles were turning white. I knew from experience that Connor had an exceptionally good hold of his temper—but I was pretty sure he was about to snap.

I bit my lower lip, worried about what would happen when Connor did snap.

“What are you going to do, Joseph? Are you going to beat me up again? Like you did last time? You going to make me go to the ER to get my arm set again?”

My blood ran cold. That’s what had happened between them? His brother had broken his *arm*? What the hell kind of person did that to his own brother? It was maddening to hear. Not to mention upsetting, for Connor, who’d had something so horrible done to him by someone he cared about.

“You’re not wanted here.” Joseph’s eyes were practically black with rage.

It didn’t seem like Joseph’s anger was going away. He had broken Connor’s arm before, which meant he could very well do it again. I didn’t want Connor to experience such a thing, not for a second time.

“Dad would’ve wanted me here.”

“Dad.” Joseph snorted. “You always were his favorite. Even when he found out you were queer, you could do no wrong. But Mom and I, we aren’t having any of it. You can take your *husband* and flit off back home. Leave us alone. I’ve got a kid on the way, with a great girl, and I don’t want you around to ruin it.”

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“What? You’re afraid I’m going to take Jess away from you? *Again?*”

The last word broke the tension. Joseph flew on Connor, and they both crashed to the ground. I started in shock for a moment as they both swung at each other, unable to move. I’d never seen Connor like that before. He’d never lost his temper with anyone. He’d never once hit anyone. And now here he was, hitting his own brother.

“You fucking faggot! She’s my girl and she’s not getting anywhere near you ever again!”

“She was my girl first, you fucking loser!”

My mouth dropped open. They were fighting about *Jess*? My husband was fighting with his brother about a woman. Brilliant.

“Connor!” I hurried down from the porch to reach where they were rolling around in the grass. “Connor, come on!” I grabbed his arms and pulled him off his brother, but Joseph wasn’t about to let me remove Connor from the fight. He dove after him, hit him around the waist, and then we all fell to the ground.

I rolled away from flying fists so I wouldn’t get one in the face. It wasn’t my fight, so I didn’t want to sport the war wounds from it.

They weren’t even yelling at each other anymore. They were intent on beating each other’s faces in. I tried to grab a hold of Connor again, to drag him away, but I was pushed away.

“Connor!”

He ignored me, too intent on Joseph. Joseph didn’t even react to my voice. To him, I was still invisible.

Where was the brotherly love? Had they always been like this, or was it because of homophobia and jealousy it had developed this way?

“Connor, come on!” I got a grip on his shoulders and managed to push him back, away from Joseph. “Calm down. Come on. Don’t do this. Not now.” His dad had just been put in the ground. I didn’t want him hurt and I didn’t want him to think back to a fight with his brother on this day.

Connor pushed himself up on his feet, glared down at Joseph, who was also pushing himself up. Without a word, he turned and strode back inside.

I glanced once at Joseph, at the angry grimace. He wasn’t worth my time. I hurried after Connor.

---

“Is that what happened between you before?”

I put the damp cloth to Connor's lip, trying to be rid of the blood. His lips were split, and he had a graze on both his cheeks. He looked worse than Joseph, who'd only seemed to be bleeding from his nose before I left him out on the lawn.

“Fighting?”

“Yeah. About Jess?”

“Well, yeah. Her and me being gay. He really doesn't like me being gay. Especially not as I dated her first.”

“Huh.” I pressed the cloth harder, and he flinched. “Sorry. I just didn't expect that.”

“What?”

“That you'd fought over a girl. You never once mentioned having a brother to me and that's because you fought over a *girl*?” I'd expected some big reveal. Instead, I was just baffled. Connor didn't even *like* women.

“Joseph hated the fact that I was with her. He always wanted her. And when he found out I was gay, he took great pleasure in sharing it with everyone.”

My eyebrows rose. “Your brother outed you?”

“Yeah.” He covered my hand with his and guided the cloth over his lip. “Out of pure spite. We've never been close. He hated me for having the girl he liked, he hated me for being Dad's favorite, he hated me for doing better in school than him—Honestly, I could go on all night.”

“He's your brother.” I couldn't imagine. But then I was an only child.

“That doesn't matter. He outed me, Dad still liked me, Jess was still my friend. Seemed he got his clutches in her in the end though.”

“She seemed like a decent girl. Surely there must be something good about your brother?”

“I don't know, babe.” He heaved a sigh. “Love makes you blind. Isn't that a saying?”

“I guess.” I shrugged. “Am I blind to your faults?”

The unharmed corner of his mouth hitched up into a wry grin. “Maybe we're blind to each other's.”

“Maybe we are.” I kissed that particular corner of his mouth.

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“Anyway, I want to change our flights. I want to go back home tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I was caught by surprise. “You sure about that? We’ve only been here a full day.”

“And it’s been more than enough.”

I went to the sink to rinse out the cloth. “I go wherever you go, Connor. If you want to go home, that’s where we’ll go.”

“Dad was the best thing about this place. He’s gone, so... there’s really no need to stay any longer.”

I could understand. He hadn’t exactly been welcomed with open arms.

“There’s one thing I want to do before we leave though. I want to go visit Dad’s grave, just you and me.”

“Of course.” I’d go with him to the end of the world if he asked. All he had to do was just that—ask.

\*\*\*\*

The dirt was piled high on the grave, and it was covered in ribbons and flowers. A white cross at the front told us whose grave it was.

Connor was crouched in front of it, arms dangling from his knees, and eyes somber as he took in the simple cross.

He didn’t say anything, he just sat in complete silence. I stood behind him, hands in my pockets, and tried my best to be quiet. To give him this time with his dad. It was the last he’d have in a good while.

He’d managed to change our flight tickets. It’d been more expensive, but he’d said he didn’t care how expensive it was, as long as we could go home. I kind of agreed with him, because it wasn’t like I enjoyed being treated like I was invisible. Or being glowered at like I was an abomination.

I wanted to go back home just as much as he did, back to the peace and quiet, where we could be ourselves. I wanted to go back to my parents, who loved us both and weren’t afraid to show it.

Connor straightened eventually and his strong arms wrapped around me. I took my hands out of my pockets and embraced him, too. We stood there for a good while, hugging each other, without saying a word. I was both a comfort to him and his strength. I’d be whatever as long as he’d be fine eventually.

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“Let’s go back. Get some sleep before we leave tomorrow morning.”

I nodded, and he kept an arm around my shoulders as we started walking back toward his childhood home.

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“You’re leaving?”

His mother appeared behind us as we lugged our bags out into the driveway. We’d ordered a taxi to pick us up, because another drive in complete, tense silence wasn’t something either of us wanted to experience again.

“Yes, Mom.” Connor turned to her. She stood at the top of the stairs.

She nodded. “All right, then.”

“That’s it?”

I knew Connor hadn’t expected anything, but I could tell he was hurt all the same.

“What do you want me to say? It’s for the best.” In body she looked fragile, a thin old lady, but her expression and her eyes were cold. “After yesterday’s debacle, leaving is a good decision.”

I burned to speak up, to tell her yesterday hadn’t been only Connor’s fault, but I wasn’t sure if he’d appreciate me speaking my mind to her or not. So I kept my mouth shut.

“Yeah, Mom. I guess it is for the best.”

The taxi pulled up behind us, and Connor swirled around to go put our bags in the trunk.

“Connor!” Jess came hurrying out of the house. She descended the stairs and came towards us as fast as her small, pregnant body would allow it.

Connor allowed her to hug him this time. He even hugged her back lightly.

“I’m glad you came back. I’m glad I got to see you again.” She pulled back to look into his eyes. “I’m sorry about Joseph. He just can’t seem to get over...” She trailed off, but she didn’t need to list the reasons he couldn’t get over. There were only three of them—Connor being gay, getting with his girl before him, and Connor being his dad’s favorite—but those three were more than enough. “But I’m happy to see you, know that. As for me, you’re always welcome back.”



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“Thanks, Jess. It was nice to see you again, too.” He didn’t put much emotion into it, but I knew he was being truthful. He was still hurt about his mother’s cold words.

“It was nice to meet you too, Tim.” Jess turned to me with a smile. “I hope we’ll meet again someday.”

I nodded with a smile. “I hope so too.”

She hugged Connor one last time, then we got into the taxi. The taxi drove away once Connor slammed the door shut, and Connor’s eyes rested on me as we drove away instead of glancing back home.

“Do you regret it?” I asked. “Leaving now?”

“No.” He shook his head for emphasis. “I don’t regret it at all. I’m looking forward to getting back home, where we belong. We don’t belong here. *I* don’t belong here.” He reached over to tangle his fingers with mine. “My mom’s always been frigid, but she was a bit warmer when Dad was alive. I guess now he’s not, she’s got nothing left.” He gazed out the window. “I hope I won’t ever experience losing you.”

I couldn’t answer that. We didn’t know what would happen in the future. All I knew was that for now, I wasn’t going anywhere, and neither was he. We were married, we belonged together, we were *family*.

\*\*\*\*\*

My parents met us at the airport. I’d texted them that we were coming home, and now here they were.

“I didn’t know you were coming to pick us up!” Connor embraced first my mom, then my dad, with a big smile on his face.

“That’s what family’s for, Connor dear.” Mom smiled widely back at him and patted his cheek.

I went in to be hugged as well, then I wrapped an arm around Connor’s waist. His sad mood from the taxi drive and the flight seemed to have vanished the moment he’d spotted my parents.

I was glad.

Because this was family. People who loved you unconditionally—and who showed up at the airport to pick you up without so much as being prompted to it, just because they loved you so much.

*That's what family's for, indeed.*

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*T.T. writes m/m romance, all-male ménages, lesbians, and even a few m/f short stories in already established series. She writes books that are only intended for adults; her stories usually have explicit sexual content, so if you're not 18 years of age, you probably shouldn't be reading them.*

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# WHAT REMAINS OF US

By J.H. Knight

## Photo Description

Two men in early 20<sup>th</sup> century clothing are standing outdoors together. One has his arm around the other's shoulder and he's tweaking his mustache.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*It's been a year since the earthquake. With San Francisco burning around us, we were sure we'd lost everything. With nothing left to lose, we turned to each other. The world didn't end that day after all, and we've lived every day since rebuilding—together. We're finally ready to tell our story.*

*Please make the story as sweet or as sexy as feels authentic to you, and feel free to get as history-geeky as you like.*

*Sincerely,*

*Vanessa*

## Story Info

**Genre:** historical

**Tags:** drama, hurt/comfort, in the closet, natural disaster, family

**Word Count:** 15,740

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## WHAT REMAINS OF US

By J.H. Knight

*Sunday, April 15, 1906*

Martin laughed when Roger leaned in with his flask of gin and whispered, “Make it a Tom Collins?” He was already dumping a healthy splash into his own lemonade.

“So you can beat me at croquet?” He put his hand over his glass when Roger tried to tip his flask over it.

“So we can forget how dull and forgettable this garden party is turning out.” Roger’s tone played between disgruntled and amused.

With another laugh, Martin reminded him, “It’s *your* garden party.” He knew the party was only supposed to be a small get together of their close friends to show off Roger’s new home, but the guest list had gotten away from him. Martin almost felt sorry for him. He watched the ladies cluster together near the tables of refreshments, their long dresses swaying softly with the breeze as it shifted the leaves in the trees. The men mostly gathered at the card tables under the pavilion canopies, betting, chatting, and laughing. A few others were making fools of themselves with lawn tennis. One man stood out, though. Motioning across the yard with his drink in hand, Martin remarked, “Not sure I’ve seen him around.”

“I wondered how long it would take for you to notice him.” Roger’s answer was full of teasing with only a hint of smugness.

Hearing the friendly jibe, Martin nudged him with his elbow. “Can you blame me?”

With an undignified, but at least hushed snort of laughter, Roger said, “Hardly.” They both glanced at the man lying luxuriously in the grass. He wore his dark hair cropped short and parted down the middle, not unlike Martin’s own. On the other man, however, it appeared more stylish and, at the same time, nonchalant. Even with his well-manicured mustache—another thing they had in common—and impeccable suit, he seemed casual and at ease where Martin felt buttoned up and starched within an inch of his life.

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“From what I’ve gathered,” Roger went on, “he’s a good bit younger than us, twenty-four or thereabouts.” He paused to take another sip from his drink, as if to let the eight-year age difference register. “He’s from somewhere back east, the south, maybe, but he doesn’t have much of an accent.” Martin took the information in with a thoughtful nod. Before he could ask the question most on his mind, Roger added, “He’s one of our sorts of fellows. If the rumors are true, at least.” He could only mean the sort of fellow who liked other fellows. “Should simplify things, I would think.”

Roger had answered his unspoken question. Martin shot him a quick grin and said, “Or complicate them beyond measure.”

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“I can’t decide if you’re shy or simply uninterested.” Martin stood over him, casting a shadow from the high sun.

“Neither,” he said, glancing up at Martin. “And, it doesn’t matter.” He smiled as he sat up in the grass. “I’m doing it all with a dignified air, as if this is exactly what we’re supposed to be doing. If you wait long enough, others will plop themselves down on the grass too.”

Martin laughed and took a seat next to him, tugging the legs of his trousers up as he did it.

“See? I’ve already got one following my lead.” With another broad smile, he extended his hand to Martin. “Hugh Jones.”

Setting his glass down beside himself and planting it securely, he turned to Hugh and introduced himself, shaking his hand. “Martin Conrad. Pleased to meet you.” In the comfortable silence that followed, the two of them watched as a small group of children ran across their path, chasing a ball with a stick. “Roger tells me you’re new in the area.”

Hugh nodded, a smile lingering in his eyes. “Yes, from Virginia.”

“Far from home.”

Hugh huffed a laugh, not quite a happy sound. “Not far enough.”

Martin leaned back on his elbows and shifted to face Hugh better. “Sounds like there’s a story there.”

“Not much of one, I assure you. Or if it is, it’s been told a hundred times.” Hugh picked at the blades of grass, plucking them with his fingertips and rolling them together before dropping them and gathering more. He seemed

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thoughtful and Martin didn't want to intrude. Before long, Hugh explained, "I just wanted to get out from under the old family money and make something of myself. It didn't feel possible so close to home. Mother holds to a firm belief that the best thing for me is to marry and start a family, that it's the natural course. Father feels I should go into business with him, make a small fortune, and then marry and start a family." He shrugged and glanced at Martin. "I'm all for making my own small fortune, but I'm not as comfortable with the rest of it."

With a laugh, Martin nudged him. "At least you're comfortable with your own small fortune." Hugh smiled warmly at him, but didn't say anything else. To break the silence, Martin asked, "Have you set up house yet, or are you still looking for a place to settle down?"

"I'm at The Palace for the moment, still trying to decide if I want to build or buy something closer to town." The Palace was a grand hotel, the finest in the area. With that simple statement, Martin understood exactly how affluent Hugh must be. His own family wasn't exactly bad off, but theirs was ill-gotten new money. Martin and his father had worked hard to legitimize it, but the stain of their history still lingered around the edges.

Martin forced a grin and tried to shove aside their class differences. "Rubbing shoulders with royalty, then?"

The look Hugh gave him was pleasant, warm, but a hint of embarrassment flitted across his features. "Father booked my trip west," he admitted, tugging rather sharply at the grass. A moment later, two ladies across the yard shook out an old blanket and placed it on the lawn before kneeling on it. Hugh's mood lightened then. He pointed in their direction and grinned at Martin. "See?"

"I'm glad we didn't wager on it."

Hugh leaned in, only slightly, and met Martin's eyes. "I'm not a betting man," he said quietly, but he held Martin's gaze just long enough for Martin's pulse to quicken.

"Neither am I." Martin's voice had gotten husky, a nervous energy skittering to the surface. His throat felt oddly dry, and he wanted to reach for his drink, at the same time not wanting to look away from Hugh.

Before he could say anything else, Hugh broke the spell with a sigh and another glance across the picnic. "I do enjoy a friendly game of billiards from time to time, though." It wasn't quite an invitation, but it seemed like one, dangling there midconversation. Martin was about to suggest a place they might

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go for a game, but Hugh looked at him again, smiling that bright, crooked grin which was already ensnaring Martin. "If you're up for it, perhaps tomorrow evening you could stop by the hotel for a game?"

Hugh's tone wasn't weighted with suggestion. Nothing he said, no look in his eye, could make Martin think anything else was on offer, but still Martin was hopeful. Alarmingly hopeful, to be honest. He was about to accept the invitation when he remembered what day it was. "Unfortunately, tomorrow's no good." He caught the flash of disappointment in Hugh's expression and rushed to explain. "Family dinner every Monday. I'd have to be on my deathbed to get out of it."

Hugh looked uncertain, but he nodded in understanding. "Another time, then." He smiled as he said it, but the warmth had left his eyes. Martin nearly panicked.

"I'm free Tuesday evening, if—"

"Yes," Hugh cut him off cheerfully. "Tuesday, then."

Martin couldn't stop his own grin, glad Hugh seemed as eager as he felt. "Tuesday." He said the word again, as if sealing a promise, his heart already stuttering with anticipation.

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Martin had only asked the serving girl to bring him a small snifter of brandy. The meal was finished, or near enough, and there was no need to stand on formalities with his family. He'd forgotten that his younger sister, Emily, had recently taken up with a few women—*sisters*, they liked to be called—in the temperance movement. She was nearly twenty-one, and some days Martin wished he could marry her off to an unsuspecting young man.

"If you had seen what I have seen, Brother, you might not be so dismissive." She'd been telling him for the better part of five minutes how his finger of alcohol was all that was wrong with the world. "Women and children beaten bloody at the hands of those who should protect and treasure them," she said with a disgusted huff. "All because of that *demon liquor*."

Martin rolled his eyes, he couldn't help himself. "Yes, and, sweet Sister, what you don't realize is that not every drunkard would beat his wife, and not every man who beats his wife is a drunkard. All I'm saying is pick your cause. Is it to protect women and children? If so, then drink is not your enemy." As the only man in his family, sitting at a table surrounded by his four sisters and his



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mother, he could have been severely outmatched in this debate. Thankfully, only Emily had taken up that particular cause.

“I agree with Martin,” Kitty said. She was a handful of a different sort. Already a firebrand at seventeen, her passion was for medicine and suffrage. Truth be told, she was his favorite. “If a man is a brute, he doesn’t need to be inebriated to show his true colors. And, likewise, if he’s naturally kind at heart, then drinking isn’t going to make him less so.”

Martin lifted his glass and beamed at Kitty. “Well said, Kitten.”

Their youngest sister, Molly, spoke then. Only five, but always ready to let her own views be known. “I agree too,” she said, rising up on her knees to make herself taller. “If Martin says it’s all right, then it’s all right.”

“Of course Kitty would agree with you. She always does.” Emily crossed her arms over her chest. “And Molly is too young to understand.” She looked at Evelyn, the quietest of them all, for some support. “Don’t you have anything to say, Eve?” Her tone was more accusing than pleading.

Evelyn looked up from her plate. She had been pushing the remaining bits of food around with her fork since before the debate began. It would take her a moment, Martin knew, to choose her words. Not because she was dimwitted, but quite the opposite. She was likely the smartest person he knew, man or woman.

Evelyn took a small sip from her water glass and then dabbed at the corners of her mouth with her napkin. Martin couldn’t guess what she was going to say, but it was clear on her face she was trying to decide the best way to state her feelings without giving anyone offense. She was barely nineteen, but he thought her soul might be ancient, deep, and rich with wisdom.

“A piece of cake doesn’t make someone fat or lazy,” she said slowly, as if feeling the weight of her words on her tongue. “Money doesn’t make someone greedy.” Martin couldn’t help smiling when he saw where she was going. “And liquor doesn’t make a man into a devil. I worry for the world when we claim to be controlled by that which we should be in control of.” Martin thought she was done, but she added, “I would be slow to trust anyone who feels they should have the right to tell us what we can and cannot do with our own bodies, Emily.” As if to illustrate her point, she reached for Martin’s glass and took a sip from it. He’d never seen her drink before. Judging by the way her face reddened and the surprised cough she let slip, it was the first time in her life. Even Emily laughed with the rest of the family as Evelyn waved her hand in front of her mouth.

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His mother, who had been silent up until then, said, “Eve, darling, I think you might want to start with a nice glass of wine before you try to keep up with your brother.” Evelyn smiled at her, but her cheeks were rosy and Martin had to wonder if one sip was enough to go to her head. She seemed as bold and bright as Kitty in that moment. Martin realized he didn’t have a favorite after all. He loved them all for many different reasons.

As if she sensed her moment to change the subject, his mother asked, “Martin, how was the party yesterday? Marjorie tells me there was quite a crowd.”

All but Emily seemed grateful for the new topic. Martin leaned back in his chair as Molly climbed down from her own seat and came to him, wanting to sit on his lap. He lifted her up and kissed her blonde curls before answering. “It was lovely, quite a turnout.” He started to trot his leg, bouncing Molly on his knee as she giggled. She had been a surprise, born after three miscarriages when his mother thought she was past childbearing age. Molly was the last gift their father had given them and Martin cherished her. “There were some new faces as well. Met a man by the name of Hugh Jones from Virginia, seems like a good sort.”

Kitty cast him a questioning glance at the mention of Hugh. He wondered if there had been some hint in his tone to tell her what Martin really thought of him. Kitty was the only one in the family who knew his dark secret, having stumbled across him one evening nearly a year ago when he was entertaining someone in the garden. It had been awkward and terrifying, but Kitty had only looked at him in stunned silence as his acquaintance made a hasty retreat. She seemed puzzled at first and then, when recognition set in, she looked at the ground before lifting her gaze to his. She swore she’d never tell anyone. She actually apologized for frightening him. He moved into his own house the following month. One of four sisters had reacted as best as he could hope, but he didn’t want to press his luck with the others.

“Virginia, did you say?” His mother’s voice pulled him out of his thoughts and he nodded in answer. “I wonder if he knows the Montgomery family.”

Martin couldn’t care less if Hugh knew the Queen of England, let alone the Montgomery family, but he said, “I’ll ask him tomorrow. We’re getting together for a bite to eat and a round of billiards.”

Kitty’s look was less questioning and more knowing then. She smiled at him, and his secret felt less dark.

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Martin was early, as was his habit when he was nervous or looking forward to something. Tonight he was both.

The clatter of horse hooves coupled with the rumble of motor cars greeted him as he turned down Market Street. The heat had been rising steadily all afternoon, but he chose to linger outside once he reached The Palace. The sun was beginning to set and the sky was turning a brilliant pink as he watched the cable cars make their way up and down the road. Men, women, and children passed in front of him, and a newsboy stood on the street corner trying to peddle the last of his papers for the day. There was nothing special about the afternoon, nothing remarkable at all, except he was going to see Hugh in a few minutes. He couldn't have explained it to anyone. In fact, he barely understood it himself, but Hugh woke up a different kind of desire in him. It went beyond the simple animal lusts he'd indulged in with other men. And, for the first time in his life, he didn't feel the cold specter of disapproval standing behind him whispering, *this is unnatural*. Wanting to spend time with Hugh felt like the most natural thing in the world.

He took out his pocket watch for the fourth time and let out a disappointed sigh. He was still nearly fifteen minutes early. After another moment passed, he decided to go into the hotel, laughing to himself as he thought, *I'm beginning to feel like a vagrant*.

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They were to meet in the Palm Court, but Martin didn't expect Hugh to be there yet. He took a moment, as he always did when he visited The Palace, to enjoy the grandeur of the hotel. From the marble floors, thick carpets, and electric lighting throughout, to the large palm trees and vaulted ceilings, it was a lovely space. Greenery surrounded clusters of tables and chairs, lending an intimate feel for small gatherings, despite the vastness of the room.

Due to the early hour, they had agreed upon casual attire, but Martin couldn't help wondering if the decision had been a mistake. Even in the public rooms, most everyone dressed as if they were meeting international dignitaries.

To his shock and delight, Hugh was already waiting for him. He had slicked his hair back and wore a dark blue sack coat and matching trousers with a rather busy-looking checkered waistcoat. Martin smiled when he saw him, struck again by how similar their styles seemed to be. Hugh wore a winged collar and bow tie whereas Martin had opted for a high collar and a simple four-in-hand knotted tie, but otherwise they were looking quite the pair. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

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Hugh jumped, obviously startled at the sound of Martin's voice. "Not at all," he said as he slid his own watch back into his pocket. "Looks like we're both running early." The smile Martin got was enough to knock him over. It dazzled him, in the same pure way the white-capped sea in a storm or the sun rising over a mountaintop could dazzle him.

It took him far too long to respond as a rush of heat and curiosity and maybe even yearning charged through him. "Better than one of us running early and the other running late."

With a laugh, Hugh said, "I couldn't agree more." He glanced around the room and then looked at Martin again. "I was thinking we could start with a light supper? Unless you've already eaten, that is."

"Actually, I'm famished, so there's no need for it to be light," Martin joked. There were plenty of choices for dining in the area, some of the best in the city at the hotel itself. "The American, or...?"

"I was thinking the Men's Grill Room, if that's all right." Hugh placed a hand on Martin's shoulder, already guiding him towards the lobby. The Men's Grill Room at The Palace had a reputation, even overseas, for being superb. "I could eat their porterhouse morning, noon, and night and not tire of it."

"Excellent," Martin agreed, trying to ignore the way his blood heated at the feel of Hugh's palm still resting comfortably on his shoulder.

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Martin was grateful Hugh wasn't a betting man. He would have cleaned Martin's pockets at the billiards table. They'd enjoyed a pleasant dinner, chatted long and happily. As it turned out, Hugh did know the Montgomery family, but only in passing. When they'd lingered far too long in the dining room, Hugh suggested they move their conversation into the game room. From there, Hugh proceeded to trounce him in no less than five out of six games. It was quite a sight, and they both shared a few laughs over it.

"Are you as good at cards as you are at billiards?" Martin asked before taking a sip of port.

Hugh flashed him a devilish grin. "Better."

With a boisterous laugh, Martin told him, "It's a good thing you're an honorable man. I'd say your fortune would already be made twice over if you were ever to use your skills for ill."

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The crowd from earlier had started to thin and the cleaning staff lingered on the edges of the room. It had been a lovely evening, and was turning into a lovely night. Especially when Hugh caught his eye and said, "I'm not certain how honorable I am, sometimes."

He couldn't expect a better opening than that, but Martin was still unsure. "I think everyone is entitled to a few vices."

Hugh flashed him an uncertain grin in response. After a short pause, he nodded toward the staff around them. "I think they'd like to be rid of us."

It was well after midnight, Martin realized. "I suppose we should let them get on with things." He wasn't sure if the game room stayed open all hours or if they were only accommodating Hugh—and by extension, Hugh's father. Rather than question it, Martin picked up his bowler hat and followed Hugh toward the lobby.

Hugh was silent for a moment as they walked together. Martin was starting to feel a bit let down, not wanting the night to end, despite the late hour. Before they reached the door, Hugh asked, "Do you live far? I didn't think to ask..."

"Not at all." Martin was smiling still, wondering if it would be appropriate to set another date for later in the week. "I'm only around the corner, actually, over on Howard Street. A pleasant stroll from here."

As if something had been decided, Hugh grinned. "Excellent." He nodded politely to the doorman who had pulled the heavy door open for them. "I'll join you then. I could use some fresh air, I think."

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A shroud of humidity covered them as they stepped out into the nearly abandoned streets. Hugh tugged lightly at his collar, almost fidgety next to Martin. He could understand the restlessness because he felt much the same. It was no cooler than it had been earlier in the evening and now the night air was thick and strangely tense, as if the whole world were holding its breath with Martin, waiting to see what would come of this friendship.

As they turned a corner, a baker's wagon made its way toward Market Street. It nearly collided with an automobile as it slowly trotted through the intersection. Hugh motioned to the car whose driver was furiously honking its horn. "Have you got one?"

"A motor car?" Martin laughed. "No, I haven't seen the need for one, really. The trollies do me just fine and I rarely need to go farther than they do."

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“True.” Hugh nodded. He was walking close to Martin, their shoulders bumping casually as they strolled to the next block. “Though, the idea of a nice long drive down the coast with the sun shining and the wind in my face is appealing sometimes. It rings of freedom.”

Thinking for a moment, Martin had to agree. It did sound like a lovely idea. Especially when he entertained the thought of running his hand over Hugh's thigh while they cruised down the coastline. Or the hidden spots they could discover together along the way. He let his mind drift to an isolated sand dune somewhere, tucked away from the world, his arm around Hugh's shoulder, the two of them kissing, embracing. He had to clear his throat before he could speak again. “Well, now you've got me considering a motor car.” They both laughed softly, Martin grateful that Hugh couldn't read his thoughts.

When they came to his own small house, nestled between two others, Martin motioned towards it. “This is me,” he said before adding, “I'd invite you in, but I'm afraid it's going to be stifling in there. I don't have a live-in, so the house has been closed all day.” The shutters were pulled and not a single light was on. The house he'd come to love for its anonymity and freedom now seemed like a lonely little shell.

Hugh glanced at him and smiled. “I don't mind it being stuffy. This is nothing compared to summer in Virginia.” Martin considered that and was about to start up the front steps when Hugh suggested, “We could take another turn around the neighborhood, though, if you like.”

Their interaction was starting to feel like a dance. One of them advancing and then the other, nearly meeting in the middle before one of them stepped back, the other following. Martin enjoyed it, the way he felt unsure of his footing, but secure with his partner. “I'd like that very much.” Martin smiled and walked past his front stoop.

They took another turn and then another, chatting quietly as the city slept around them. A few cars and carts were starting to make their way here and there, but for the most part, it was as if they were alone in the world. “Tell me more about your sisters,” Hugh said, adding, “Kitty sounds like she's got some claws.”

Martin couldn't help but laugh and agree. “She does. Father always called her his wild kitten because she would never do as she was told, always asking questions, always curious. I think she paved the way for the rest of them, even though she's younger than Emily and Evelyn.” He smiled fondly at the thought

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of them, his girls. "I think he gave up on turning them into proper ladies shortly after Kitty learned to speak." He didn't mention that his own mother was far from proper or that Kitty came by it naturally.

"Is she planning to take over the world yet?"

"Not yet." Martin thought Eve was more suited for world domination than Kitty. No one would see it coming, but before they knew it, they would be converted to her way of thinking without a single gun being fired. "She's got her eye set on medical school."

"Nursing?"

"*Surgeon*," Martin said with some emphasis.

The look on Hugh's face was almost comical. His brows shot up toward his hairline as he asked, "I... Is that done? I'd think nursing or a... woman's doctor maybe, but surgery?"

Martin couldn't help his laugh as he gently clapped Hugh on the back in mock comfort. "I can't say if it's been done before, but if any woman can, Kitty will."

"A kitten with claws, indeed." They both laughed again before Hugh went on to say, "I'm not entirely comfortable with the idea of my mother driving, let alone cutting into someone with a scalpel."

"I was thinking of inviting you to family dinner next week, but on second thought, you might not survive the night if you said something like that."

Hugh paused to pull his cigarette case from his inside pocket, offering one to Martin who declined with a smile. "I promise to keep my opinions to myself, should I ever meet them." He spoke around the bare end of his cigarette as he struck a match and lit up.

"Impossible." Martin laughed again as they started down the street once more. "Emily will watch you like a hawk to see if you take so much as a thimble of port, Kitty will want to know where you stand on women's voting rights, and Eve will observe quietly until you say something that requires correction."

With a grin, Hugh asked, "And Molly?"

"She's your safest bet. She's trying to talk us into riding lessons. Get her started on horses and she's yours eternally."

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They continued their walk for far longer than Martin had realized. He told Hugh about his grandfather who'd moved to San Francisco during the gold rush and made a sizable sum for himself—how he'd lost a great deal of it on bad investments, how his own father had managed to recover a good bit and keep the family going. He left out the fact that their real money was from his mother's side of the family and that it was useful, but tainted. There was a somber mood over them when Martin talked of his father's death, nearly five years ago now, Molly having just been born when he died. "Surrogate father as well as brother, then?" Hugh asked, a sad smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Essentially, yes. I'm afraid I might be spoiling her rotten, though. Those riding lessons she's trying to talk us into? She's getting a pony for her birthday in June."

Hugh beamed at him. "She's got you wrapped around her little finger, doesn't she?"

"It's a sad state of affairs," Martin joked with a furrowed brow, getting another laugh from Hugh. When he looked up again, he realized they were back in front of The Palace. "Looks like we're back where we started."

Hugh seemed surprised, as if he'd been paying even less attention to their surroundings than Martin had. He pulled his watch out and looked at it, whistling when he saw the time. "I've kept you out all night. It's after five in the morning." Martin had guessed at the time when the gas street lamps went out, but he'd been enjoying himself too much to mention it.

The sky was an inky blue. The sun hadn't quite risen, but it was clearly near dawn, the birds singing a greeting to it. "I think it's the other way around. I've talked your ear off." They'd spent hours together and there hadn't been a single break in conversation. They were comfortable in each other's company and that seemed more important than any other attraction he felt for Hugh.

Meeting his eye, Hugh said, "This is the most fun I've had in a long time."

Martin couldn't have stopped his smile if he'd wanted to. "For me as well." After a brief pause he said, "Perhaps later this week if—" Martin felt a faint rolling under his feet, as if the world had shrugged in complaint. At first, he wondered if he were more tired than he realized, if it was some kind of dizzy spell, but then the sense of familiarity struck him. He'd felt his share of tremors. It seemed to pass quickly and he couldn't help but laugh at the look on Hugh's face.



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“What on earth was that?” Hugh asked with wide eyes. He looked around them, as if he might find the source of the disturbance.

Before Martin could tease him, there was another, much stronger shift. The windows of The Palace standing behind them started to rattle. A sound like a locomotive on broken tracks roared all around them and Martin reached for Hugh, pulling him out toward the street. It couldn't have lasted a minute, but it seemed endless as they tried to keep their balance and fight wave after wave of heaving under them. The ground shook and rumbled as people in all states of undress rushed out of the surrounding buildings. Mothers in dressing gowns with their hair spilling over their shoulders carried confused children on their hips. Women in half-laced corsets and petticoats, men in pajamas and bare feet... everyone was filing out into the predawn San Francisco morning. Martin watched a dog huddle under a wagon and wondered if they shouldn't join him.

Before it was over, he could hear the distinct sounds of brick and mortar collapsing, small crashes, glass shattering.

When it finally ended, Hugh looked at him, clearly astonished, and said softly, “That was an earthquake.”

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Time seemed to pass slowly, everyone looking on in quiet shock. Martin felt as if he were dreaming, moving in a dazed wonder as he and Hugh stepped over a crack in the sidewalk. There were noises of all kinds, but it was as if he couldn't hear anything, only the wild beating of his heart. He hadn't realized at first where they were headed, but Hugh was guiding him down the path they took earlier that night, toward Martin's home.

He stood frozen in front of the building. It had tipped to one side, looking like a drunk leaning on his pal for relief as they left a saloon together. The roof had caved in and a pile of bricks covered the door. “I've got to get to Nob Hill.” Just like that, he was waking up from the dream and into a living nightmare as reality crashed into him. If his home were falling down on itself, what condition would he find his mother's in? Were the girls safe and unharmed, or had one of them—*all* of them?—been hurt?

Before he could follow that tract any further, he heard a muffled cry nearby. Hugh seemed to hear it as well. He stood straighter and turned his head, as if trying to find it. “There,” he said, pointing toward one of the neighbors—Lancaster, if Martin remembered right. They were a family of three. Husband, wife, infant son, and a maid who always seemed cheerful.

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Hugh stripped off his coat and left it in a heap on the cracked ground. He was jerking his cufflinks free, rolling his sleeves as they followed the thumping sounds and cries for help.

“We’re here!” a voice called from behind a fallen wall. Martin could hear the baby crying, a sharp scream rising above the busted rafters. “Is there anyone there? We need assistance!” Such an understatement might have been amusing in other circumstances.

Without a second glance, Hugh was already climbing over the debris and making his way closer. “I think if we can get some of this moved we might be able to get them out.”

They worked for long minutes, hauling and shoving things aside. A few other men came to help and soon they were able to wrench one last piece of lumber from its place and push a door open. Mr. Lancaster stood behind his wife and gently guided her through before he passed their son to her. He turned then and offered a hand to the maid to see her safely outside. He was the last one to exit, just as a housecat darted out and disappeared into the chaos. Barely a second later, the house groaned and then collapsed more fully. The structure was reduced to nothing more than a pile of cracked brick and splintered wood.

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Even as the sun began to rise around them, time seemed to stand still. Their day was one excavation after another. They were making their way north as quickly as they could, but every step seemed to bring another call for help.

Then the fires began. At first, it was only a sound like a clap of thunder, and then the smell of smoke carried on the air, a faceless threat that seemed to be following them. Before long, though, they could see their real enemy bearing down on them. It seemed hungry, a ravenous, spitting adversary that devoured everything in its path.

“This can’t be real,” Hugh said as they stood for a moment, watching as the flames jumped and contorted, spreading faster than Martin could have ever imagined. “How can this be happening?”

In a quiet, steady voice, Martin answered him. “I don’t know how, but it *is* real and it *is* happening.” He reached for Hugh’s hand and gave a light tug, drawing his attention from the fire swiftly scourging the street behind them.

People were starting to run as the air grew heavy with smoke.

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As they hastily continued north, Martin saw something he wished he hadn't. From a collapsed building, off to their right, he saw someone reaching out a window that no longer faced forward, but up. The hand was moving frantically, waving a strip of fabric. With another glance behind them, already able to feel the heat from the blaze only a few yards away, Martin muttered a curse under his breath.

Hugh stopped when he did, but didn't seem to understand why.

"There," Martin told him, pointing toward the building. "Someone's in there."

After less than a heartbeat of consideration and his own look at the fire crawling up their path, Hugh shouted to some of the people passing by, "Stop! We've got to get them out!" He and Martin were already running to the building, but a few others followed them as well.

The climb felt like a mountain expedition. Bricks and other bits of clutter shifted under their feet as they clawed their way to the top. By the time they reached the window where Martin had seen the makeshift flag, a small child stood there, clearly having been pushed out by someone inside.

The men had made a line up the side and Martin handed the child down to the one behind him, the group passing and carrying the child to safety. Hugh leaned close and shouted through the broken window, "How many?"

Martin could see a woman trapped in the dark ruins, her face streaked with tears, her hair a tangle of brown curls. "Six more!" she called back. "And my husband, but I don't think he's..." She began to cry then, but that didn't stop her from pushing another child out the window.

Hugh took the toddler and passed him down the line while Martin took another. He paused briefly when the building closest to them took spark. Smoke swirled through the air as the flames hissed and crackled around it. The fire was going to eat them alive too if they didn't hurry on.

The next child, a small girl who made Martin think painfully of Molly, clung to her mother as the woman tried to push her out. Her terrorized screams lifted over the din surrounding them as Hugh slipped his hand under her and yanked her from her mother's arms. The rescue was unceremonious and might have looked unkind, but they both knew what the real cruelty would have been.

Two more children were passed up to them and carried quickly down. The last one was an older girl, maybe twelve if Martin had to guess. Rather than cry,

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she had a look of grim determination on her face as they pulled a few bricks free, trying to make a space large enough for her. When she was out, she looked down at her mother. "Find your brothers and sisters," her mother told her. "Find them and find your aunt; she'll take care of you." The girl nodded and reached a shaky hand to Martin. "I love you. Tell them I love them, always," her mother said at last. Her expression was one of torment, as if she knew this was goodbye and couldn't bring herself to say it. Her daughter turned away from her with a solemn nod, away from one hell and very near another.

The smoke was unbearable by then and one side of the remains they were standing on had caught fire as well. Orange and yellow ribbons of heat were popping, clawing their way up toward them, looking as if they were reaching for Hugh. Martin felt a wave of panic when he heard Hugh say to the woman still inside, "Now you."

He meant to dig her out as well. He meant to stand there, with his fingers bleeding and rip her from the building. Martin thought he might die trying, thought they both might.

"There's no room for me," she said with a shake to her head.

That didn't deter Hugh. He looked at Martin with his chin jutting out defiantly, as if waiting for an argument. Fearless or driven mad, Martin couldn't guess, but whatever was going through Hugh's mind in that moment, Martin couldn't bring himself to stop him. He hoped someone, a mile or so up the road, would do the same for his girls if they didn't make it there in time.

Smoke was starting to billow up from the inside, spilling out around the woman who was now wedged through the opening. The fire was smoldering somewhere deep within the remains but Hugh was as resolute as ever to pull her out to safety.

Martin noticed that every brick they touched seemed to be growing warmer. Their actions were becoming frantic as the blaze heated their skin. The bright glow was nearly surrounding them now. It felt angry, maniacal, as if it planned to punish them for stealing so many of its victims.

Sweat poured into Martin's eyes and he couldn't breathe, only choke and sputter and cough, but still they tried to dig the stranger out.

He could hear rubble shifting behind him, but Martin was afraid to look. Then he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder before a hulk of a man suddenly pulled him back. "There's no saving her," he shouted, giving Martin a push before he reached for Hugh.

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Hugh seemed to ignore him until the man jerked him away from the opening. "You'll get yourselves cooked if you don't get out of here!"

He could see that Hugh wanted to resist, but the fire had gotten closer than either of them had realized. They were nearly surrounded with only one small path still available to them. Hugh's face twisted as if in pain, but he didn't say a word and neither of them could look at the woman they were abandoning as they picked their way clumsily down the mound.

When they reached solid ground again, they could hear her scream, but neither of them looked back.

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They continued to Nob Hill, Martin looking neither right nor left.

"This is madness," Hugh whispered, raking a bloodied hand through his hair. All day, panic had seemed to rise and fall like a tide with every aftershock or explosion, but now they walked in disbelieving calm. People staggered together in quiet clusters, some crying, some looking straight ahead as the occasional breeze would blow smoke toward them, like a spiteful reminder of where they'd just been. When Martin didn't respond, Hugh glanced at him, his brow furrowed in concern. "I'm sure they're all right. We'll find them, all of them."

Martin could only offer a curt nod. His jaw was set, making his teeth ache and his head hurt, but he was afraid to loosen his hold on himself, fearing what he might say or think. He wanted to cry out, to rage, to shake his fist at the unforgiving sky, but he only plodded along, putting one foot in front of the other.

Every now and then, a horse and cart would pass them, filled with people, some injured, and others looking just as Hugh and Martin most likely did: battered and broken, but still carrying on.

They had both shed their waistcoats and shirts at some point earlier and were now trudging through the stifling heat in nothing but their undershirts and trousers, their suspenders hanging down about their waists. In a vague way, Martin was aware of how odd it was to see so many people on the city streets, disheveled and half-dressed, but it also seemed fitting. Their beautiful city had been torn apart, and apparently, so had her citizens.

They passed one collapsed shamble after another, but the fire was mercifully behind them. Martin allowed himself to hope it wouldn't reach as far as Nob Hill.

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The crowd that had been with them closer to Market Street seemed to have thinned somewhat. Many people had turned other directions, possibly seeking their own loved ones or a safe harbor from the terror they'd left behind.

Despite his exhaustion, Martin found himself walking faster, his long strides eating each step eagerly. Courage and fear warred inside him, but he focused all his attention on the one goal of getting there and finding them all safe.

Forcing himself up another rise, Martin lifted his head at the sound of his name being shouted in the most familiar and lovely voice he'd ever heard. His heart leapt in his chest when he looked up and saw Kitty standing on a corner with Molly on her hip. "Martin, is that you?" she called out, walking closer. The house behind her looked like a giant had crushed it under its feet. Only the iron fencing around it seemed to be intact. She herself looked like an avenging angel, as if she had wrought all this destruction in a righteous fury. Her dark hair was braided and falling over her shoulder, her white corset undone over her underthings. She looked magnificent.

Martin and Hugh began to run then and when he reached Kitty, he barreled into her with both his arms securely around her and Molly. She laughed when he nearly knocked her off her feet, but he couldn't bring himself to let go. "You're safe," he whispered into her hair, kissing her and Molly again and again.

"Yes, we're safe." She laughed again before pushing his shoulder. "But you're about to kill us both. Martin, I can't *breathe*."

He pulled back to give her some air, but he kept his hands on her bare shoulders, looking at her, trying to prove to himself that this was real, she was there, not a ghost, not his imagination. Kitty put a hand on his cheek and smiled at him. He sniffled as he turned his face into her palm and kissed her there too. He hadn't realized he'd shed a few tears of relief until she laughed again and said, "One little earthquake and you're as misty as an old woman."

Martin gave her a teasing shove. "Mother and the girls? Are they all right as well?"

With a nod, Kitty answered him, "Yes, all well and safe." She looked at Hugh then. Martin hadn't exactly forgotten he was there. He'd been grateful for Hugh's quiet strength all day and awed by the fact that Hugh stayed with him rather than make his way for the ferries like so many others had.

Before they could make a formal introduction, Hugh looked closely at Molly and said, "Looks like you've had a run-in with something." Martin had

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been so overwhelmed with happiness he hadn't even noticed the small bandage over Molly's left eye. There was a bit of blood in her blonde hair.

"A picture frame hit me on the head." Molly wasn't at all shy around new people. She said the words as if she were mentally cursing the picture frame.

Martin laughed and took her from Kitty. "Does it hurt?" he asked gently, giving her a light bounce on his hip.

"A little," she admitted with a nod.

Kitty, brazen as ever, looped her arm through Hugh's. "Looks like you've got a few battle scars of your own."

Martin really looked at Hugh for maybe the first time since the quake. His hands were bleeding, which he'd noticed earlier, but one of Hugh's fingernails had ripped off as well. *That must have hurt like the devil*, he thought with sympathy. His own hands were similarly injured, but not nearly as bad. Scratches littered Hugh's face and arms under the layer of ash and soot clinging to his skin. Hugh's hair was falling limply over his brown eyes and his mustache was drooping on either side of his lips. Martin wondered if he looked as rough.

"I'm Kitty, by the way."

Hugh somehow managed to grin at her. "I thought you might be," he said kindly. "Martin has told me so much about you, I feel as though I already know you."

"Well, you're ahead of me, then. I only know your name and that you're from Virginia." She shot Martin a teasing look and then added to Hugh, "I'm assuming you're Hugh Jones, since my brother has decided to let us flounder along without an introduction."

"You assume correctly." When Hugh laughed and smiled at her, when the worry lines on his face seemed to smooth out, Martin thought Kitty really ought to be a doctor. Her presence alone had a healing affect. With some formal training, she might be able to bring a man back from the dead.

"Were you able to get a telegram off to your family?" Kitty asked him. Martin knew if she were far from home when a disaster struck, her first priority would be getting word to them.

Hugh's brow creased again, and Martin wondered if it hadn't occurred to him until then to send a message to his parents. "Not yet," Hugh responded.

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“Things are chaotic and I’d be surprised if the lines are still open.” He cleared his throat and smiled at her again. “I’ll get word to them as soon as possible. I’d hate for them to worry.” The words sounded hollow, more like a dutiful response than genuine regard, and Martin wondered why. Kitty shot him a glance, and he knew she had caught it as well. It wasn’t the time or place for that conversation, though, so Martin let it go.

They were making their way back toward the house when Martin asked, “How bad is the damage?”

Kitty shrugged. “Not as bad as some, but worse than others. It’s hard to tell. When I left to take a look around, Mother was still working with the servants to pull a few useful things from the house. We’ve got an aid station of sorts set up and one of the neighborhood children was able to squeeze into an opening to the kitchen and retrieve some food.” She laughed then. “He’s quite the little industry lord. His charge is one quarter of anything he could retrieve.”

“Let me guess, young Richard from down the block?”

“Would anyone else be so mercenary?” Her tone was teasing rather than condemning. “He has four other boys working under him, doing the same thing at other houses. When this is all over, his little gang will be better off than the governor.”

Hugh looked concerned and said, “Best warn them when you see them. There’s a shoot-to-kill order for looters.”

Kitty’s face changed in a heartbeat from amused to outraged to devastated. “Do you really think they would shoot *children*?”

“Without mercy were their exact words.” Hugh’s expression was grim.

That seemed to stoke a different kind of fire. Kitty’s eyes narrowed and her lips turned down into a thin frown. “It’s times like these when mercy is what we need most of all.” She was winding herself up, Martin could tell. “Looting, thievery, taking advantage of people in crisis... those things should be punished, of course, but not like that.”

Martin could understand her feelings. On some level, he agreed, but he also understood the importance of taking tight control from the beginning, making a hard point with a few lawless men early on to prevent total anarchy. To calm her, he said, “If they’re truly scavenging for homeowners, with consent, then they’re not in danger, but we’ll spread the word just the same.”



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Kitty only nodded in response. Martin was trying to change the subject when he asked, "Did the staff make it out unscathed?" Theirs wasn't the grandest home on the hill by far, but they did employ two cleaning girls, a serving girl, a cook, a girl for the laundry, an old man by the name of Willis and his orphaned grandson for the horses and carriage. While they weren't his first thought, he was concerned for their safety as well.

Kitty sighed, concern knitting her brow. "All but Deloris. Her leg was crushed as she tried to get out, but I was able to splint it and staunch the bleeding. She's in a good deal of pain, but I don't think she's in any real danger." Kitty's medical knowledge was self-taught from dozens of books and articles she'd read, but she was likely the closest thing to a nurse they had available.

Martin winced at her words, but he said, "It could've been much worse." He and Hugh had seen much worse with their own eyes, but he didn't tell Kitty that.

"You have no idea." Kitty's tone was grave. "A wall fell right on Molly's bed. If she'd been in it at the time..." He could see a small shudder run over her. Hugh laid a hand over hers and gave it a squeeze.

"Why weren't you in bed?" Martin asked Molly, kissing her head again with a quiet prayer of thanks.

"I was chasing Princess Penelope. He'd run away and I was trying to find him." *Prince* Penelope would have been a slightly more appropriate title, but no one in the family had been able to convince Molly he needed a boy's name.

At the questioning look on Hugh's face, Martin said, "Her cat." God bless that damned cat. He had the strangest personality of any animal Martin had ever encountered. He would hiss and spit at strangers like a guard dog trapped in a feline's body, but he was always tender and careful with Molly. "Did you find him?" Martin asked finally as they turned a corner, nearly at the house.

"He found me," Molly explained. "I was hiding when the house started to shake, and he came and got me." Martin made a mental note to find a tuna for Princess Penelope as soon as possible.

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Martin's heart nearly stopped when they got to the house. A large portion of it had caved in and a column slanted over the front door. He found his mother climbing through the small opening as a bit of plaster fell near her feet. She had

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a bundle of linen in one hand and a candlestick in the other. "Mother!" he shouted, exasperated. When he put Molly down and rushed forward to help her, she smiled at him as if she'd just seen him on the street after a day of shopping.

"Martin, darling." She lifted up on her toes to kiss his cheek even as he was trying to tug her away from the house. "Would you stop pulling on me," she scolded him before passing the things in her hands to him. "Take these over to Emily. I need to go back in."

In times of crisis, men are likely to say and do things they would regret later. Martin was no different. "Mother, I absolutely forbid you to go in there again." His tone was firm, deadly serious. He cursed himself when she laughed at him.

"You *forbid* me, Martin? *Forbid*? I'm going to assume you've got some kind of head injury and we'll never speak of this again."

He could hear Hugh snort a laugh from behind him, and Kitty said in mock-whisper, "Martin forgets that forbidding Mother is the only way to ensure she'll do whatever she pleases."

Before Martin could say another word, he heard a shifting and scraping sound from the doorway. A boy crawled through before turning and dragging a large basket behind him. "Mrs. Conrad," he said excitedly. "Look what all I've gotten this time."

She turned from her son and went down in a crouch to sift through the contents. "This is excellent, Richard." The boy was obviously pleased with himself when she praised him. "Take the linens to Eve and the food stuff to Emily, then pick your reward." Richard got to his feet and started to drag the basket to the yard. "Remember, if you choose any picture frames, carefully remove the photographs and give them to Eve before you add them to your pile." He nodded and went on his way.

"You're actually encouraging him to do this?" Martin asked her, his tone carrying disapproval with each word.

She arched her brow at him and planted her hands on her hips. "Of course I'm encouraging him. That child is more like a ferret than a boy. He's been able to squeeze himself into spaces and pull out food, wine... he even found a carafe of milk." With her own sigh of exasperation she said, "Richard is the only reason we've had anything to eat or drink in the last several hours and he's more than earned his fee."

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“Don’t you think it’s... it’s... *dishonorable* to take advantage of people in times like this?”

Rolling her eyes, she told him, “I couldn’t care less about his honor right now. And, frankly, I think it would be far more dishonorable to let him put himself in harm’s way on our account and then not reward him for his efforts.”

“Yes, but this isn’t a reward, it’s a *toll* he’s exacting from you.”

She waved her hand, as if she were trying to shake his words from the air. “What difference does it make, Martin? People are hurt and hungry and he is helping us take care of them.”

Martin couldn’t bring himself to argue further with her and, honestly, she did have a point. Desperate times truly did call for desperate measures. “So be it, Mother, but would you at least”—he had to stop himself before going on, consider his words wisely—“allow us to go in and survey the damage while you take a much needed rest and tend to some of the things that require your attention outside the house?” He’d found them safe enough, but his mother seemed committed to being buried alive inside the house now that he was there.

He could see her considering her answer before she said, “I don’t need a rest, but if it will make you feel better, I’ll stay out here for a time, all right?”

Genuine gratitude welled in him. “Thank you, Mother.”

Her smile was placating and Martin felt like a frustrated child. When she noticed Hugh standing behind Martin, she asked, “Did you collect a refugee on your way here?”

“I think it’s safe to call all of us refugees at this point, Mother.” He cleared his throat and looked at Hugh. “This is my mother, Martha Conrad.” Martin was grateful for the gleeful look of amusement on Hugh’s face. “Mother, this is Hugh Jones, of Virginia.”

When Hugh nodded and went to take her hand, Martha said, “Quite the welcome you’ve gotten from our fair city.” Even standing in nothing but a dressing gown and slip with her hair pulled back in a rough knot, Martin was struck by how dignified she managed to look. Hugh laughed and then flinched when Martha took his hand and turned it in her own. “Go with Kitty and get your wounds bandaged. Seems you boys have quite a tale to tell.”

Not a tale Martin felt like repeating, and he was sure Hugh felt the same. “I think it would be best if we went in first, see what can be done,” Hugh said amiably.

“I think it would be best if you didn’t argue with me.” Martha was polite but firm.

God, she was a formidable woman. How could Martin forget so easily?

Kitty laughed loudly at the expression on Hugh’s face and pulled him along. “If you’re shocked now, you should have seen her earlier when she was fresh.”

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As it turned out, they all took a rest and cleaned up. Their injuries were mostly scrapes and bruises from digging through the remnants of buildings, but Kitty tended to both of them with gentle ease, as if she’d been doing it all her life. She noted that neither of them seemed in need of stitches, confirmed that neither of them had hit their heads, and when she was done with Martin, she kissed his forehead and smiled at him. He decided then that she was going to go to medical school if he had to establish one himself.

After having a bite to eat by late afternoon, Hugh and Martin stood inside the house. Shafts of light filtered through broken windows and cracked walls, highlighting dust motes on the air. Furniture had toppled over and parts of the floor were broken beneath their feet. A large chandelier had crashed down from the ceiling in the center of the main room. They could hear beams creaking as plaster fell around them. “We’d best make this the last trip,” Hugh said. “I think it’s getting ready to collapse.”

Martin felt the last trip should have been hours ago, but his mother had insisted on pulling as much out as possible. He nodded and said, “Mother’s photo album,” as he walked through the room toward a toppled shelf where the book had once been. It seemed foolish, standing there in the wreckage that had been his family home, to dig for a book of pictures, but all else was lost, it seemed. He decided the best thing he could do would be to retrieve her memories.

Thankfully, the leather-bound book hadn’t been trapped under the heavy shelf. Instead, it lay on the ground as if it had tossed itself out in the hopes of being found. Several of the other books had been collected earlier in the day, and Martin was grateful he’d found this one so easily.

“Where does your mother keep her important papers?” Hugh asked from his side as Martin stooped to pick up the album.

“Important papers?” he repeated stupidly, not understanding.

Hugh smiled at him. “Insurance records, bank books; things like that.”

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How could he have been so thoughtless? Their home was ruined, the fires still weren't out down the hill, and Martin had never thought for a moment about something so practical. Instead he clung to a book of pictures. "My father's study. If we can get to it."

Hugh stepped back and let Martin lead them through the rubble.

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As a child, when his father would sit at his desk reading a paper or making notes, Martin would hide near his father's feet and play with his wooden train. The memory sent a pang of hurt through him when he saw the desk tilted to one side, the chair his father used to occupy crushed from a fallen beam.

Funny how such a small thing—a broken chair—could bring up so many emotions for a grown man. Martin was suddenly aware of all they had lost and all they came very near to losing. His entire family could have been taken from him in one crushing blow and there wouldn't have been a damn thing he could do about it. It was getting hard to breathe.

Hugh was sifting through some files in a drawer. Martin must have made a sound because Hugh glanced up and looked at him curiously. "All right?"

Martin nodded and clenched his jaw, turning away from Hugh. He was afraid he was about to have some sort of breakdown, and he certainly didn't want Hugh looking at him when it happened.

Suddenly there was a bandaged hand on his shoulder and Hugh was at his side, turning Martin to face him. "Take a slow breath, Martin," he said softly when he met Martin's eye. With another nod, Martin tried to do as he was told, but the exhale came out a shuddering sob. This was too much. Too much devastation, too much kindness, too much closeness. It was all more than he could bear.

"I just can't help but wonder..." Martin whispered, his voice frayed and paper-thin. "What remains of us?"

Hugh shushed him softly and pulled him into an embrace. Not the passionate kind Martin had imagined earlier in the night, a lifetime ago. Instead, the sort a father might give his son, or a dear friend might offer when delivering terrible news. Hugh held him, fiercely strong, and said quietly, "Everyone is all right, Martin. There's nothing in this house that can't be replaced."

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Hugh made a valid point. Nothing in this shambles mattered anymore when he compared it to his sisters and his mother being alive, unharmed even. They had lost their father years earlier. There was no reason for the pain of it to be hitting him now, as if it were fresh and new, not a hollow point inside himself he'd let close over. "I know," Martin murmured, swallowing down his emotions. Hugh's arms loosened, but didn't fall away. "I was just a little... overwhelmed for a moment." He actually managed a broken laugh at that. So many understatements for one day.

Hugh drew back enough to press their foreheads together and ran his damaged hand through Martin's hair. "I think we've all earned a little of that today." Yes, Hugh was younger than him, but in that moment he seemed much stronger and wiser to Martin than a man of twenty-four ought to be. Martin could only huff a breath, something close to another laugh, at Hugh's words. Then Hugh asked him, "Are you collected now? I don't need to try and find some smelling salts, do I?"

The wonderful bastard was actually making fun of him. Martin did laugh then, a genuine, healthy one. He pushed Hugh back and said through unshed tears, "I can see you'll fit in quite well with the rest of my family."

With a broad grin, Hugh said, "Good, I was already hoping your mother would adopt me."

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They managed to find some of the more important documents including the bank books, his parents' marriage certificate—which Martin took more for sentimental reasons than sensible ones—and the insurance policies. He also found a small stash of money his mother kept. It wasn't much, barely a hundred dollars, but it was better than the seventeen he had in his own pockets.

They stepped carefully back to the door and crawled out into the early evening.

"I was beginning to wonder if I should send someone in after you," Martha said as Hugh handed her a folder containing the papers. She smiled in thanks to him, but when Martin handed her the album with photos and both family trees in it, she—for the first time in Martin's life—burst into tears and threw her arms around his neck. "Thank you, you sweet boy," she whispered into his ear.

The pragmatic items they'd recovered would be far more useful in the coming months, Martin was sure, but he didn't have to guess which she would have chosen if she'd had to.

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The sun dipped down behind the hills to the west as Evelyn started putting together crude shelters. Kitty seemed perfectly comfortable running around in her unmentionables, but the rest of the girls had found more clothing for themselves. Emily served food to the people who had collected on the lawn, neighbors and their employees alike. Everyone had rallied together, and many had brought some of their own food to share. With half the city burning, no one dared to light a cook fire, but they all enjoyed cold meats, cheese, bread, and fruit. Mostly, they enjoyed the security that came with company.

Feeling his exhaustion deep in his bones, Martin turned to his mother and said, "We've got to get you and the girls out of the city." The idea of losing them to some new horror after having found them spared sent a chill through Martin.

He should have known it wouldn't be easy to convince her. She narrowed her eyes, the way she always did when she was about to lay down the law. "You've forgotten who you're dealing with, Son. I might have married a Conrad, but my father was a Robber Baron and my own dear mother was a dance hall girl in cahoots with the Sydney Ducks when she was still a child. My family robbed and pillaged this Barbary Coast. You think I'm going to run from her now, simply because she's decided to exact her revenge?"

The shameful history of his mother's family and fortune wasn't news to him. It was well known, something she almost took pride in. His own father had nearly been disowned when he fell in love and married her. Still, he could feel the flush of embarrassment creep up his face knowing Hugh had heard every word. Martin cleared his throat and collected himself. "It's not running, Mother, and this isn't a battle you're retreating from."

"And this isn't a topic for debate." As simply as that, the conversation was closed. Martin knew, come what may, no matter what adversities lay ahead, his mother had dug her heels in, prepared to stay until the bitter end.

His sigh was heavy and carried with it all of his irritation at her stubbornness. "Would you at least consent to me finding safe passage for the girls? They could go to New York and stay with your sister-in-law." He nearly reminded her that—with his father gone—he was technically the head of the family, but he knew if he did, he'd have his mother arguing with him on one side and Kitty on the other. God help him if Evelyn overheard as well.

Martha's laugh was unladylike, bordering on scornful. "Not even Emily would be allowed over her threshold." His aunt wasn't the most forward-

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thinking woman in their family. In fact, she was likely the most backward. In her eyes, children should be seen and not heard, and the only duty a woman had was to her husband and family. They need only be educated well enough to run a home, and they were certainly not supposed to have opinions or be informed about what she referred to as men's business. If Kitty were forced to share a roof with her, one of them would surely not survive. It would be a shame for Kitty's dreams of medical school to end with her in shackles. "Though," Martha continued, "if she's ever thrown together with my girls, I only pray I'm there to see it."

Damn her, he was laughing with her.

Hugh was sitting on his other side. Martin felt him lean close before he whispered, "Let's go take a look over the ridge. I'll be falling asleep soon if I don't move."

As they walked carefully down the block and into the street where they would have a better view, Hugh said, "Your mother is quite a character."

"Is that the word for it?" Martin asked with a laugh. He loved her dearly, but he didn't find any joy in her rebellious nature like Kitty or even Evelyn did.

"Every one of us has some sordid detail in our history. My own family built their lives on the backs of slaves and fought in the Civil War—as *Confederates*. After the war, they were involved in all sorts of underhanded dealings to keep their lands and such." Martin turned to look at him as Hugh spoke. "At least your mother is honest about it. It's not a dirty secret she'd rather disappear."

When they turned the corner, they found several other people there as well, watching the city burn. The flames that had seemed so menacing earlier now looked oddly beautiful as they lashed against the darkening night. How could something so brilliant be so deadly? Nothing else seemed to matter when he looked at it.

Martin's stomach churned as he remembered the woman they'd had to leave to the fires. He knew it was the only option, but he didn't imagine he'd ever forgive himself. When he glanced at Hugh and saw the tortured expression on his face, Martin wondered if he was thinking the same thing.

Staring wide-eyed at the wasteland below, Hugh said, "I can't think of a single word that could possibly cover this, to convey..."

"Horrific," Martin said flatly, looking out at the ruined city.

"Is that possibly enough? One word isn't enough to sum this up."



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“I’m not sure anything will ever be enough again.”

After a pause, Hugh turned to him and said softly, “If we survived that, I think we can survive anything.”

“I think maybe you’re right.”

They watched in silence for another moment before turning back toward what was left of his family’s home.

Most of the people they’d shared dinner with had gone back to their own lawns, or crawled into one of the shelters that had sprung up all around the block. It wasn’t even eight, but Martin was ready to drop. Then he remembered he and Hugh hadn’t slept at all the night before. Small wonder he was so tired. He didn’t imagine anyone would sleep well tonight, but he thought they should at least try.

Eve quietly showed them to a small shelter she’d put together. Martin couldn’t call it a tent. He thought of it as a child’s play fort. Eve had draped blankets and sheets over a table, one side pulled back so they could climb under. But a soft pile of clothing and bedding waited for them to rest on and that seemed like more than enough. So many people would be sleeping under the stars tonight, or in their own little lean-tos, Martin was grateful they had more than the hard earth as a mattress. He could understand his mother’s fondness for Richard then, and he begrudgingly—silently—agreed the boy’s fee had been fair after all.

Martin climbed in without a thought and started to fluff an actual pillow. He was so pleased by the sight of it, it took him a moment to notice Hugh was still standing outside—as if uncertain where he belonged. “There’s plenty of room if you don’t mind sharing.”

He could only see Hugh’s feet from where he sat, but one moved and then the other, then he took a step back before crouching down to look at Martin. “Are you sure? I can find a spot to rest my head somewhere...”

“I’ll be asleep so fast, I won’t notice who or what is in here with me.” That statement probably wasn’t true. Martin had allowed himself a few moments of weakness after he’d met Hugh, wondering what it would be like to share a bed with him. Of course, the circumstances in his fantasies were quite different, but he was certain, even if he did manage to sleep, some part of him would be more than aware of Hugh next to him, occupying the same space, the simple intimacy of sleeping—*only* sleeping—next to him.

Hugh was halfway inside when he said, "If you're sure," as he kicked off his shoes.

They shuffled and shifted for a moment as they both got comfortable. Martin pulled one of the blankets out from under himself and threw it across both of them. They were cloaked in darkness inside the thin fabric walls, but Martin could still feel Hugh next to him. As they tried to find a better position, their arms or legs would touch briefly, and it would send a small shock of want through Martin, which he tried to ignore. Rumors were one thing and even his own intuition about Hugh could be false. Moreover, given the circumstances of the day, he thought it would be best if he pushed all else aside. *Sleep is what I need.* That was what they both needed, wasn't it?

As Martin tried to force himself into rest, Hugh whispered in the darkness, "This reminds me of hunting trips I took when I was a boy."

Martin turned on his side to face Hugh, despite the fact that he could only see an ambiguous outline. "You've had some god-awful excursions, then."

Hugh's laugh was quiet, but long, and Martin could feel him turn over as well. The warmth from his body was tangible, and Martin thought he must be closer than he had been a moment ago. "I only meant the sleeping outdoors part," Hugh said finally and they both laughed again. "I'll admit, the company here is much better, though."

Unsure what to say to that, Martin asked, "Do you hunt often?"

"Not really, no. You?"

Martin grimaced, glad Hugh couldn't see it. "I enjoy duck hunting occasionally, but I'm a terrible shot, truth be told."

"I'm a fair shot, but I like to observe the animals, rather than shoot them."

He agreed with a nod, forgetting Hugh couldn't see him. Martin laughed a beat later and whispered, "You should see Evelyn with a rifle. She's a crack shot. Father used to say it was a pity she'd been born a girl."

"I bet your mother was quick to defend her sex."

Martin grinned. "You've already got the measure of her."

"I'd have to be deaf *and* blind not to." Hugh's tone was hushed, but cheerful and Martin thought Hugh must really like her.

"What about your family? You don't speak about them much..."

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Martin could hear him sigh, as if he wasn't sure where to begin. Finally, Hugh said, "My family is all manners and decorum, Southern gentility. If something happens, even a grave tragedy, it's simply never mentioned."

"That sounds..." Horrible was the only word Martin could find, so he didn't finish his thought.

"It's suffocating," Hugh murmured. The humor of a moment earlier had disappeared and left in its place a weighted silence. After a minute passed, Martin struggling to find something to fill the void, Hugh finally said, "I had a sister. Well, I still do, somewhere."

He was afraid to ask, but Martin couldn't help himself. "What happened to her?"

Hugh took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm sorry, I really shouldn't have brought this up, I..."

Martin reached a hand to him and found his chest. It was a gesture of comfort and nothing more. "In case you haven't noticed, Mother tends to put everything, even our tragedies, out on display."

Hugh slid his hand up over Martin's and grasped it gently. Martin could feel the bandage around the tip of his finger, the scabs and callouses from the day. "She was... violated. She had been taking a walk around the grounds and someone, some drifter, crossed her path, abused her, took advantage, and left her broken and sobbing." Martin gasped, thinking of one of his own sisters. The idea filled him with grief and rage as Hugh went on. "Mother cleaned Helen up herself and told everyone she was ill, confined to her room. By the time the cuts and bruises had healed, it was clear she was with child." Martin was afraid to ask what happened to her after that. He didn't have to. Hugh said, "Within days, Mother had a trunk packed full of Helen's things. She told everyone in town that Helen was going north to help a distant relative who had fallen on hard times, taken ill, something of that nature. I haven't seen her since."

"How long?" Martin hated asking, but the question was out before he could stop it.

"Six years," Hugh said quietly. "I got a letter a few months ago, found it in the post before my parents had gone through it. She said she missed me and hoped I would find it in myself to *forgive* her and talk to our parents on her behalf, to get them to let her come home again. She said she knew she had brought shame on all of us, but hoped that enough time had passed." Hugh was

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silent for a moment, but then he went on bitterly. “She actually thought that *I* was ashamed of her.” He made a small sound, gruff and breathy, and when he spoke again his voice was an angry rasp. “When I confronted my father and insisted that he bring her home at once, he took the letter from me, threw it into the fireplace, and told me I was never to bring it up again.”

Martin was dumbstruck for a moment. He tried to imagine what his own mother would do. He thought, even if one of their girls had willingly fallen into bed with a man, she might parade the child around town and tell everyone in earshot how wonderful it was to be blessed with a grandchild without the inconvenience of another man underfoot.

“I like your family.” Hugh whispered the words as if they were an admission of guilt.

Martha’s willfulness, blunt honesty, and disregard for societal constraints were suddenly more palatable, even welcome. Martin wanted to crawl outside and find her, tell her what an amazing, wonderful creature she was. But Hugh was still holding his hand. Martin didn’t know what to tell him, so instead he pressed closer, only meaning to offer some human contact, some security that might remind Hugh he wasn’t alone.

Martin thought he might have drifted off to sleep until he felt a warm rush of breath against his face as Hugh slid his leg closer. Martin followed him, just like earlier, a thousand years ago when they did their dance on the city streets, but there was no retreat this time. Each of them moved silently closer until their bodies pressed together. He could hear hushed conversations outside, occasional laughter, and even weeping. When he leaned in and found Hugh’s lips in a tender kiss, he knew it was the biggest risk he’d ever taken, but possibly the most worthwhile.

To Martin’s great relief, Hugh met him with a sigh full of longing. Martin parted his lips, enjoying the feel of Hugh’s mustache as it brushed against his unshaven cheek. Their tongues touched briefly, slick and warm, and then Martin closed his teeth on Hugh’s bottom lip, a light teasing touch.

When they broke apart, Martin whispered, “This could be the end of us.” They both knew what getting caught would mean, but Martin couldn’t forgive himself if he didn’t throw the warning out into the open.

Hugh murmured, “Let them arrest us, I don’t care anymore.” That was all the encouragement Martin needed, but Hugh added, “The entire world seems to be ending and if it does, I won’t go to my grave with another regret.”

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Martin bit back a groan as Hugh slid his rough palm under his shirt, pulling it free from the waist of his trousers. They mirrored each other for a moment, stripping down silently in the warm confines of their tent, and when they were both free of their clothing, naked and grinding together, Martin had to bury his face against Hugh's chest to keep from crying out.

Their touches were almost sacred. Every stroke of a fingertip, every brush of lips on skin, resonated with life, with gratitude. It made Martin's blood sing and his heart race, his skin warm. Even the smell of smoke and death and disaster clinging to both of them only served as a shining reminder that they were alive, they were well, and they were together.

Their movements were clumsy and messy, even comical at times. In the end, there was nothing more than ragged breathing as they slicked against each other, hips thrusting in a heavy rhythm until their climax was tearing through them. Hugh muttered Martin's name as he spilled hotly between them, and Martin caught the words in a hard kiss that brought him over the edge as well. They clung to one another, panting, as breathy laughter filled the small space.

Life, freedom, love. After they'd cleaned up and dressed again, falling asleep with only their hands clasped together, Martin understood why men were willing to die for it all, to pay so dearly a cost.

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*June 5, 1907*

"No peeking," Hugh teased as he guided Emily up the walkway. Martin was directly behind them, ushering Evelyn and Kitty with Molly on his hip. Martha had refused to cover her eyes, having been to the building site more times than he could count. She had insisted on overseeing much of the work, starting with location, then design, and finally the actual building of her new home.

It was considerably smaller than their house on Nob Hill had been, but it had every modern convenience. Martha had decided not to hire any new staff and decreed this one would be much easier to maintain for the one cleaning girl who remained after the fires. Their cook, Pamela, and Willis's grandson Robin were the only others who stayed on, most having left the city shortly after the disaster. Willis had died from an outbreak of pneumonia in the refugee camps, and the family took Robin in since he was alone in the world after that. Thankfully, the boy was quick to learn and eager to help maintain the two new automobiles as well as Molly's pony, which she got for her seventh birthday, only a year later than Martin had planned.

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“If you don’t let me open my eyes, I might be forced to kill you, Martin,” Kitty told him with a laugh as they carefully edged their way up the path.

He set Molly down and said to Kitty, “You can open your eyes now, ingrate.” He kissed her cheek to take any sting out of his words.

Expecting a retort or a jab from Kitty’s elbow into his ribs, Martin was surprised when she only said, “It’s lovely.”

She was right. Smaller, maybe, but Martin thought their new home was much more pleasing to the eye. They had planted saplings in the yard and every border was bursting with flowers. The wraparound porch had been Hugh’s suggestion.

The upper floor had a room for each of the girls and a master suite for Martha, complete with her own bath. The lower floor had two rooms for Hugh and Martin with adjoining doors. That had been Kitty’s idea, bless her. Once construction was finished on Hugh’s home, they would decide how to proceed with the living arrangements, but for the time being the ‘guest rooms’ were theirs and theirs alone.

Their night on Nob Hill had proved to be a short one. Before morning came, the fires were still wreaking havoc, ravaging the city streets. As the neighborhood was evacuated, they packed as much into their carriage as it would hold, and the family made their way to Golden Gate Park, as did many others that night.

The city burned for two more days and, by the end, it was almost entirely destroyed. From the ashes, Hugh and Martin had been building their life together, one step at a time.

Molly was still at Martin’s side, as she had been for most of the last year. “Can we go in now, Martin?” she asked, smiling up at him with a hand raised to shield her eyes from the sun.

“Of course you can,” he told her, leaning down to give her a peck on the forehead. She ran to the front steps and then disappeared inside.

Dropping back next to Martin, Hugh asked, “How long do you suppose it will take for the orange trees to give us anything?”

The others were milling on the lawn, looking around their new yard, all but Molly and Evelyn who were exploring inside. “At least a few years, I imagine.”

Their dogs, strays they had picked up from the camps, were loping along next to them as they went around to the back yard. The animals—Empress

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Melanie and Queen Madeline, Molly had named them—had proved to be loyal and gentle. They took to their names like the good boys they were. Princess Penelope tolerated them the same way he tolerated the rest of the family.

“Hugh, sweetheart,” Martha called as she rounded the corner. She had, in fact, adopted Hugh in her own way, treating him just as she treated Martin. “Are you remembering to take your photographs?”

Hugh looked down at the small Brownie camera in his hand as if he'd forgotten it. “No, but I will now.” His bashful smile was met with a tsk and a roll of Martha's eyes.

“Hand it here,” she said, not unkindly, but in a tone that dismissed all arguments. She passed Martin her cigarette as Hugh handed off the camera to her. “You two go over there, near the trees.”

Doing as they were told, Hugh and Martin, along with the dogs, stood in front of the greenery just off the path that was still bare from construction. Hugh slung his arm over Martin's shoulder, but as Martha was snapping the picture, he reached around and tweaked Martin's mustache. “There, perfect,” he said with a laugh.

Martin shot him a playfully annoyed look and as Martha told them to pose for another, he whispered, “Just can't keep your hands off me, can you?”

Hugh straightened his shoulders, as if he were trying to look dignified. “Nonsense,” he said with a laugh. “I only put up with you because you make me look good.”

It was hard for either of them to be serious after that, but with a stern warning from Martha, they finally managed a few pictures that were sure to come out well.

Later that night, as the house slept, Hugh and Martin lay tangled together in Martin's bed. They had made love in all manner of places over the last several months, braving the potential consequences with the kind of stubborn courage born in peril. They had learned they were both, in their own ways, gambling men after all. When the stakes were high enough, at any rate.

Hugh was resting his head against Martin's shoulder, sliding his bare feet against Martin's. “You know what surprises me?” he whispered as Martin fingered his hair in gentle strokes.

“Me, I hope.”

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Hugh laughed and lifted his head. "Yes, that too." He brushed their lips together. "But... is this all better than you'd imagined? Better than you'd hoped for?"

Sliding his hand down Hugh's cheek, Martin cupped his jaw lightly, his thumb brushing against Hugh's cheekbone. "You are," he whispered, kissing him again. "You're better than I'd ever dared to hope for."

With a mischievous look in his eye, Hugh climbed on top of him, pressing himself close, grinning into another kiss. "That's because I'm better than you deserve."

Martin's bark of laughter was loud enough to wake the family, but he didn't care. He ran his palm down Hugh's back, seemingly tender until he smacked him on the ass. "And *that's* better than you deserve."

Hugh yelped, but he was laughing as well. "I'm not sure I care for your style of seduction." He kissed Martin again, but then he added, "You're getting brutish in your old age."

Growling as he locked his arms around Hugh, Martin turned him onto his back and pressed him into the bed. "I'll show you what a brute this old man can be," he teased as Hugh's laugh turned breathy and heated.

They were done talking for the night.

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### *Epilogue*

It would be another year, but Hugh would find Helen and they would take her in. They would never learn who adopted the child she bore or what became of him.

Kitty would become a doctor, though it would take her over a decade, fighting each day for her place in the world. She would marry a man five years her junior, love him, and lose him too soon when the world was torn apart by war.

Evelyn would become engrossed in politics and help change the face of women's rights for the entire nation. She would also marry, but hers would be an analytical union with its own kind of devotion.

Emily would find she had a taste for the liquor she so sourly condemned. Her battle would be with drink for most of her life, all or nothing.



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Molly would treat Hugh and Martin like her fathers and when she was old enough to understand their true relationship, she would feel the same about it as she felt about everything else: if Martin thinks it's all right, then it's all right.

His mother would die, but she would die old and happy, knowing her children were each in their own way rebels and troublemakers, just as she had been.

Hugh would make his fortune, investing in healthy businesses as the city sprang back to life once more, only to lose it all in the market crash of '29 when the world was pitched headlong into a depression. Martin would keep them afloat for a time and Hugh's ingenuity would sustain them. They would rise and fall and rise again, and they would do it all together. They would squabble, they would mourn, they would cry, and they would laugh. There would be tragedies big and small, and there would be love. Always love.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*J.H. Knight has been writing love stories since the second grade. When she's not catering to the whims of her imaginary friends (whom she sometimes refers to as "characters"), she's usually found driving her four children all over the planet, working on a school project, or saying things like "Not until your homework is done!"*

*A Pacific Northwest native, she loves the outdoors in every season whether she's in the city, the mountains, or building sloppy sandcastles with her kids on the beach. On her best days, she's cuddled up with a good book, and on her worst days she's tearing her hair out as she tries to decide if her sentence needs a comma or a semi-colon. She gratefully bows down in awe of editors, since she usually gets it wrong.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# WHERE WILLOWS WON'T GROW

By Lia Black

## Photo Description

A black and white image of a bearded man, naked, bound and blindfolded.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Here I am. Tied, blindfolded and ready to be put up for auction, as if I were a precious painting, an ancient statue or a fine piece of antique furniture.*

*After six months of undercover investigations I am finally a step away from identifying who's behind a ruthless organization of male prostitution. To what extent will I have to push myself to do my duty? But most of all, why is a part of me so excited about what is going to happen?*

*Sincerely,*

*Giulio*

## Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction, futuristic

**Tags:** dark, undercover cop, prostitution ring, interspecies, hurt/comfort, tentacles (yes, tentacles), abduction, drug references

**Content Warnings:** graphic violence, rape, dubious consent, references to child sexual abuse, character death (secondary), extreme taboo: gruesome alien sex, sounding, sadism

**Word Count:** 44,968

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*Dedication*

To Giulio, for letting me go a little nuts with his very cool prompt.

*Acknowledgements*

Thanks to Jaye McKenna and Steve Madill for beta-reading. Thanks to Elizabetta, Samantha, and all of the Love's Landscapes volunteers for, once again, putting together and pulling off this wonderful event!

# **WHERE WILLOWS WON'T GROW**

**By Lia Black**

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## Chapter One

He thought there were twelve of them. Twelve young men, stinking of sweat and apprehension as they rode naked, bound and blindfolded in the back of a transport shuttle.

The seats were cold metal benches, covered only by rough terrycloth towels, and he'd had the unfortunate luck to be settled over the point where one towel ended and the other began, digging a sharp seam against his scrotum. It was made worse by the spreader bar between his knees. It forced his legs open, causing his bare thigh to rub against the man beside him, who jerked away and whimpered with every brush of his skin.

"It'll be okay," he whispered to the man—or hoped he had. Blood was roaring in his ears along with the steady hum of the shuttle's engine. *Focus*. He had to keep a clear head—pay attention to everything without inviting too much notice—otherwise the entire investigation would be compromised, and six months' worth of diligent police work would vanish right along with the leader of this illegal prostitution ring.

This was not the kind of operation that had safe words. Once he'd been picked up, Detective Alex Kley was on his own for the duration. The problem was, already this seemed like something much bigger and more dangerous than the Office of Federation Security had initially believed.

It was not a matter of luck that he'd been chosen. Alex knew that people had made bargains and taken payoffs to get him into the best position to be sent to the top earning brothel house owned by the leader of this insidious group.

They had been trying to bring this sex-ring down for years, but it seemed that each time they got close, the leader pulled up stakes and disappeared, only to return in another form someplace else.

While the OFS was certain that the individual was not human, it seemed his house favored human males of Alex's appearance, so all Alex had to do was to give a convincing performance.

At this point, Alex had little doubt that he was as convincingly scared shitless as the rest of these men.

The guy beside Alex began shivering; his clammy skin and heavy breathing indicative of a person going through symptoms of withdrawal. Alex wasn't

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surprised that there was at least one drug user among the bunch—part of the reason that this organization had remained undetected for so long was because they were picking up cheap rent-boys and back-alley hustlers. Because of the social demographic they targeted, no one had really missed one less hooligan on the block—or even twelve, for that matter.

*Almost no one.* Some of the young men had families, something Alex didn't have—or at least no one who would notice his absence, which was why he was the best candidate to be here; tied up, blindfolded, and trying to keep a seam from rubbing his nuts raw.

Despite the necessity and ultimate good that would come from infiltrating an illegal prostitution ring, there were few romantic partners who would be able to handle extreme infidelity in the line of duty. And having a gay son working as an undercover agent on a sex-crimes investigation wasn't often a source of pride for parents.

Pride was something Alex had given up on years ago, along with any fantasies of ever having a normal life. He was too jaded. He'd come into the OFS right out of the military—a spoiled, yet naive, rich kid who'd managed to advance by using his good looks. When he'd first been approached to work in the sex-crimes unit, he thought it was a wet dream come true. Getting paid legitimately to party, taking money and gifts from old perverts then sending them off to the penal colonies, sampling the latest aphrodisiacs and club-drugs to maintain the mirage. And, of course, the sex. Intimacy was something Alex had never understood; sex was just an activity, a means to an end.

Unfortunately, it would all be coming to an end soon. Although he would be thirty in a month, he was blessed—or possibly cursed—with a face that looked ten years younger. But in five years or less, that might no longer be the case. Even if he could maintain his youthful appearance indefinitely, his soul was quickly becoming putrid; every case killed his humanity a little more.

The vehicle lurched to a stop, and Alex smelled the sharp tang of exhaust when the door slid open.

“All right, whores, end of the line.”

The unfamiliar voice startled Alex; meanwhile, the junkie beside him had broken down and was sniveling and rocking in his seat.

“Shh,” Alex tried to soothe the man quietly, offering a press of his thigh that he hoped might be taken as reassurance.



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The hydraulics dipped under the weight of the men coming on board. These were the handlers, though he had no idea what they looked like. Alex believed that they were all human, judging by the ease at which they had gotten through the Federation checkpoints. Humans were one of the few races who maintained colonies outside of their home world, so shipments through space were commonplace. As long as everyone on board a vessel was human and the operators had their paperwork, there were no questions asked.

That was another reason why it had taken so long for the authorities to figure out just what was going on—no one cared enough to be suspicious. While humans had helped to establish the Federation of Allied Races, the allegiances were purely political. Humans were only taken seriously because they usually had the biggest guns.

Alex breathed a sigh of relief as the spreader bar between his legs was unlocked. His thigh muscles burned when he was hauled to his feet, and his knees buckled, but arms on either side caught him and lowered him to the ground. Alex could feel the roughness of a carpeted mat under his feet—the kind with sculpted artificial pile that felt as forgiving as stone.

“Now listen up,” a man began to speak, his voice roughened by smoke, weather, or injury. “You’re all here because you’ve robbed from us. You’ve either borrowed money that you haven’t paid back, or you’ve stolen drugs, food, booze... This here is where you will be auctioned off and sent out to your new homes where you can try to work off your debts. Back on the streets you’ve managed to stay alive by fucking strangers, so this won’t be a whole lot different than that. You’ll fuck who we say, when we say, where we say. In return, you get food, shelter, medical attention, and maybe a couple of years added to your worthless lives.”

Alex knew it was just a ploy. At some point in their lives, practically all of these men had found it necessary to borrow more money than they could pay back, or stolen some small item—probably food, out of necessity—that made this lie seem somewhat plausible. In reality, regardless of the crimes with which they had been charged, there was no way any one of them could hope to work off his alleged debt.

They were herded into a hallway, judging by the way the sounds bounced off of close, solid surfaces. Alex tried to memorize the sensation of his body moving through space as he counted his footsteps. He would need all of this information when it came time to close out this case.

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The group was led down the hallway and into a larger room. *Forty-eight steps*. Alex could see a faint glow bleeding through the bottom edge of his blindfold, indicating that the room was brightly lit. It was warm—comfortably so, despite the discomfort of being naked, bound and in serious need of a shower.

He cocked his head, listening to the hum of conversations originating from elsewhere in the room before another male voice addressed the group.

“This is the auction block, whores. Do your best to look pretty, and make sure you do what you’re told.”

Alex flinched as a bare hand smacked his ass, and he listened to it continue randomly down the line. So he was at an end, or very close to one. He just had no idea what end, or if that even mattered at all. All he had to do was what he always had—just like the man said: *look pretty and do what you’re told*.

From further down and to his right, a man’s voice said: “You, you, and you.” Then the quiet padding of bare feet across the wooden floor. A dull echo with each step indicated that there was a hollow space under the floorboards. Were they on a stage? A moment later, the murmurs quieted, then began again more earnestly, and the man with the gravelly voice began the opening bids.

“This little blond one is twenty-two, no visible scars. As you can see, he’s got a wide mouth built for sucking cock. Bidding will start at—”

“Mine.”

Alex felt a chill at the base of his spine when he heard the new voice. Likely male, judging by the pitch, but the accent and strange bell-like reverberation indicated that it was not human. *Fuck*. They were being auctioned off to aliens. While it wasn’t completely unexpected, this particular one seemed to be given first dibs without offering a bid. That meant he had some influence, and this was likely the man that Alex was supposed to impress. Although he’d been assured that he had just what these skin-traders were looking for, Alex couldn’t help but be nervous that something would go wrong and this entire thing would come crashing down.

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## Chapter Two

The bidding had gone on for nearly an hour before Alex was called to the block. His legs were beginning to cramp and he rocked, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He'd heard the unknown alien claim five men in total, and Alex was the last man up.

His heart was beating much faster than it should be, and his body felt hot. If it had been fear driving his anticipation, that might have been preferable to the tension pulling through his groin. He was getting an erection, knowing that he was going to be out in front of a large group of strangers to be auctioned off like a piece of antique furniture. *What a fucked up time to realize a new kink.* Obviously, the handlers were aware of his semi, and when he was escorted out and made to stand on a rubber mat, the murmurs of conversation grew louder.

*Gee, Alex, how did you manage to fuck up six month's worth of investigation and get yourself shot in the head?* Unfortunately, even that scenario wasn't enough to make his dick behave.

Worry settled in. The sounds of the audience's voices seemed different to him, but because none of them were using Earthspeak, he had no clue whether they approved of what they were seeing.

"This fine specimen—"

"Make him kneel."

It was that alien again. Alex's heart stuttered against his ribs. Someone—probably the guy who brought him out—squeezed Alex's shoulders, indicating that he should be down on his knees. *Fuck.* Another little twinge from his traitorous cock down below.

Alex could feel the man's gaze upon him, beyond all of the other eyes cast his way. The man moved almost silently; the rustle of his clothing was the only thing that gave away his location.

"This one..." the alien mused.

Alex opened his mouth slightly when he felt the man's gloved hand pressing under his chin. He smelled leather, and heard the rasp of it against his beard. Alex swallowed audibly, his throat constricting as the man moved his thumb against his lower lip, teasing it open.

The thumb pushed up under his top lip, feeling sticky against his front teeth.

“Hm. Fairly straight bite. Minor chip in number six, but hardly anything to take down his value...”

Alex choked back a protest as the man moved his hand to pinch his nose.

“Nice straight bridge, a bit aquiline from a break, but appears to have been handled surgically... you said he doesn't snore, right?” The man was talking to someone else in the room.

“We didn't hear him,” came the answer. “Do you want the footage?”

“That won't be necessary.” The alien had turned his attention back to Alex. He pinched and pulled at Alex's face and hair for what was far too long, before Alex felt the man's now bare hands resting on his shoulders. Tetradactylous—three fingers and one thumb—and slightly cool; the digits were long and smooth against his skin. Alex searched through his education, trying to match these physical characteristics with a known race and came up blank. There were some races that had a similar hand structure, but none he knew of that had that tonal quality to their speech.

“Wide... well-formed clavicle... good muscle tone... you eat regular meals?”

It took Alex a moment to realize he was being addressed directly.

“Sir. Yes. I mean, when I could get them, sir.” *God*, he *hoped* it was male.

“Mm. You're thinner than I'd expect from a man of your stature, but that's fine.”

The alien seemed to ignore Alex's cock and walked around behind him. “Put him on his feet.”

Someone ambled over and shoved his hands under Alex's armpits, jerking him roughly to his feet.

The alien hissed, “Careful, idiot—you'll bruise him!”

Alex wobbled from the numbness that had started working its way up his calves.

“Please bend forward.”

Alex's heart turned to ice in his chest. *Was this alien going to fuck him in front of all of these people?*

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Having little choice, Alex leaned forward onto the man in front of him, who held him in a dispassionate, but steady embrace.

Those cool, smooth fingers moved down either side of Alex's spine, pressing firmly as they assessed him. "Good. Straight, strong back."

The fingers pushed into the divots above his ass, then moved lower, squeezing his gluteus muscles and slowly, agonizingly, slipping between and spreading his cheeks apart. Alex heard the snap of latex and the unpleasant sound of air accompanying gel being squeezed from a tube. Although he anticipated what was to come next, Alex nearly hit the ceiling when he felt the probe of cool, slimy fingers pressing against his puckered hole.

"Relax..." the man encouraged, reminiscent of a physician. "Tight. You're a top normally, aren't you?"

Alex bobbed his head and acid burned its way up his throat.

"Hm. But you're not entirely averse to some anal play..."

Alex gasped and his muscles clenched around the slick finger that curled up against his prostate, causing more blood to rush to his cock. He bit his lip and tried to jerk away, but the man in front squeezed him so hard that Alex saw white flashes behind his eyelids.

He was not spared any humiliation. The way the man's finger moved inside of him was making it clear that he was touching Alex for the purpose of watching his body's reaction. Alex's cock started to weep as the alien continued to milk his prostate, and then, just as the pressure was beginning to build, the alien stopped and removed his hand.

Alex whimpered at the sound of the latex glove being turned inside out and dropping quietly to the mat.

"Clean him up—inside and out. This one will go into the ring," the alien said finally, and the volume of voices below the stage began to chatter louder.

*The ring?* Whatever it was, Alex had a feeling that it was not going to be good.

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Cleaning him up "inside and out" was just that. Alex had never understood the concept of enema play, and after having a hose shoved up his ass and being pumped full of water, he could honestly say he wasn't a fan. It left him feeling strangely light-headed and hollow; a little doped up, and if ever there was a time that Alex needed to remain aware and in control, it was now.

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They waited to remove his blindfold and handcuffs until they'd finished cleaning out his intestines—smart move. Once he was unbound, two men sent him into a large glass-walled shower.

Alex blinked like a newborn pup as he forced his eyes to adjust to the lights in the room. It didn't help that everything was shiny and white, but the steam fogging up the enclosed shower managed to dull some of the glare. He noticed a few other men getting the same treatment, their expressions mirroring the bewilderment he felt. Along with the five naked men there were six other men wearing charcoal military-style uniforms, keeping an eye on them all. Their presence discouraged any attempts at conversation.

The showers all shut off at the same time and each of them was tossed a clean towel, which was taken away as soon as they were deemed dry enough. Alex shivered; beads of water dripped from the ends of his hair and ran down his spine like tiny cubes of ice.

They were led through an open doorway into a room that resembled a barbershop, and each man was placed in a chair to have their faces shaved clean.

Alex tried to get a look at the other men who had been chosen by the alien. He thought that there might be something about them all that was similar enough to warrant comparison, but from what he could see, except the fact that they were all human, that was not the case.

There was a young man with blond hair who Alex guessed must have been the first one on the block. His features were hard, and he seemed to be making an effort to square his shoulders and maintain a scowl. He did have a wide mouth with a thick upper lip. Not handsome, yet interesting enough that he might be considered somewhat attractive.

From Alex's vantage point, he could only make out two others: a man with deep, caramel-colored skin and shoulder-length black hair; and a much larger man with brown, spiky hair tipped with blond. This man was broad-shouldered and thick with muscle. By comparison, Alex was five-ten and about one-hundred and seventy pounds of lean mass—or had been about a week ago.

An older human, looking completely ridiculous in a black tuxedo, walked into the center of the room. Bald, he appeared to be in his mid fifties with red, splotchy skin and a thick, brown beard streaked with gray. As soon as he started to talk, Alex recognized him as the gravelly voiced auctioneer.

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“Okay, whores, the reason you have been separated is because Willow House has taken an interest in you. That’s top-of-the-line in brothels—you all must be pretty special. But six of you is too many, so you’re going to participate in an elimination match of sorts. Winners go to the House.”

“What do the losers get?” Alex asked. *Elimination* sounded uncomfortably final to him.

The man turned and grinned at Alex with yellow, gapped teeth. He had a black spot that bled out from one iris, discoloring the white of his eye. “Besides getting a dick up the ass, they get sent to whichever off-world stable that placed the highest bet against them.” He clapped his hands together, making the little blond jump in his seat. “Now this here is wrestling with a twist. No punching, scratching, biting, or goddamn hair pulling. You win by pinning your opponent and fucking him in the ass.”

“W-what?” The blond’s scowl had turned to something resembling terror, and Alex had to admit that he was feeling pretty terrified himself.

“You heard me, boy. You whores should be used to it. If you ain’t, well you’re gonna be one way or another.”

Alex exhaled a shuddering breath and caught the big spiky-haired guy smirking in his direction. *Nope. This was not going to be good at all.*

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## Chapter Three

They had been escorted single file down a long, dark hallway, up a short set of stairs, and onto a stage—probably the same one they'd been on previously. Alex had gotten a look at the other two men as they were lining them up: a ginger-haired man of short stature, but stockier than the blond, and a handsome dark-skinned man whose eyes were shifting as he tried to look everywhere at once.

“This isn't funny, man,” he said when Alex caught his gaze. The men in the military fatigues were moving between them, covering their bodies with oil.

Alex offered a tiny shake of his head. *No. Not funny at all.*

Once Alex got where he was going, if he could get within twenty feet of a communications kiosk, his embedded aural transmitter would send out a signal that could be picked up by any passing patrols—even on the other side of the invisible boundary in space. The problem was that he wouldn't know for certain a signal was received until help arrived—or didn't.

OFS had never discussed what happened then.

“F-fuckin' watch your hands!” the little blond stammered and jerked backwards when oiled hands moved too close to his cock.

“Yeah, you should be paying more attention to his asshole because I'm going right in there.” It was the big guy, and he was looking at the blond with a predatory sneer.

The blond's bravado shriveled smaller than his limp dick, and his rodent-like eyes kept a wary watch on the giant to his left.

When the curtain opened, Alex squinted, momentarily blinded by the bright lights turned towards them. He blinked to try and make out any faces in the audience—to see if any at all were human, but the most he caught a glimpse of were some blurry silhouettes of bobbing heads. He could hear the occasional clink of glasses and the closer they walked to the roped-off wrestling mat, the heavier the air became with sweet-and-bitter smelling smoke. The vapors were making him feel a little light-headed, and he recognized the aroma of at least one illegal drug.

“No! No! This isn't—I ain't doin' this!” The caramel-skinned man backed up and started swinging as he was ushered towards the ring.



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He slipped as a result of the oil covering him from head to toe and he landed hard on his back on the stage floor. Instantly, he was surrounded by four men wearing fatigues, and one jabbed him with a stun baton. The young victim's body became momentarily rigid—every muscle flexed to its maximum before he went limp—then he lay there twitching and panting. He was wrapped in a blanket and carried back behind the curtain.

Hisses and boos emanated from the audience. Alex exchanged a nervous glance with the dark-skinned man a moment before the man was gestured in between the ropes and took his place on the wrestling mat.

A large timer was projected above the stage, the glowing orange numbers held at a count of 180 seconds.

The man's opponent was the stockier redhead, and the two circled each other for what felt like a small eternity, each man sizing up the other, before the timer reached 120 and the audience started to grumble. At that point, the two men rushed together, upper bodies shoving in concert like sumo wrestlers as each one tried to get a hold on the other's slippery skin.

The ginger went down first. Slipping on the oily mat, he wrapped his hands around the darker man's waist and pulled him down as he went. In an instant, they became a writhing tangle of flesh and limbs. The oil made their skin slick and shiny; gleaming espresso muscles sliding over smooth strawberries and cream. The ginger was thicker and stronger than his opponent, but the dark-skinned man was more flexible, and he coiled around his rival, slipping out from underneath him before he could be pinned. Whether it was from the physical contact, testosterone, or the intoxicating vapors filling the air, Alex noticed that both men were hard. The darker man's cock was cut, thin and curved like polished mahogany from his glistening black nest of curls, while the ginger's was uncut and about average length, but built thick like the rest of him.

Alex took in a shuddering breath as his own cock began to fill. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the big man stroking his sizable hard-on as he watched the two on display.

The dark-skinned man grabbed the other man's arms and shoved him forward on the mat, forcing his shoulders down and ass up, but the angle was all wrong for entry. Before he could make it right, the ginger did a somersault, flinging the lighter-weight man over his back and landing on his back on top of

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him. The air rushed out of the wrestler underneath with a heavy *whoosh*. Somehow, the dark arms still held on, curling around into a half nelson, but neither man had managed to successfully mount the other, and the timer ran out.

It was a draw. More complaints echoed around the stage as two of the handlers came in and got the men apart. They were led out of the ring to separate sides, given water and a fresh application of oil, as they rested up before their next round.

One of the handlers perked up his head and moved towards the edge of the stage, crouching to speak to someone in the audience. He stood up and turned around, gesturing towards the ginger and the little blond. Apparently, somebody had decided that these two should be next.

From all outward appearances, the ginger would be the clear winner. He was roughly the same height as the blond, but probably outweighed him by close to seventy-five pounds. The blond was scrawny by comparison. Yet the exertion still evident from the first battle made them seem slightly better matched, at least initially.

The blond was obviously a street fighter. He was fast and fought dirty as he dropped into a crouch and swept the ginger down at the knees, then hopped on his back like a greasy, shaved spider monkey. He hooked one leg around the other guy's waist, and turned his ankle to mash against the ginger's cock with his toes. Alex looked around, expecting one of the handlers to intervene, but the two men either hadn't seen it, or really didn't care.

The ginger gulped in a noisy breath and his face turned purple. A second later, he was down, his chest pressed against his knees, and the little blond raised his skinny hips and started fucking him hard and fast.

The timer stopped and a bell sounded, nearly drowned out by the cheers from the crowd.

Three handlers entered the wrestling ring, and it took two to pull the blond off the ginger's back. His little eyes were glittering and his pupils blown wide as his cock stood out red and straining, wanting to finish pounding the other man into submission.

Alex felt sick to his stomach, as repulsed by his own reaction as to the act itself. It had turned him on to see the other man dominated so completely, while at the same time he prayed that it wouldn't happen to him. Even though his

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position in the top house had been almost assured, this could change everything. If he didn't get through this, he would be sent off to some other stable and literally fucked in every way—at least until he could get out a signal and hope for a ride home.

No, he had no choice. He wouldn't lose now that they had finally come so close to identifying the leader of this group and shutting them down for good.

“You.”

Alex realized that the handler was talking to him. Dread settled into his stomach as he moved towards the mat, and the handler raised the rope for him to climb inside.

The rubber mat was glazed with oil and sweat. Alex stared at it dolefully; unaware of his opponent until the dark-skinned man was led to the ring.

In a way, Alex was relieved to see that he wasn't fighting the spiky-haired giant, who was still grinning and stroking his cock. *Christ, could that thing get any bigger?*

He was momentarily caught off guard by his opponent charging towards him even before the timer began its countdown.

Alex spun out of the way and caught the guy's arm, twisting it up between his shoulder blades, but he couldn't get a good grip because of the oil. The man slipped free, then tried to roll clear for another attack. He hesitated, his upper lip curled, baring his teeth as he fixed Alex with a predatory gaze.

The smoke, Alex realized, was beginning to affect him. His body felt light and hot, and lightning flared through his core. He glanced down to see the guy's ebony rod at full mast, already beginning to bead with pre. The man licked his lips, his pupils dilated as he rocked like a cobra, ready to strike.

If he was a cobra, well then, Alex would just have to be a mongoose.

They charged, coming together in a feral embrace, close enough to kiss had they not been hissing through their teeth with the struggle for dominance.

Alex's logic slipped away, until he became nothing but base need and instinct. *Grab him. Take him down, and fuck him.* There was no Detective Alex Kley, just a beast driven to breed.

The man let out a furious battle cry and the crowd cheered back. He shot towards Alex like a bull, head down and aiming for his stomach. Alex responded as a matador should, arching out of the way with a fluid grace. He

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turned on his toes as the man started past him, and circled his arms around his waist. Jerking the man against his body, Alex thrust forward with his hips, impaling the man with his cock.

The dark-skinned man yelped, and Alex roared triumphantly, following him down to the mat, deafened by the crackle of blood in his ears as he continued to piston into the man who was clutching futilely at the mat beneath him.

It wasn't until he was wrestled back by several handlers that the drug-haze dissipated enough for Alex to make sense of what had just happened. He heard the man sobbing, and saw his hole gaping and raw. Alex's heart stuttered in his chest and his blood turned to ice. Shaking his head, he slipped away from the handlers outside of the ring and dropped to his knees on the floor, dry heaving so hard that he thought he'd puke out his own guts. *What the fuck had he just done?* He'd just raped another man—reduced him to flesh, and he'd relished every depraved moment of his cock shredding apart the other man's dignity.

Someone patted him on the back, handed him a bottle of water, and cracked a capsule of ammonium carbonate under his nose.

Alex jerked to attention, the sharp tang burning his nostrils. *How long had he been out of it?* He heard the crowd cheering loudly, and the little blond screamed through his torturous defeat.

He looked over his shoulder and locked eyes with the spiky-haired man, who pointed at him with a vicious grin. He grabbed his turgid cock and pumped it for show, riling up the crowd even more.

“Just give me a minute.” Alex held up his hand as he was approached by a handler.

“You wanna forfeit?” the man asked him, making ready to rise and call off the fight.

“No. I just need a minute to focus.” Alex turned to sit facing the mat as he sipped his water. The blond was shaking, red-faced, and had a large white towel draped over his shoulders. He moved stiffly and looked slightly dazed. Two handlers escorted him to the edge of the stage. They spoke with someone who was obscured by the shadows, then the little blond was helped down a set of hidden stairs nearby, and he too disappeared out of view. It wasn't what had happened before. The others who had lost had gone back behind the stage.

Alex might have considered it further, but currently he had other worries. He reminded himself that sometimes good people had to do bad things to help

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set things right. In the last several years it had become almost a mantra. But Alex didn't feel like he was a good person, or that he ever had been. *That's why he was so perfect for this job.*

He reminded himself that this wasn't about him. He was here to protect the young men who had come before him, the agent who'd come before him, and to prevent anyone else from becoming a victim. Alex used to eat this line of noble bullshit for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Under the current conditions, it wasn't holding up.

"Ready now?" The handler had returned and he bent down to peer into Alex's face.

"Yeah." Alex got to his feet, trying to gather up his energy and willpower to get through this, rather than focusing on his all too eager opponent.

He didn't have to win yet—just draw. Maybe that would give him a few more minutes to figure out a strategy. Maybe the audience would get bored and they'd pit them against each other in some other way. *Yeah, like in a rousing game of rock-paper-scissors?*

On his way into the ring, Alex took an inventory of his opponent. Six-foot-five if he was an inch. Probably tipping the scales at around two-fifty, and all of it thick muscle. He was built like a goddamn superhero. *Draw?* Alex knew he'd be lucky if he even managed to walk again after this giant split his ass in two.

"Here, kitty kitty," the big guy crooned, a maniacal grin cleaving his face from ear to ear.

The animal part of Alex would revert to fight or flight mentality, and every muscle was twitching as his instincts told him to run. Despite the intoxicating vapors rising in a cloud around the stage, he tried to maintain enough control to remain lucid as the starting buzzer sounded.

The two men circled each other, each one looking for the weakness that would give him the upper hand. Or in Alex's case, the one place he could grab onto that would keep this guy from fucking him up until the time clock ran out.

The giant's skin was flushed from the adrenaline circulating through his blood. At some point he'd have to hit the physiological wall, and Alex prayed that it would be soon enough to save himself.

One advantage he had over the larger man was speed. As the guy lunged forward, Alex dropped and rolled, somersaulting out of his reach. But the giant did something unexpected. Instead of turning around for another attack, he

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launched himself backwards, landing halfway on top of Alex and grabbing hold of one of his thighs. Alex didn't wait to catch his breath before he forced himself to roll right up and over the giant's face on his way out of his grasp. If jamming his dick in the guy's ear counted, Alex might have been the clear winner, but since it didn't, all it had managed to do was to piss the guy off.

"You're going to bleed, bitch!" the giant roared, struggling to sit up on the oil-slicked mat. He managed to roll instead, and reached out, snagging Alex's leg and dragging him back down. Alex couldn't get enough traction on the slippery rubber surface to get away, and he felt himself being dragged closer to the suffocating heat of the giant's body.

He began to panic, flopping around like a fish as he was pulled closer to his doom. The roar of the crowd was deafening, and Alex knew that not even the buzzer would save him. The crowd clearly expected a winner, and Alex knew it wouldn't be him.

*Shit, shit, shit!* Alex cursed every part of this investigation from his CO to the victims. This entire thing had been set up from beginning to end, but nobody had warned him about this. Nobody had warned him that getting fucked up the ass by the wrong person could send this case and his career to hell.

Something rising up outside of the ring caught Alex's attention. The most frightening and captivating creature was moving towards the mat; a beautiful demon with snow-white hair and obsidian skin, dressed in blood-red robes.

Everything in the world stopped but for this creature.

Almost human—and yet too exotic to be anything but an alien species. His cheekbones were wide and high, his silver eyes were angular—tapered on each end. They seemed to be taking apart Alex's brain, piece by piece, and laying out the blocks to examine their contents. A broad mouth, and lips shaped like a bowed heart, revealed the dagger-edges of the alien's teeth when he spoke.

"Stop."

It was the voice Alex had heard earlier. The one owned by the alien who had sent them here, to this ring, and was now choosing to end the game he'd begun. Alex remained spellbound until he felt the weight of the other man lifted off of him and hands pulling him up from the floor.

"Clean them up," said the black-skinned alien beauty. "I want them both."

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## Chapter Four

He'd wanted three this time, and a variety. Who was Illythe to question the demands of the Scion?

While Illythe hadn't got the humans in the varied skin shades he'd hoped for, he'd rather have the best candidates in Willow House, and the size differences in the trio might make for interesting combinations.

The little one was going to be trying with his unfortunate speech impediment, but he could be kept quiet by any number of methods. For the time being, he'd been treated for his injuries and put to bed until morning when the others were set to arrive.

Of the three, it had been the dark-haired man who'd captivated Illythe the most. Lean, strong; with an intelligent and handsome face, and a beautiful human body. He would be popular. Illythe should have been proud of his choice. Instead, he was trying not to succumb to the ache that was starting behind his eyes.

He told himself that it was the trip to the auction house that had caused his discomfort. It had been years since he'd ventured out among others, and even his guards had been uneasy with all of the attention paid to him by the other patrons. They all knew who and what he was. It was a truth he abhorred, but could not deny.

Illythe looked himself over in the full-length mirror. He had been told to wear red tonight. He never liked the color red, but the Scion insisted he looked his best in it; that it was the color of vitality, life, and love. Illythe snorted, shaking his head at his reflection. He'd never known any of those things... not for a long time, or without pain, anyway.

He glanced over at the bed, made up, covered in plastic sheeting, and ready to handle tonight's activities. Red lanterns hung on the walls, giving the room a soft glow.

Illythe had been told that Willow House was fashioned to resemble an ancient Earth brothel in a place once called Japan. Although none of it was made from the traditional materials once found in such places, it was good enough to create a fantasy that pleased the Scion and his most important guests.

Outside there was a courtyard with a high wall surrounding artificial trees that produced cherry blossoms year-round. It was all too theatrical for Illythe, who was forced to endure the whims and wishes of the Scion.

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Tonight, the Scion wished for Illythe to wear a *yukata* and *hanhaba obi*—basically an overly complicated robe and narrow sash—with nothing underneath. It annoyed Illythe that even now he was not permitted to choose his own wardrobe, but after nearly three decades he should have been used to it. Unfortunately, Illythe and the Scion came from races with very long natural lifespans, though there was nothing natural about Illythe's life.

Illythe had been a child—a young prince from a nomadic clan of warriors—when the technologically superior Gengein attacked his planet. It had nothing to do with politics and everything to do with profit. In less than seventy-two hours, an entire race was destroyed, and a preadolescent prince had become a sexual plaything for a group of Gengein soldiers. It had been the Scion—a general in the Gengein military—who had rescued him, if one could call it that. It was a confounding irony that the one who led the attack on Illythe's planet had saved him from being killed. Illythe both hated and loved him; he wanted to see the Scion dead, while believing that he would not be able to live without him.

His father would be ashamed if he could see what a coward his son had become. But his father was dead. All of those brave and honor-bound warriors were dead, so truly, what good was such a thing as honor?

Willow House was a new establishment in a new location, but the same old business. The multitude of Brecchian guards in this place were mostly to keep an eye on the Scion's business interests and on Illythe. Anti-Federation races and criminals of all sorts came to Omanai Station, and their leaders came to Willow House. Occasionally, they came unscheduled, and the guards kept such events from escalating into all sorts of problems.

But aside from that, the large number of guards were here to make certain Illythe stayed put. Three or four Brecchian he could handle easily, despite their weapons. He'd proved this before, at the last place he managed for the Scion.

The private entrance at the back of Illythe's room slid open as he was finishing up his preparations for the Scion's arrival. The large alien who entered cast his ominous shadow over Illythe, who had long ago stopped flinching over such trivial surprises, despite the fact that something inside of him always recoiled from his presence.

Illythe sighed, setting down the comb he'd been using to straighten his long, white hair.

"Troubles, Illythe?" The Scion wore a white suit, contrasting his smooth brown skin. Illythe had never quite decided if it was comical or terrifying when



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the large alien tried to fit himself into human fashion. Of course, any garments had to be specially tailored to account for the extra set of arms, not to mention the highly specialized sex organs, which required the addition of a large pouch below the waistband.

Illythe conjured a smile and raised his hand to accept the bottle of spirits the Scion had brought him.

“Thank you, Scion. No, no troubles.” He watched the large creature settle onto the sofa in the room as he poured them each a drink. “Three new *kagama* will be arriving this evening. I hope that the guests will find them to their liking.” Illythe gritted his teeth, annoyed at the insistence that he use foreign words to pretty up the truth. *More kidnapped human whores all set to suffer innumerable humiliations by being playthings for foreign species.*

Illythe moved to the sofa and handed the Scion his glass, and then dutifully sank to the cushion at the Scion's feet. He arched his neck, his lips parting as the Scion's brown fingers brushed gently at his hair, then immediately hated himself for falling prey to his body's conditioned response.

The Scion chuckled softly, patting the sofa beside him. “You have three of them now. It may be exhausting trying to teach them all.”

“I only want the best for you.” Illythe rose and settled into the small space on the sofa next to the Scion. He sipped at the cloudy liquid in his glass. *Genvian spirits.* The liqueur bubbled sweet on his tongue, and flowed in a hot and cold river down his throat, seeping quickly through his tissues and into his bloodstream. It raised his body temperature, and his black skin lightened to gray under a wash of red freckles blossoming over his chest and thighs.

“You were the best.” The Scion's voice lowered an octave, lust filling his tone like gravel. “You still are.”

Illythe heard the whisper of the Scion's long appendages rustling behind the silk and linen fabric of his suit as the larger alien moved up closer behind him. He shivered at the fimbrial caress of this species' mouth on the back of his neck, his body responding from memory and the intoxicants in his system. Blood surged to his cock and Illythe sighed, raising his hips in trained invitation.

The alien behind him chuckled, and two sets of arms came around to rid him of his clothing. He should be grateful that he was allowed a role as mentor, and not confined to his former position as slave. That the Scion had cared for him enough to let him age gracefully, rather than chained to his bed, was

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appreciated, and so these occasional forays into his former life could be tolerated with certain caveats—or so Illythe told himself.

“Exquisite.” As the Scion breathed, the cilia waved in his mouth cavity, his red tongue appearing just behind the blushing fringe.

The instincts cultivated by his former slave status took over, and Illythe groaned, rising to his knees and leaning forward to rest his elbows on the arm of the sofa. He curved his spine, lifting his ass high and rocking his hips for the master's approval.

Glancing over his shoulder briefly, he saw the fabric covering the alien's genitalia slide down, and Illythe swallowed back the rising gall in his throat.

The first time he'd been raped by the Gengein, it had left a scar on his psyche that would never fade, despite the decades of pleasure since. Although not recognized as a member race, the intelligent alien species was one of the least human looking of those known by the Federation of Allied Races. At eight feet tall and adorned with a veil of thin, fleshy appendages, the Gengein was a thing of nightmares for most human beings. But these features were not nearly as frightening as the creature's sexual organs.

The heady aroma of the Scion's mating secretions filled Illythe's head, the scent so overwhelming he could taste it, as he felt the first tentative probes of his anus. He whimpered as the alien's mouth tickled against his opening, and the long, hot tongue began to lap at the tightly puckered flesh. The beast's saliva flowed like sap between Illythe's cheeks, and slicked him up for entry as the Scion's pointed tongue drilled inside.

As horrific as sex could be with these aliens, it could also be incredibly sensual, provided that the Gengein involved cared about his partner's pleasure. Illythe gasped and moaned as the Scion's tongue wiggled against the gland buried inside of him. He pushed his hips back, desiring more of the incredible sensations. Two of the Scion's hands came around to tug at the rings through Illythe's swollen nipples; twisting and milking the sharp nubs of reddened flesh.

“Bed,” the Scion said but one word as he drew out his tongue, and Illythe went scrambling to the oversized mattress, reassuming his position of submission with his shoulders down and his ass waving in the air. Blood pounded in his ears as his heart beat faster. The Scion was on the bed, kneeling behind him, poised and ready for entry.

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The alien's cock rose long and thick, ribbed along the shaft and surrounded by the same tendrils of flesh that moved around its skull. They slithered over Illythe's flanks, some wrapping around his cock, while others encircled his balls, pulling them down and away from his body, and rubbing them in his sac. Illythe's cock throbbed in the warm bindings of flesh, and they squeezed and released him, tugging lightly on the piercing through his crown, and wringing from his lips another appreciative moan. There were times when the Scion had chained him by the rings through his cock and nipples, and touching them served as a reminder of the pleasure and pain it could inspire.

Illythe felt the moisture of the blunt tip of the Scion's cock now pushing against his saliva-lubricated hole. The secretions aided entry as the alien slipped inside, relaxing and readying the channel for the remainder of the breeding process. He seated himself deeply, pausing for a few moments before he began to move back and forth inside of Illythe, the thick ribbing on his cock sending shudders of delight as he pistoned slowly, then began to work up a rhythm, rocking Illythe's taut body against the bed. One of the Scion's hands pressed against Illythe's mouth. Illythe opened it to take in two thick, brown fingers, and sucked on them to aid in stifling his screams.

The first thing to occur prior to the Gengein orgasm was the feeler slithering into the slit of Illythe's penis, working its way into his urethral tube and vibrating ever so slightly as it released the antitoxins into his system. This was to counteract the poisonous effects of the Gengein spermatozoa on a life-form that was incompatible with its breed. This was not the part that incited the screaming, however. While initially uncomfortable, there had been times where Illythe had experienced mind-shattering bliss as the talented appendages—sometimes as many as three—squirmed inside of his cock and milked the cum from his balls. It caused a terrifying buildup of pressure, which ultimately culminated in an orgasm that often went on for minutes at a time. But the Scion was not content today to just let Illythe take his own pleasure.

Illythe's breath began to come in quick bursts as he felt the first indications of the Scion's cock preparing for orgasm inside of him. The organ swelled and began to unfurl, the soft flesh rolling and peeling back as it turned itself inside out, and the sharp spines of the inner lining were exposed.

Illythe squeezed his eyes shut tightly and screamed into the muffling hand, his spit foaming against the Scion's soft, sticky palm. He felt the capillaries burst in his eyes, and his bladder constricted as his body went rigid with agony. The spines pierced through his sensitive inner tissues as the Scion's cock

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bloated from his impending orgasm, and blood slicked Illythe's insides. Illythe's own orgasm was trapped within his testicles by the appendages creating a tourniquet around his cock and balls, even as the tentacles inside began to vibrate faster, signaling the near completion of the Gengein's breeding act.

The Scion roared as his orgasm exploded through his cock, the needles flexing inside to inject the semen through Illythe's rectal walls. At the same time, the tentacles filling and squeezing Illythe's cock released him and his own cum burst out of him, making his orgasm feel more like a kick to his groin than the pleasure it should have been. Illythe choked, his screams long inaudible as the Scion's cock pumped the remainder of its caustic load into his body, then finally the spines retracted and the organ went limp, slithering out in a mess of blood and cum.

Illythe's body went heavy as his brain compensated for what it perceived to be a traumatic injury, and finally, mercifully, his consciousness shut down. *Thank the Divines—the Scion had been gentle this time.*

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## Chapter Five

Alex and the spiky-haired giant had been bathed, somewhat dressed, and sedated for their journey. When Alex woke up, there was a shadowy angel hovering over him.

Alex blinked to clear his vision, but the black-skinned angel was still there. He'd begun to believe that it was a statue until it blinked its silver eyes. In that moment, everything came rushing back to him, and he sat up with a gasp, then regretted it as his brain sloshed around in his skull like the worst hangover he'd ever had.

"You're finally awake," the now somewhat familiar alien said. He had been sitting on Alex's bed, and Alex felt the mattress rise slightly when he stood up. The alien angel moved stiffly around the small room, as though it caused him pain to do so, and poured a cup of water, bringing it to Alex.

"Where is this place?" Alex asked him.

"Omanai."

*Omanai*. It was a station settlement, outside of Federation jurisdiction, known by the OFS for its red-light district and shady merchants. It was off-limits to humans, but that didn't always stop the more unscrupulous ones from coming for a visit. Contraband of all sorts was available here, if one knew where and how to buy it.

When the alien turned, Alex saw him wince, and asked without thinking, "Are you hurt?"

The alien stared at him for a moment before answering, or rather, not answering him.

"I am Illythe. You shall call me Mentor. What first name are you called?" The tone was neither kind nor harsh, and maybe it was the lack of any emotional inflection that made it so unnerving.

"Alex... sir."

"Alex," Mentor Illythe repeated. His accent drew it out like a purr. "You've slept through lunch, Alex, but if you check with the cook, she will make you something suitable. I expect you to be in the north hall by two." Illythe indicated what appeared to be an antique pendulum clock hanging on the wall, then he walked out the sliding door.

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Alex stared after him for the few moments it took to process his instructions, then he looked around the room.

It was small—only large enough for a bed, a dresser, and a nightstand, all of which were of very simple design. There was a small lamp with a red glass shade, and the walls were gray panels above black lacquered wainscoting. The sliding door had frosted panels that seemed more like paper than glass, but were undoubtedly neither one. The style of everything was somewhat familiar—Earth-based and older... Japanese, perhaps? Often, alien species became obsessed with certain periods of Earth's history for the design. French Baroque, American Antebellum, Italian Renaissance, Edo-Period Japan... usually they mixed the styles with varying results. His favorite example of design gone wrong was an ostentatious Rococo throne used as the captain's chair for an otherwise sleek Federation fighter vessel.

Alex sat up much more slowly this time, swinging his legs off the side of the mattress. He sniffed at the water. Detecting nothing other than the usual sterilizing chemicals—a smell like bleach and rubbing alcohol—he sipped it, and then gulped the rest down when his thirst got the better of him. It burned his throat slightly, and tasted a little like vinegar, but nothing beyond the range of normal for treated water.

He'd been dressed in a very simple outfit: off-white drawstring pants and a shirt of the same fabric. A pair of slippers sat on the woven mat next to the bed, and Alex slid his bare feet into them.

It seemed odd that he'd be allowed to just wander around the house, until Alex slid open the door and saw what resembled a large samurai warrior outside of his room.

The samurai was actually a Brecchian, a bulky, bipedal race with a head that looked like a toad's except for the two rows of tiny serrated teeth that filled up their wide mouths. Although *it*—because Brecchian were asexual—was dressed like an ancient Japanese warrior, Alex knew there were more than simple metal scales and leather strips making up the armor. As if seeing an alien dressed like a samurai warrior wasn't clue enough, the large plasma rifle and stun baton were also indications that Alex hadn't stepped back in time.

Brecchian were usually freelance mercenaries, so someone had to be paying well, especially if they were asking them to play dress up.

The bulbous yellow eyes followed Alex's uncertain trip down the hallway. He passed a few more doors that were open, showing bedrooms identical to the

one he'd been in, and a few other doors that were closed. He was about to ask another one of the samurai for directions when he saw a large letter "N" painted above an archway. Well, that likely solved one mystery. Now to find the kitchen.

"Hey—"

Alex spun around at the sound of the human voice calling to him from behind. It was the spiky-haired giant, looking about as confused as Alex felt.

"Hey," Alex answered him tentatively. The guy *had* just tried to fuck him into submission not so long ago.

"Do you know where the hell we are?"

Alex shrugged and waited for the bigger man to catch up.

The guy flinched when he brushed against one of the house guards and the creature growled at him. "Shit—it's alive?"

Although he'd been off-world several times, Alex hadn't really considered the fact that most Earth-born had never seen aliens outside of the media—if even that. It wasn't that they didn't know they existed, but only those who lived near the big centers of government or had been off-world would come in contact with any.

The reality slowly settled in with him as well; odds were that at least ninety percent of the clientele here would be nonhuman... and this being a brothel, he would be expected to service them. *Cripes*. While he'd known that he might have to engage in some unsavory activities to maintain his cover, he was wondering just how unsavory some of the species with whom he'd be *engaging* might be.

"Name's Bryant—what's your name?"

"Alex." He thought he smelled something like food, so Alex started to follow the scent down a wider corridor.

"Are we the only ones here? I mean, besides that black-skinned dude... that's a dude right?"

Alex offered Bryant a sidelong glance, not really wanting to carry on a conversation with him, but not seeing any way out of it. "Yeah, he's male."

"What is he? He's hot enough to be a woman... think there are any women here?"

"I don't know." Alex figured his answer should suffice to cover all of Bryant's questions as he rounded the corner to an open kitchen.

There was an older female working in the kitchen. She was from a race that appeared vaguely human—Jowan, he thought. She jerked her head towards an open doorway on the opposite end that turned out to be a dining room.

The smaller blond man was sitting at the only table in the room, eating some kind of pastry when Alex and Bryant entered. He froze midbite when he saw Bryant.

"Hey, little dude." Bryant winked at the blond, who moved to the other side of the table to put space between them.

"D-don't l-l-little dude m-me!" the blond stammered, his face so red that his hair seemed to glow.

"Aw, you're not still mad about the match are you?" Bryant scratched the top of his own head, ruffling his spiky hair.

"Y-you h-hurt me!"

Normally Alex might have let them argue or work it out between themselves, but frankly, his head was hurting, he was starving, and he suspected that things might just escalate between the two.

"Look, everybody hurt somebody. None of us had a choice." He grabbed one of the pastries off of the tray, at this point too hungry to care whether it had been drugged or not.

"So what's your name?" Alex finally asked the smaller blond man, trying to keep conversation as neutral as possible.

The blond's murky brown eyes sparkled and he grinned, his entire demeanor changing from fearful to flirtatious. "M-M-Melvin. You c-can call me Mel."

"I'm Alex and that's Bryant," Alex said, then looked around for something to drink. Of course it was too much to ask for to get a decent cup of coffee here. While the pastries weren't terrible, each bite turned into a lump of paste as it slid down his throat. He got up and poured himself some water from a pitcher on the sideboard, examining the layout of the dining room. It was done in the same style as the rest of the house, a pseudo-ancient Japanese design. It was an attractive style, although admittedly a strange choice, and it revealed the owner's fetishism of the Earth culture.



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Some kind of light, natural, or otherwise, shone through the large frosted panels along one wall.

“I guess there are just the three of us?” Alex asked the question, but doubted either of them knew the answer.

“I d-didn't s-see any others,” Mel stammered, watching him through veiled eyes.

“So, Alley-cat,” Bryant started as he leaned back in his chair, “how long you been a whore?” He reached up over his head, flexing his meaty biceps. Alex wondered how long the sleeves of his shirt would last as they were pulled taut across the muscles.

“What's it to you?” Alex asked, not in the mood to be friendly with either of these men. He was still trying to figure out how he was going to handle this situation, whatever this situation turned out to be.

“Oh, sensitive? Lemme guess, your step daddy used to fuck you, and your momma didn't love you enough to kick him out, so you left, right?”

“Bingo,” Alex said, noncommittal, as he looked around for a clock.

“I-it's n-none of your b-business,” Mel defended him, but Alex was already heading for the doorway. It was two o'clock; time to get this show on the road.

The others followed Alex out and down the hallway, deferring to his assumed familiarity with the interior. Around every corner, they encountered another faux-samurai, bringing the count thus far to seven in Alex's estimation. One was bad enough, but seven of these monsters left little doubt that this was the highest earning brothel on Omanai, and someone wanted to keep it that way. Although Alex had to wonder if the guards were there to protect the guests, the workers, or the house itself. It added another difficult wrinkle to an already complex case.

At the end of the north hallway, the double-panel doors were open, and Illythe—or *the mentor*—was standing in roughly the center of the room, dressed like a geisha. He wore all black, without the traditional makeup, and instead of a fan, he had a leather whip coiled loosely in one hand. His face was set in the kind of placid gaze that only one who has given up hope could achieve. Alex found it curious, and a little unnerving. Perhaps he was wrong, and the blank expression was only a natural trait for this species he'd never known existed.

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“This is Willow House,” the mentor said, and his silver-glass eyes seemed to focus on the three of them at once. “This is the jewel in the Crown of Seven Houses. You are fortunate to be here, so please remember that throughout your stay.”

He began to walk slowly in a gliding sort of half-circle, his movements so precise, it was nearly a dance.

“Willow House, like all of the Seven Houses, is owned by the Scion.”

*The Scion.* That was a name Alex hadn't heard before. Was Illythe speaking the word in reference to an individual or the organization?

Mel was standing beside Alex, also watching Illythe with interest that bordered on awe. Bryant seemed more interested in the fake orchids standing in a planter. Bryant likely didn't realize they were artificial—they looked real enough, but Alex knew that nothing living could thrive in such a place. Ironic that they would call the brothel Willow House in a place where willows wouldn't grow.

Alex had been trying to find a way to phrase his question so that he could get more information about what or who the Scion was without raising suspicions, but Illythe began speaking again.

“In your former lives, you did what men wanted you to do for money, or drugs. Here you will do what you are instructed to do by the house, for the house.”

“Does that include dressing up like a woman?”

Alex could *hear* the weight of the air increase after Bryant spoke, then stood there with a self-satisfied smirk. Alex glanced quickly down at the whip and wondered if Mentor Illythe planned on using it. He wished he would, if for no other reason than just to shut Bryant up so that Alex could try to get some answers.

“And what first name are you called?” Illythe asked softly, moving up very close to Bryant.

“Bryant.” When he said it, Alex saw the upward tilt of Bryant's chin, and the squaring of his shoulders. He was playing tough, and all Alex could do was to stand by and wait for the train wreck.

“Bryant,” Illythe repeated. He tapped the whip lightly against his leg—just enough to make a soft rustle against the silk.

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Alex hadn't realized how tall Illythe was until he stood close to Bryant. They were approximately the same height, but Illythe was a lot leaner than Bryant, and he carried himself with the kind of aloof grace that could only be achieved after years of practice and self-awareness.

"Well, Bryant." Illythe cocked his head pensively; his voice remained calm and bereft of any emotion. "Because I speak for the house as its master, you'll do anything I tell you to do and you will be honored to do so."

Bryant opened his mouth to say something that turned into a loud huff of air as Illythe punched him hard in the stomach, without so much as visibly tensing a muscle. With that same impassive grace, Illythe grabbed the doubled-over man by his spiky hair and forced him to his knees. He pushed Bryant's face against the black satiny brocade covering his crotch.

"If the house tells you to suck its cock, you will do it until you can't feel your tongue."

Alex swallowed hard; shocked, afraid, and aroused all at the same time. He glanced up and met Illythe's silver eyes.

"Alex, Mel, undo your pants. You are the house today."

Mel seemed quite eager to untie the drawstring and pull the waistband of his bottoms under his balls, but Alex hesitated, again meeting the mentor's icy gaze.

"Alex?" Illythe raised an eyebrow. He was still grinding Bryant's face against his groin while Bryant let out some muffled coughing.

Alex lowered his gaze, his eyes trying to be anywhere but on the mentor or the man he held. "I, uh..."

Illythe pulled on Mel's shirt to bring him closer, and then he turned Bryant's head, pushing him into Mel's eager cock.

"Suck," Illythe instructed, and strode over to Alex.

"Mentor, I'm sorry..." Alex shivered when Illythe's thin fingers brushed across his shoulder and down his chest.

"You are not aroused by the thought of that man sucking your cock?"

Alex glanced over briefly to Mel and Bryant. Mel was grinning triumphantly down at the man who'd been forced to suck him off. Alex looked away, curling his upper lip.

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“No. Not like that, especially.”

“Mm.” Illythe hummed softly, tugging lightly on the collar of Alex’s shirt before turning away. “I knew you were different.”

Alex’s throat tightened. In an undercover situation, different wasn’t a good thing. He thought he should say something, but couldn’t come up with a single worthwhile thing as he followed Illythe to the back of the room where there was a small sofa.

“Mel, don’t ejaculate yet,” Illythe instructed as they went past. He pointed Alex to the sofa. “Sit down.”

Alex sat down, forcing his knees to bend beneath muscles that had gone rigid with apprehension. “W-what are you—?” he gasped when Illythe went to his knees between his legs and unlaced Alex’s pants, fishing out his already hardening cock. Suddenly he was in the moist, sweltering cave of the alien’s mouth. Alex’s eyes rolled back in his skull despite his attempts to deny his body’s reaction.

*Fuck... was that a forked tongue? Studs? As good as it felt—and it felt incredible—Alex struggled to keep from becoming too overwhelmed to keep his wits about him. What if he had some poison stinger down his throat? What if he meant to bite with those sharp teeth of his?*

Illythe paused, raising his antimony-colored eyes to Alex’s reddening face. “Relax. Enjoy it, but don’t come.”

Alex nodded vigorously then covered his mouth with his hand as a moan slipped out. The mentor’s tongue was all over him, the split working around the ferrule and the flared edge of his sensitive crown, stroking both sides and the center at once. Those studs in this tongue rubbed Alex like little fingers, and Illythe even managed to push one into the slit of his penis, popping it out like a cork a second later. He had never been so aware of his own skin to the total exclusion of the rest of his body. It was incredible, and it was dangerous as hell, and that made it all that much hotter.

“Don’t come,” Illythe reminded, whispering against his rigid cock. He rubbed Alex’s beading precum all around his flushed glans with his thumb while his other three fingers curled tightly around the straining shaft.

Alex gritted his teeth and bobbed his head, his body tensing on the cusp of orgasm.

“Mel, bring Bryant here, but don’t let him stop sucking.”

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Mel and Bryant shuffled awkwardly sideways, Mel's pants pooling around his ankles in the process. Alex might have laughed, but the pressure in his groin was growing tighter, and frankly, he was a little concerned about what Illythe had in mind.

Illythe gently pushed Alex's upper body back onto the sofa. He pulled a sealed condom from under his thick sash and ripped the packaging with his sharp teeth, rolling it down over Alex's erection. Then he coaxed Mel over, with Bryant still attached like a giant lamprey. "Have a seat, Mel."

Alex choked out a cry as Mel dutifully spread his cheeks and Illythe guided Alex's cock into Mel's hole.

Had he not been so close to coming already, he might not have reacted so strongly or immediately to the well-stretched orifice sliding around him, but it was different being watched, and when he came, clinging onto Mel's arms as he gave a thrust then emptied, his eyes belonged solely to Illythe. It was a strange, surreal feeling. Having sex with someone he wasn't particularly attracted to, and didn't necessarily like, while the most beautiful man he'd ever seen watched stoically a few feet away. Alex didn't even notice when Mel came—half of it down Bryant's throat and the rest in his face. He didn't notice anything but those cold, silver eyes; laying him out, separating him piece by piece, and examining his soul.

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## Chapter Six

After being allowed a few moments to recover from the bizarre, unanticipated three-way, Illythe explained to them the rules of Willow House.

“You have each been given a private room. This is your room, not one where you will entertain guests. You three may be asked to entertain some clients simultaneously, you may be required to perform as a group, a duo, or individually. It is forbidden to meet with guests outside of the registry, or with those who are registered, but beyond an appointed time. You are here to make money for the house which will, in turn, see to your needs. If you feel your needs require clandestine meetings or love-affairs, you will soon learn that feelings have no place here, and neither do you.”

Illythe began pacing slowly; letting loose, and then coiling the whip once more in his hand. It appeared to Alex as though he was making a clear effort to avoid eye contact, which allowed Alex to stare at him more intently. Aside from his pretty face, it was difficult to determine much more than his height given the flowing, layered garments he wore. Although they suited him to a degree, Alex couldn't help but wonder if Illythe wore them to create an artificial sense of softness and fragility—something by which other people could underestimate him. It had obviously worked in Bryant's case.

“Sir? Mentor Illythe? What happens when someone is sent away from the house?” Alex asked.

Illythe focused his gaze squarely on him. “If you obey the rules, you needn't concern yourself.”

Alex offered a terse nod. He had to assume that to disobey to the point of being sent away meant death, but to keep asking questions might raise suspicions. As dumb as they seemed, Mel and Bryant apparently knew when to remain silent. Alex decided it was better to follow their lead in this case.

Illythe went on, listing off the house rules.

“Never kiss a client on the mouth. Many of these species reserve such things for pair-bonding. It is sacred, and an insult to their culture to be kissed by anyone who is not a mate.”

Alex again caught Illythe's eyes. It was difficult to know what those furtive looks meant. Perhaps the mentor was testing him? Alex worried that maybe his

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lack of an initially eager performance with Bryant and Mel had made Illythe suspicious. But really, even prostitutes could be a little bit discerning in their tastes, right?

The mentor continued, “You will be expected to rest and take care of your bodies. Food provided is meant to keep your human bodies healthy and fit. You will visit the gymnasium here four times a week for an hour each morning at nine, unless special circumstances prevail. Two days a week you may have personal time—that is, you won’t be serving clients, though you will always be subject to the rules and whims of the house. Physical contact between any workers that is not done for the benefit of a client is prohibited, as is masturbating without being instructed to do so. There will be punishment for infractions. Any questions?”

“W-what about y-you, M-M-Mentor?” Mel asked him.

Illythe stopped his pacing and offered his attention to Mel. “What about me?”

“W-will we be h-having s-s-sex with you?”

Illythe’s eyes traveled past each man’s face, lingering on none of them. “I touch you to teach only. The house rules apply.” Illythe turned away from the small group.

“Teach? What sorts of things will you be teaching us?” Bryant finally asked, having come down a few notches in attitude—at least temporarily.

Illythe stopped a few feet from the open doorway, but he did not turn. “Whatever I feel you need to learn, Bryant. It’s nearly dinnertime. Please go to the dining room and wait for me when you are finished eating.”

“A-all of us, M-Mentor I-Illythe?” Mel stammered.

“All of you,” Illythe confirmed, then left them in the room.

Bryant leaned closer to Alex, his breath and hair still smelled like semen, and his lips brushed unwelcome against Alex’s ear. “I still owe you a fuck up the ass, Alley-cat.”

*So much for a change of attitude.* Alex shouldered him away. “In your dreams.” He moved to put some distance between them, glaring at the maniacally grinning man.

“I’ll bet you’ll be dreaming about that alien—he give you a good suck, kitty?”

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Alex rolled his eyes. “Yes, he gave me an incredible suck. Maybe you should pay more attention next time—I’m sure you could use some technique.” Me-ow. *Christ*, he was beginning to sound like those street corner drama boys. It was a great persona for his undercover status, but he wanted to take himself outside and smack the shit out of his own head. He left before Bryant decided the same thing.

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After dinner, Illythe came to collect them to start their “training”. He took them back to the room they had been in earlier and lined them up—stripped down to the most minimal form of underwear that could be called such. Alex had once gone undercover as a stripper and had felt less exposed.

Illythe was pacing slowly, smoking from a long, thin pipe. The smoke that came out was purple, and intoxicating to humans, judging by the way his head was starting to float. Illythe showed no obvious effects, but then, he wasn’t human.

“Willow House is the only house that the Scion honors regularly, and part of this honor is that one of you may be chosen to service him.”

So, it seemed the Scion was an individual, and getting to see him could be as easy as being the best fuck. *That* Alex could manage. Once he got inside, however, it was anyone’s guess what he’d encounter. Judging by the number of house guards, likely all Alex could do would be to pray there was a way to get out a signal for backup.

When the time came to take the Scion down, Illythe would fall as well. It seemed a shame, because he truly was lovely, but his involvement made it likely that his heart was as black as his skin. If Illythe was in charge of the most exclusive house, then it was unlikely he was in a position of innocent bystander in any way. He ran the house, chose the workers, and served the Scion.

Alex would have to be careful around him, while at the same time doing his best to impress Illythe, so that he could be the one chosen to serve the Scion.

This new information sounded like just what Alex was looking for. Unfortunately, his brain was turning to mush, and Illythe was slowly evolving into lights and tracers as Alex began to hallucinate.

“You will, in the meantime, service others. Some may be more difficult to accommodate with your human bodies. You will be prepared.”

“How?” Alex heard the voice and it took him a moment to realize it was his own.



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“By whatever means necessary, Alex. If you are too tight, you will be stretched. If you are too resistant, you will be made compliant through drugs or punishment. Does that sound unreasonable?”

Hell yes. It was unreasonable, but not entirely unexpected. Working the sex crimes detail had put Alex in some very dangerous and compromising situations, but never so far from backup. This was the first time he hadn't had a direct link to the OFS, and the first time he'd been taken off-world.

It was then that Alex realized Illythe was right in front of him. Illythe placed his hand under Alex's chin, tipping it up to peer down into his face. “How do you feel, Alex?”

“S-strange.” It was the only word Alex could come up with, and still it had been a struggle to get it out. He could feel his brain and body trying to play catch-up as sensations moved faster than he could register them.

“This is a very special intoxicant. In small doses, you'll find that it numbs you just enough that pain and pleasure have no edge.”

Alex felt pressure on his lower lip, then a trickle down his chin. He dropped his head as something dripped down and left a spot on his thigh. Blood.

Illythe again lifted Alex's chin and leaned close, flicking his tongue over Alex's bloody lip. It was like being touched through cotton batting; the sensation was neither pleasurable nor painful, and was forgotten immediately after.

“Fuck it. I don't like this,” came Bryant's voice from somewhere in the periphery, and Illythe moved away from Alex.

Alex forced his head to turn in that direction, watching and waiting with less trepidation than was warranted as Illythe closed in on Bryant.

“What you like is of no concern and should present no consequence to our guests,” Illythe said. His voice changed in neither pitch nor volume. He took a deep draw of his pipe and exhaled it directly into Bryant's face.

Bryant coughed, and his coughing made him wobble until he lost his balance and landed on his ass on the rug. Before he could move, Illythe pressed his foot against Bryant's genitals, pinning him in place like an insect. Bryant began to giggle and cry at the same time.

“This intoxicant becomes stronger the longer and more directly one is exposed,” Illythe explained. He hadn't let Bryant up yet. “Greater exposure

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tends to have the opposite effect on some people. They feel pleasure and pain acutely, but cannot tell the difference.”

Bryant was sobbing now. His face was a mess of snot and tears, yet he hiccupped out the occasional laugh. Watching it was making Alex sick, even if Illythe felt that Bryant needed to learn a lesson.

“Stop it,” Alex said.

Illythe turned his face towards him, raising a slender white eyebrow.

“He doesn’t deserve that,” Alex added, as if it was something Illythe didn’t already know.

“And what would you suggest, Alex?” Illythe finally released Bryant from beneath his foot and approached Alex.

Christ, he was tall, and even though he was thin, Alex suspected that Illythe would have little trouble snapping him in two.

“M-make him s-s-suck my cock!” Mel stammered almost gleefully.

Illythe didn’t behave as if he’d heard Mel as he continued to look down at Alex.

Alex was fighting the urge to fidget; worried he might have overstepped an invisible boundary.

“Mel, take Bryant back to his room, leave him there, then return to your own room,” Illythe instructed without looking away.

A little squeak slipped from Mel that might have been a protest, but he did as Illythe had instructed, nevertheless.

Bryant had stopped blubbering, but his eyes were glassy and he seemed dazed as Mel helped him to his feet. They staggered together out of the room. Alex watched them go just to keep from meeting those disapproving silver eyes in front of him.

When they had gone, Alex felt Illythe’s cool hand under his chin again, bidding him to look up. His gaze started at those plum-tinted lips, then up to the narrow nose, and finally to the large, slanted eyes that reflected Alex’s own face back at him like twin mirrors.

“You protect him, Alex. Why, I wonder?”

Just about the time Alex had decided the question was not rhetorical and opened his mouth to answer, Illythe continued.

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“You do not like him. You owe him nothing... but these are not things which you do not already know.” He paced slightly, then turned on his heel and considered Alex for several moments as he sucked on his long pipe.

Finally, he came forward, and although Alex knew he'd exhale the intoxicating purple smoke into his face, he was curious to see what Illythe had planned for him, so he didn't hold his breath. If Illythe was going to remove any of them from the house, Alex was certain that Bryant would be the first one to go.

Illythe leaned very close to him, their lips so close that a tremble would move them into a kiss. He parted his lips just enough to let the smoke billow from between them, and Alex breathed it in.

It took on a fragrance like lavender, and made Alex's head fill up with cotton, while at the same time his hair stood on end—just the movement of air in the room was enough to wake up every nerve on his skin.

“Large doses,” Illythe was saying from somewhere deep in Alex's foggy brain, “cause the lack of sensation to become painful...”

Alex closed his eyes as something gentle slipped over his head, then he felt his arms being caressed all the way to his elbows, and a moment later, the same with his legs. And then he was surrounded by touch—lifted, cradled, and caressed over nearly every inch of his skin.

More smoke worked its way into his system, pillowing his mind in lavender-scented bliss.

“...Sensory deprivation can weaken even the most stubborn mind.”

Something tickled at Alex's lips and he opened his mouth, only to have it filled with a rubber ball-gag. Alarm registered too late. Muffling earphones blocked out any sound but that of his beating heart, and suddenly, he couldn't even feel the floor beneath his feet.

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Illythe sat on the sofa, smoking his pipe, and watched the human twist and struggle as he dangled from a cable a few feet above the rug. The room was becoming blanketed in a lavender haze, and Illythe realized that the drug was actually beginning to affect him as well.

The Scion didn't like Illythe to be drugged when he came for a visit; he wanted Illythe to feel every inch of him crawling around inside.

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Illythe shuddered. Sometimes there was physical pleasure, or once had been. As Illythe had grown older, his body had betrayed him and he'd begun to look forward to the touch beyond the pain, or sometimes, even the pain itself was enough. But these days, he was mostly numb to his own suffering. He envied the humans for their fear and passion. He envied them for their imminent death.

This one—Alex—was exquisite in his contortions. Illythe had wrapped him in a material that became as tight as a second skin, binding him in a clear, shiny trap that looked like oil against Alex's flesh. His muscles flexed and rolled as he fought his imprisonment. The need for touch would soon become excruciating for him.

Illythe stood and moved slowly around the human art object. Alex was beautiful, but he still had too much power. It would cause him to suffer when the Scion requested his body. Bryant pretended to have power by speaking in a manner he believed sounded brave, Mel's only power was to rise above those who had fallen ahead of him, but Alex...

Illythe held up his palm and hovered it barely an inch above the surface of Alex's heaving, sweating chest. No, it would take far more to break him than this. Even after days, Illythe suspected that Alex would maintain the will to fight. He would have to spend more time ensuring that Alex's spirit was gone before the Scion came to take him.

Illythe gasped, surprised when Alex arched his neck, straining towards the heat of Illythe's hand above his chest. When Illythe moved it down lower over Alex's belly, he again responded. His body bowed, yet despite the physical effort, Alex had begun to relax. *So sensitive*. When Illythe pulled his hand away, after a few moments, Alex whimpered and began to struggle anew.

It seemed a shame to damage this, to take this passion away.

Illythe had been held in a similar trap many times over the years. At first, he fought with the strength and fury of his warrior's blood... so the Scion bled him until he was nearly empty, then caressed and soothed him as his body slowly refilled. Once or twice—maybe even a dozen times of this wouldn't have broken him had he not already been so badly fractured.

Illythe swallowed back his rising nausea. The intoxication of the pipe-smoke was making him feel those needs again. Not purely sexual, although that was almost always the outcome. No, he needed to be held; to feel cherished and... *safe*. Illythe coughed out a puff of smoke as a laugh escaped him. Safety

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in the many arms of the monster who'd taken his family—his very soul—was his ironic reality.

It didn't matter anymore—that was what Illythe struggled to believe. Once broken, he'd been rebuilt *by* and *for* the Scion, and every part would only ever belong to him. The Scion was his everything, and this was the only comfort Illythe would ever know.

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Alex's brain was still foggy when he felt the sensation of the rug beneath his feet. The contact was both blissful and painful from his body's need to be touched.

As soon as he was freed, his eyes focused on the pitch-skinned angel who'd saved him, and he began to whimper in gratitude, his mind still held in the remnants of the drug's twisted embrace.

"Thank you..." Alex pressed himself into the angel's narrow, strong body and kissed those soft, violet lips, clutching at Illythe's snowy hair. For one nearly imperceptible moment, Alex felt Illythe yield to the contact. That velvet mouth slid against his, Illythe's fingers splayed wide and curled into Alex's chest, and he sighed.

A heartbeat later, Illythe quickly drew back and smacked Alex's face, shoving him away.

Alex stumbled and dropped onto his rear end, his body realizing its overexertion ahead of his brain. When he squinted up at Illythe, he saw something that resembled terror in that normally expressionless face and it made his own heart catch in his throat.

"I'll forgive you that." Illythe's voice trembled, and he squeezed his fist tightly against his chest, as if trying to keep something contained. He then turned and strode quickly from the room, leaving Alex sitting dumbfounded on the rug.

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Illythe swayed, leaning against the doorframe of his room, his hand pressed firmly over his mouth as nausea welled up within him.

It hadn't hit him until now—the reason he'd found Alex so captivating.

*Neil.*

Alex looked—he practically *tasted* like Neil.

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“Fine,” Illythe told a curious guard pre-emptively, as the Brecchian samurai peered around the corner.

*But Illythe wasn't fine.*

He stumbled into his room, sliding the door closed behind him, and dropped down onto his small sofa as his knees gave out beneath him. *No. Not again.* He couldn't go through it ever, ever, ever again.

Illythe squeezed his eyes shut tightly, biting his lip and covering his face to quiet the sobs escaping him. The Scion would know—probably already knew before Illythe had put it together, and he would use this to test Illythe.

*Had the Scion specifically sought out this man to ensure Illythe would choose him?* It was more than in the realm of possibility. The Scion knew Illythe down to the cellular level. He knew him better than Illythe knew himself, because the Scion had spent so much time dissecting and reconstructing him.

Through tears, Illythe locked his gaze on a camera and understood that the Scion was looking back.

“Are you happy now?” Illythe muttered under his breath.

The Scion enjoyed watching him cry. The monster used to masturbate to it when Illythe had been a child. But over the years, Illythe had become desensitized to the pain and cruelty. He hadn't provided this form of emotional pornography for the Scion again until Neil. After that, the Scion had been careful not to overindulge this trigger, in order to keep it fresh, though deep in his most nightmarish imaginings, Illythe had worried that at any time the Scion would again seek this form of titillation.

Illythe was determined not to let his tears be the vehicle for the Scion's arousal. The only way around that was not to let Alex discover those parts of Illythe that Neil had found and made raw.

It would undoubtedly be easier said than done.

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## Chapter Seven

Over the course of the next several days, it became obvious that the humans at Willow House were expected to contribute to the house more like servants than prisoners. They did daily chores that included laundry and maintaining the cleanliness of the rooms where guests were entertained. They also cleaned the common areas, as well as took turns cooking meals at least three times a week.

The remainder of their time was spent watching video feeds about the sexual customs and anatomy of some of the species they might encounter, learning how to mix and serve drinks, how to converse appropriately, and other things that reinforced that this was an exclusive house of pleasure.

The most interesting thing Alex learned in this regard was that there were distinct personality traits each man was expected to cultivate. Mel was taught to be demure, submissive, and coy in flirtations. Bryant remained big, dumb, and slightly more dominant. Alex, on the other hand, spent the most time learning how to charm and seduce like a gentleman. From the way he was to present himself, it seemed as though the brothel's understanding of what this meant came from very old Earth films.

It would make sense. Outside of Federation territory, humans and their culture were largely unavailable. However, older forms of entertainment sometimes made it off-world and so bootlegged Cary Grant films might be the only educational material many species had.

Were it not for the fact that what was happening here was illegal in the eyes of Federation Allied Law, Alex might have thought that the kidnapped prostitutes had life much better here than on the streets. But the reality remained that humans were taken against their will and never heard from again.

Alex and the other men had not had any physical contact with guests yet, although several came by throughout different times of the day—never at the same time—and used Willow House as a sort of speakeasy.

From the few glimpses Alex had caught of the patrons, none of them were human, and they all arrived with an entourage, just as would be expected when organized crime was involved. He didn't believe that Illythe ever entertained the clients beyond serving them drinks, and while he carried on conversations, he never really seemed to be a part of them. Alex filed this information in the back of his mind. Any time he'd been involved undercover in a brothel

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situation, the managers were often just as much for sale as their staff. And even when they weren't, they gave the illusion of seduction.

The communication between Illythe and the three humans in his care beyond the few hours he came to teach was minimal. He spoke only when it was necessary to guide them, and Alex might have accepted it in Illythe's role of mentor, had it not been for the furtive looks aimed his way when they did meet, and the knowledge that *something* had happened between them.

While Alex had chalked their brief encounter up to the drugs and his physical attraction to the dark-skinned alien, Illythe was acting as if he was much more affected by the situation. It was making Alex curious as to why. Was it that Illythe just found him that much more attractive than Bryant or Mel?

Illythe seemed to have little problem guiding those two through some physical pose or brief punishment—a smack on the hand or shoulder, for instance—and keeping it clinical in nature. But with Alex he seemed hesitant, and when he did touch him, his hands lingered, his lips parted, and his body moved unnecessarily close, only to draw back and become rigid a moment later.

It made sense that favoritism would be prohibited if it interfered with a manager's ability to run the business. With such a small number of workers, it wouldn't do to want to keep one to himself. At the same time, however, the manager shouldn't be deprived to the point of coveting a whore. From Illythe's reaction, it was clear to Alex that their kiss had been prohibited, yet it had been something that Illythe had responded to like a parched man to water, and he apparently harbored a continued thirst for Alex.

Maybe there was another angle; something that Alex could exploit in order to get the information he needed to take the Scion down. Provided that the mystery of this dark angel didn't captivate him beyond the scope of duty.

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It was just before dinner one evening when Alex rounded the corner and saw Mentor Illythe talking with three men. At first Alex thought they were human, then he realized they were Jowan, and they were dressed in military uniforms.

*A raid? Some kind of official inspection?* And then he heard one of them laugh—something loud, deliberately refined—and considered that they might



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be customers. He tried to move past the open parlor, but one of the uniformed men noticed him and called out.

“Illythe, is that one of your new boys?”

Illythe was stooped over, pouring from a jug of wine into the Jowan's glass. He looked over his shoulder at Alex, a hostess' smile painted on his face.

“Yes, that is Alex, one of Willow House's newest *kagema*. My apologies. He's not quite ready to be entertaining customers yet, gentlemen.”

“Come here, Alex,” the Jowan with the wine glass said, gesturing to Alex like he was a child.

Alex flashed a glance at Illythe, who offered him a discreet nod. He approached the alien, careful to add just enough apprehension to his gait to be convincing. When he got closer to the Jowan, Alex noted that his uniform had considerably more *garnish* than the others. So this one was in charge, and obviously held enough sway that Illythe hadn't rejected his request outright.

The Jowan did not rise from his comfortable chair. He placed his hands on Alex's hips, the hooded, dog-brown eyes scrutinizing him. Alex always thought of Jowan eyes as a dog's eyes. They were nearly round and filled with more iris than anything, and they had a look to them that made Jowan seem much more submissive than they were. Their military, such as it was, was made up of mercenaries and individuals who fought to pay off loans made to them by their government. Anyone who was fooled by their appearance would suffer their true nature.

The Jowan's hand strayed to Alex's thigh—framing, but not touching—Alex's genitals. The officer made a throaty hum before turning him around. Alex gritted his teeth when he squeezed his buttocks. “I want his first appointment, Illythe. When will that be?”

Alex saw Illythe's eyelids flutter as his smile faded for a heartbeat, then he carefully put it back together.

“Tomorrow.”

“Then make me his only appointment for the entire day—I'm sure you can train him up right by tomorrow evening, Illythe?”

One corner of Illythe's full mouth tilted down, and Alex saw the telltale flex of his jaw as he gritted his teeth.

“Of course, Admiral Kah. And as is customary, I will be present. Now if you'll please excuse Alex, he must get down to the dining room for dinner.”

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Admiral Kah patted Alex on the hip, and Alex willed his legs to propel him forward and out of the room. The sound of the men laughing as they shared a joke between them was muffled by his heart pounding in his ears as Alex moved on autopilot towards the general direction of the dining room.

There was no way he could say no or feign sudden illness; he was too new for that and a sick whore was an unprofitable one. While Alex had never said no to sex in the course of an assignment—and rarely said no otherwise—the thought of having sex with the Jowan was causing him considerable anxiety. By the same token, however, the thought of Illythe there and watching was weirdly arousing. *Great. More kink rising to the surface.*

When he arrived for dinner, Mel and Bryant were already there; their conversation coming to an abrupt end as they noticed him in the open doorway. Alex ignored them and sat down at the table with them as the cook was setting out the last of the dishes.

The food looked and smelled appetizing, although Alex wasn't certain what it was or if it actually had an Earth equivalent. Once he started eating, he suspected it tasted good, but he could barely taste a morsel, and if Bryant and Mel were speaking to him, he couldn't hear a word. He was trying too hard to wrap his head around this entire situation, and more than that, figure out Illythe's role in it all.

“You gonna eat that, kitty?”

Alex hadn't realized that he'd stopped picking at his food until Bryant leaned over, jabbing his finger at the protein patty on his plate.

“It's yours.” Alex sighed, and scooted his chair back from the table.

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## Chapter Eight

After dinner and washing the dishes, Alex went to his room. He lay on his back in bed, staring up at the pristine, gray ceiling, as he tried to sort through what he knew of the case already. He knew that this prostitution ring targeted humans, and that the perpetrators were assisted by humans. He knew that the center of the skin-trade was in the Pleasure District of the Omanai Space Station in the Biers Quadrant, a few clicks from the edge of allied space. He knew that Illythe managed the top house, but Illythe was not at the top of the organization—it was an individual called the Scion.

Despite all that Alex knew, what he had yet to learn assured him that this investigation was far from over. He just wasn't certain he wanted to finish it. Nothing about this case had gone without a hitch, and now he was finding himself more interested in what was essentially an accessory to the crime than the actual victims. So far, it seemed, there was nothing very negative about this situation. For all Alex knew, the kidnapped men had decided they were better off and just never wanted to return to a life on the streets back home.

This wasn't the first time the OFS had tried to break up this prostitution ring. Several years ago another field agent, Detective Neil Bradshaw, had infiltrated this group when they were using a hotel on the Verenza space station. Had Neil Bradshaw encountered Illythe? Alex wondered just how deeply Bradshaw had gotten into this investigation before he'd vanished. Had he had sex with customers? With Illythe?

Alex hadn't been able to get much information about Bradshaw's investigation. His CO had said that Bradshaw went missing in the line of duty and reiterated that this mission would put Alex into a very dangerous situation.

Maybe Alex's predecessor on the case had also found a better future elsewhere. As far as Alex was concerned, he himself had left nothing behind that he would miss.

There was a light knock on the door before the panel slid open and Illythe's obsidian face appeared. His long, white hair made a shimmering cowl around his head.

"I guessed you might still be awake."

Alex looked up at the clock and saw that three hours had passed since he'd come to his room. He leaned up on his elbows as Illythe came in, sliding the door closed behind him.

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He remembered then that he had seen Illythe with his hair down only one other time; the night Illythe had rescued him from Bryant's mauling in the wrestling ring. Alex had thought then that he was a beautiful demon, or the angel of death come to take his soul. Perhaps he was both.

"I brought you something to help you sleep." Illythe turned over his hand and showed Alex a Somnus patch.

That would be a good idea; it wasn't illegal, and the hangover the next day was minimal.

"What? No wine?" Alex smirked and accepted the patch, then he became more serious. "Mentor Illythe, I'm sorry. It's been a while since I've had sex with strangers... I was trying to get out of the lifestyle." It wasn't a lie; Illythe just didn't know what lifestyle Alex was talking about.

"Yes, I assumed as much." Illythe looked like he wanted to say more, but refrained.

Alex shrugged, and then asked innocently, "What about you? How did you end up here?"

He could practically see the iron gates slam closed behind Illythe's eyes.

*Yes, he'd been pushing his luck with that one,* and he was surprised when he got any answer at all.

"It's a step up for me." Illythe was wearing that same smile that could have been serene or hopeless, depending on who was looking.

Alex was looking, and noticed how Illythe's gaze would not focus on his.

If the Scion trusted Illythe enough to manage his human assets, there might be a lot more to their relationship than just business. Perhaps Illythe had once been an earner at the house and he'd worked his way up the ladder somehow. He *had* said it was a step up.

"Oh," Alex said. It was all he could say, considering the situation.

On a professional level, the information Illythe might offer him likely was not at all crucial to the investigation, but Alex didn't care. He wanted to know about Illythe on a personal level, but at this point, he understood that tonight Illythe had said all that he would about the matter.

Illythe finally looked at him again with his mercury-colored eyes. "After breakfast tomorrow, come to the north hall. We'll spend some time learning about the admiral. Sleep well, Alex."

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Alex watched Illythe drift from his room and slide the door silently closed behind him.

Maybe Alex was reading a little too much into things, but he believed that Illythe treated him differently than he treated Mel and Bryant. He wasn't certain if that was a good thing, a bad thing, or just a thing.

Sighing, Alex temporarily set the sleeping aid aside and got up out of the bed to undress. He folded the clothing neatly and set it on top of the small chest of drawers, glancing at his reflection in the square mirror above it. He looked at his face for the first time in what felt like ages, and wasn't certain he liked what he saw staring back at him.

He was losing sight of the mission and where he fit into it all. None of this felt like justice.

Pulling open the top drawer, Alex found some undershorts and slipped them on, then returned to the bed and peeled the woven Somnus patch from its clear plastic backing, exposing the adhesive. He pressed it to the side of his neck, then laid back in his bed, his gaze returning to the ceiling until he finally fell asleep.

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In the morning, Alex hurried through breakfast, hoping to avoid spending so much time with Bryant and Mel, but it was not to be.

He nearly spit out his mouthful of food when Bryant came in and elbowed him in the back.

“Hey, Alley-cat, you in some kind of rush?”

“H-h-he's m-meeting with Mentor Illythe,” Mel stuttered.

“And good morning to each of you as well.” Alex was seriously not in the mood for this. He glared at Mel, wondering how he'd found out. Either he'd been told by Illythe or he'd been eavesdropping last night. If Alex was a gambling man, he'd bet everything he had on the latter.

He was liking Mel less and less. The man reminded him of a rodent—something small and sneaky with a rabid bite. He certainly had cozied up to Bryant, who had terrified him a few days earlier, and Alex didn't think the forced blow job he'd received had turned Mel's fear to love just like that.

Bryant, on the other hand, was an easy read. Big, dumb, and violent. He wouldn't be surprised to see him try to walk out at some point. It wouldn't be pretty.

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Bryant slid into the chair beside him, so close that when he rested his forearm on the table, the dark hairs brushed against Alex's knuckle.

Alex gritted his teeth, tightening his grip on his beverage glass, despite his instinct to recoil.

Bryant was grinning again; his big teeth like a wall hiding his true intentions, and that's why Alex kept focus on his eyes, without looking directly enough to provoke a challenge.

"Meeting Mentor Illythe, huh? You got something for that black and white freak? He suck your cock good?"

Alex fought the twinge of memory that threatened to germinate at his crotch. There were a million possible responses to Bryant's questions—most of which would provoke fists and a delay in meeting Illythe, so Alex answered them all as simply as possible.

"Yes."

That seemed to stump Bryant, and allowed Alex to get up and walk out of the dining room before the big man could finish turning it over in his muscle-bound brain.

Mentor Illythe was waiting in the room for him when Alex arrived. He was wearing a simpler style of robe; gray, but with the same exotic cut as his kimono. His long white hair was pulled into a topknot, the remainder spilling down around his waist. Alex felt something stirring in his chest and groin when Illythe turned his silver eyes to him. *No... not good.* Instead of making things less interesting, the brevity of their interactions had increased Alex's fascination with the mentor.

"Close the door, Alex."

Alex slid the paneled door closed, then turned to face Illythe again.

"Come," Illythe said as he gestured.

Alex hadn't realized he'd been frozen in place, awaiting such a command. He moved towards Illythe, who turned and picked something up off of a red lacquered cabinet behind him. Alex looked down at the items he held in either hand.

"A cock ring and a condom?" Alex raised an eyebrow.

"Although he is a powerful leader in the field, Admiral Kah is a bottom in the bedroom."

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“And you’re so sure I am a top?”

A little smile quirked one corner of Illythe’s mouth. Alex felt his heart stutter at the rare genuineness of it.

“You don’t remember? I was the one who felt you up before the match.”

“I was sort of trying to forget a lot of that experience,” Alex admitted with a wry grin.

“Hm,” Illythe said, very nearly smiling. Then a haze crossed over his expression, and what little hint of levity Alex had seen was gone once more. Illythe placed the items in Alex’s hands, his eyes downcast.

“The core body temperature of a Jowan is roughly ten degrees less than that of a human. Sexual relations with them can be... unpleasant.”

“That’s the reason for the cock ring.” Alex pinched the clear plastic ring between his fingers.

Illythe nodded. “And the condom contains a chemical that will keep you a bit warmer.”

Alex frowned, looking down at the little blue cellophane square. “It’s not going to burn, is it?”

“No.” Illythe moved and sat on the sofa, giving Alex a flash of bare thigh when the robe fell open. Illythe didn’t seem to notice, or otherwise didn’t care.

“Tell me about yourself, Alex,” he said conversationally.

Alex chuckled. “Is this a job interview? I thought I already had the job.” His eyes followed the length of smooth ebony skin. He’d never seen flesh that color—he’d met a lot of different species, but never one like Illythe. What was he, anyway?

Illythe said nothing, his patience was plain on his serene face, yet Alex remembered how patient he’d looked before delivering a fist to Bryant’s gut.

Alex worried his lower lip, trying to arrange his thoughts to answer Illythe’s request. Fortunately, the truth of his childhood was as extraordinary as any lie and easier to remember.

“Well, I didn’t start life on the street, and it wasn’t a trauma that sent me to it... just rebellion and stupidity.” Alex shrugged. “My mom was a model-slash-actress... or she wanted to be. She hadn’t wanted a child and found herself pregnant after some casting party. Her agent told her that children were a hot

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accessory, so I was born and dumped off on whoever was on the set at the time.” It was nothing like the stories he’d usually heard from sex workers, which in a way, probably made it a little more believable as to the reason why he might have become one.

Illythe was silent while he listened to Alex’s story. Alex felt the desire to hear his voice; to learn something more about him. “May I ask a question, Mentor Illythe?” Alex focused on the items he still held in his hands, and went on before Illythe gave consent. “Do you ever service the customers?”

The answer was simple and direct. “Never.”

There was some edge to Illythe’s tone that made Alex think there was a little more to it than that.

There were a few moments of silence, during which Alex could hear the faint rumble of a large ship coming in for a landing. They must be situated fairly near to the docks; it would make sense. Public figures would want to keep these kinds of things private, and the key to that was getting from their transport vessels to Willow House as quickly and discreetly as possible. That meant communications kiosks were nearby. Figuring out how to reach them, however, would be another matter.

“I’m certain that I can trust you to be discreet, yes?” At Alex’s nod, Illythe went on, “All of our clients at Willow House are very important people. Beyond that, some of these people are enemies of one another. It would do no good to have secrets that are whispered in the bedroom shared between beds.”

Alex’s brain was ticking away with this new information. Secrets like that would put the leader of this operation at a very big advantage. It was more than likely that everything that went on in those rooms was recorded, and the man who kept that information could produce it at any time.

“Alex,” Illythe said softly, bringing Alex’s mind back to the current situation.

“Yes, Mentor Illythe?”

“We’re going to role-play now so you know what to expect of the admiral. You will be the admiral. Remember what I do, as you shall repeat it. Hands and knees.”

“I—what?” Illythe had given the command so casually that Alex thought he hadn’t heard him right.



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Illythe sat up, straightening his spine, and placed his hands, palms down, on this thighs. "Crawl to me."

Alex turned his head, glancing back at the door he knew was closed, if only to look away from Illythe's smoldering gaze. He felt his body heating from the center; the warmth spreading through his chest, sideways along his ribs, and down to his groin.

"Why do I have to be the admiral?" Alex tried to sound disappointed, though was anything but.

Again, that patience, and Illythe spoke softly to him as one might a confused child. "You need to try and understand what he is seeing and feeling to a degree, so you can understand and offer him the respect he deserves."

That last bit was doubtful. If an admiral was coming here to play out fantasies he couldn't fulfill elsewhere, it meant that he was very likely in the Scion's pocket. It was pretty difficult to respect anyone who paid to have an illegal, captive prostitute forced into pleasuring them.

Alex wiped his sweaty palms on his thighs and got onto his hands and knees. After a moment, he began a slow crawl towards Illythe.

"You shouldn't be looking me in the eye," Illythe said, his hands tensing on his thighs.

Alex dropped his eyes briefly, then deliberately focused on Illythe's silver orbs. He saw the almost imperceptible movement of Illythe's lips parting.

Alex didn't feel submissive, he felt predatory, like a big cat stalking game. The closer he got, the more he could see Illythe's body tense. He crawled between Illythe's legs, their gazes still locked, and he placed his hands on Illythe's thighs.

"Will he want to give me a blow job?" Alex asked in a voice that almost didn't seem like his own, and without waiting for a reply, he moved one hand up under the robes, gliding along Illythe's smooth inner thigh; following the rising heat to its source.

Alex barely brushed against the softer skin of Illythe's sac and the hardening flesh of his cock, when Illythe smacked him away and got up from the sofa, moving away from him. Alex knew the smack hadn't been to hurt him. It was fear that raised Illythe's hand—just like the time before; he could see it plainly on his face.

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Alex touched his cheek lightly where it barely stung. “Sorry, I thought we were role-playing.”

“You were playing the wrong role.” Illythe’s tone was firm, but Alex detected a small waver to his voice.

Illythe’s eyes occasionally flicked to something across the room. When Alex turned his head to see what was there, he saw nothing save for the orchids that Bryant had been contemplating the last time they were here.

“There is a camera there,” Alex murmured softly, returning his attention to Illythe. “The Scion. He’s watching you, isn’t he?”

Surprise widened Illythe’s eyes briefly, then Illythe swallowed hard and squared his shoulders. “Always. You should continue your regular routine today. Gym, then clean yourself up. Do not worry about shaving your face too closely—the admiral seems to be captivated by your scruff.” Illythe’s demeanor was back to business, but Alex could see how he shifted his weight slightly from foot to foot, obviously wanting to get out of this room and away from him. “I’ll come to your chambers when it is time.”

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## Chapter Nine

Illythe paced in his room, trying to fight back the rising flood of panic. Alex was too much like Neil. He had the same little smirk, similar mannerisms, and if they had looked any more alike, Illythe would have thought he'd found Neil's brother. But Neil had been a cop, and Illythe prayed to the Divines that Alex was not.

In his bedroom, there were only a few small corners where Illythe could go and remain out of the cameras' lenses. The Scion even liked to watch him sleeping, and learning this had kept him awake too many nights to count.

He sat in the east corner of the room, between a red lacquer cabinet and the wall, and gripped himself between the legs, biting his lip from the tension building there. He shifted his eyes up to where he knew one of the cameras was—a little black bump on a crossbeam, confirming that he was out of range. Wrestling up the skirting on his *yukata*, he held it in his teeth and gripped his swollen cock. He couldn't remember the last time he'd touched himself when it wasn't by the Scion's direction, but then he hadn't met anyone who'd stirred him since Neil, and he'd believed—until now—he never would.

Illythe knew that Alex's touch had been deliberate, and he suspected if he'd let him, Alex would have wrapped his hot mouth around him and sucked him to orgasm.

Illythe gripped his cock harder as he imagined Alex bending him over the sofa, lifting his robes and fucking him with long, smooth strokes. He imagined those human hands wrapping around his chest and tugging at the rings in his nipples. Alex would pull on his hair and arch his neck for a kiss that would be wet and hot and uncomfortably executed, but so completely erotic that none of that would matter.

He muffled his sounds of pleasure against the fabric in his mouth, and was careful to catch every drop of ejaculate with his hand. But when he came, he had a flash of Neil's face. It drew the final pulses of orgasm out of him painfully, leaving him feeling raw and ashamed of himself. *He should have more control than this.*

Releasing the fabric from between his teeth, he realized he had bitten through and the panic nearly started anew. *But this was casual attire, nothing the customers would ever see, and nothing the Scion would even notice.*

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With his free hand, Illythe felt around underneath the cabinet until he found the box of wipes he'd stashed there, and he used one to clean the cooling ejaculate off of his hand. The Scion likely wouldn't have punished him for touching himself without permission, but old scars never fully healed, and Illythe was trying hard to keep from earning any more.

He hadn't realized he'd been crying until a few teardrops fell onto his lap, darkening the gray material to charcoal. What a pathetic creature he was... aching for the love of a dead man, and beginning to desire another attractive human. *Would he never learn?*

Neil had been gone for almost three years now. Since that time, only a handful of humans had come through Willow House—six in total—and all had moved on; either bought out by wealthy patrons, or dead from servicing the Scion. Some toys the Scion enjoyed breaking. Rarely, one of the humans would survive his ordeal, but he would have to be put down. They were always broken beyond all repair, regardless of technology; if not physically, then mentally so.

Illythe did not want that to happen to Alex. Hair as black as Illythe's skin, fair complected, with eyes as blue as an Earthen summer sky. He had beautiful lips as well—not too thin, and not so plump that they looked artificially swollen. He wanted Alex—wanted to keep him safe, which meant he'd have to think of a way to get him off of Omanai.

Illythe bit his tongue until he tasted blood. He did not want to desire another human the way he'd desired Neil. It was too dangerous for both of them. And yet, he could not deny his mind and body's reaction to Alex.

Illythe smoothed down his robes, then took a deep breath before rising. He moved around carefully to remain out of view of the cameras for as long as possible before stepping back into their field of vision. The Scion never asked about Illythe's strange disappearances, if, in fact, he even noticed. Illythe knew the Scion had more important things to do than watching him all day and night; at least he had when Illythe was chained to his chair.

Illythe shuddered. Those memories were best left unstirred, right along with those of Neil.

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The gym was below the main level. Alex was alone down here now, uncertain of where Bryant and Mel were, but unconcerned as long as they stayed away from him.

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He avoided turning on the overhead lights, preferring the false daylight leaking in through the panes of the high windows, to the artificial brightness.

He pulled off his shirt.

After a couple of weeks without regular eating or working out, his body was starting to feel soft—well, not all of it. *What the hell...* He'd hoped that he might have been able to seduce Illythe, but again, Illythe had pushed him away. Was he loyal to the leader of this ring, or was he terrified? Alex suspected he knew the answer.

Alex worked his muscles until they were aching, and then found the entrance to a large shower room. There were towels folded in a shelving unit and he grabbed one before heading in.

Inside, he found Bryant and Mel, screwing in one of the shower stalls, and considering that Mel was on top, riding Bryant, Alex had every reason to believe it was consensual.

"There are cameras around, you know," Alex said casually, as he turned on the spray of a nearby shower and pumped some lather from the dispenser into his hand.

"F-fuck!" Mel squeaked, but didn't get off of Bryant, who was pinning his hips in place.

"Wait—I'm almost—!" Bryant's body tensed and his eyes rolled back as he came. Judging by the glaze on Bryant's chest, Mel already had. As soon as Bryant was finished, Mel jumped off of him and turned on the shower.

"Seriously? No condom?" Alex frowned at Bryant as he got up off the tiled floor.

"Like it matters if we're clean. Probably die from some fucking alien germs," Bryant grumbled, and shouldered Mel out of the way so he could lather up.

"Hey!" Mel protested. He moved into Alex's stall. "Y-you'll l-let me s-share, right?" He gave Alex a coy smile and brushed up against him like a cat begging for cream. He'd already had more than enough in Alex's estimation.

Alex rinsed off quickly and moved aside. "I'm done. It's all yours." He took his towel from the tiled ledge and dried off as he headed out of the shower room.

Mel made him uncomfortable. He was having a difficult time figuring out Mel's motivations. Maybe it was just habit—maybe he'd had a pimp on the

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street or had tried to find some safety with men who looked like they could protect him. Regardless, Alex didn't trust either man, but of the two, he trusted Mel less.

Alex swore softly, realizing that he'd forgotten to bring a change of clothing, so he wrapped the towel around his waist and left to head back to his room. Considering the fact that this was a brothel, the sight of a half-naked man was probably nothing out of the ordinary.

As he rounded the corner of an unfamiliar hallway, he nearly smacked into one of the Brecchian guards. The alien curled its fleshy upper lip in a snarl and moved its big body to block a short corridor that terminated with solid double doors.

"Sorry... what's down there?" he asked, trying his best to sound only mildly interested. Alex hadn't thought that the house was that large, but he'd rarely taken a path beyond his regular route between dining room, bedroom, and gym.

The samurai shook its big head and gave him a little shove backwards.

"Ow—hey, watch it—don't bruise the merchandise!" No doubt about it—this was an important location. Alex was just turning to leave when the double doors at the end of the corridor opened and Illythe came out, looking distracted as he smoothed a piece of loose hair back behind one tapered ear. He was carrying a bundle in his hand and he stopped when he saw Alex.

"Oh, Alex, I was just about to find you."

Alex glanced at the samurai, then at Illythe as he handed him the bundle. "What's this?"

"Clothing for your appointment with Admiral Kah. Something very simple but traditional."

It looked like black satin pajamas from what Alex could tell. He nodded and walked with Illythe down the hallway.

"What were you doing down here—undressed as you are?" Illythe asked, brushing against his shoulder lightly.

Alex felt an odd flutter in his stomach from the contact, which he wasn't certain had been entirely accidental. It was impossible not to remember their recent role-play, and as much as he hated to admit that he'd been turned on by seeing Mel and Bryant in the shower, he couldn't deny that fact. He'd hoped that the workout in the gym would have helped manage his libido a little, and it

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had—but after witnessing sex so up-close and personal, whatever good it had done was not going to last much longer.

“This house is bigger than I thought. I got a little turned around,” Alex lied. He smelled the warm, spicy-sweet scent of some fragrance clinging to Illythe. Something like cinnamon. He wanted to press his face to Illythe’s neck and breathe him in.

Illythe’s voice brought Alex out of his daydreaming. “Are you concerned about this evening?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t... I’ve never done anything with a nonhuman. You were kind of a first.” Alex let a grin slide across his face. “I only wish we could have gone a little farther.”

He heard Illythe take an uneven breath, but just when he was about to turn and look at him, Illythe said, “We’re here.” And Alex saw that they were at his room.

“You missed lunch, but dinner will be served in an hour. After which, you should take another shower, then dress and wait for me in your chambers.” Illythe turned, and Alex glanced down when he felt a small brush of skin against his wrist—or thought he did. Instinctively, he responded by catching hold of Illythe’s hand. He was certain now of Illythe’s attraction to him, so he wasn’t going to let him get away so easily this time.

“I’d like to go farther...” Alex pressed Illythe’s palm against the hardness growing underneath his towel.

Illythe did not move for a few heartbeats, and Alex saw a distinctive paling of his cheeks, followed by a flush of tiny red freckles. Illythe’s eyes were downcast.

“No,” he finally said, although it was unclear if the message was for himself or for Alex. “You’d better get down to the dining room.”

He turned quickly away and Alex let him slip from his grasp, watching his back as he moved quickly down the hallway.

*Damn it.* Alex was certain that despite the fact that Illythe was a different species, he hadn’t misinterpreted his interest.

Fear. It had to be. There was no other explanation for Illythe’s contradictory behavior.

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## Chapter Ten

Barely a minute after Alex closed his door, someone started knocking. Had Illythe had a change of heart?

When he opened it, Mel and Bryant were there.

Cold concern began to bleed though the pit of his stomach. Something didn't feel right, and he'd been a cop long enough to know that his instincts were rarely off.

"Can I help you *gentlemen*?"

Bryant said nothing, and pushed his way into Alex's room with Mel on his heels.

"Look, I'd like to get dressed in peace if you don't mind." Alex had considered shoving back, but it would only bring him within striking distance of Bryant. It would be like pissing off a brick wall—one with arms and fists.

Bryant's tongue showed between his lips as he wet them, and he looked Alex up and down. Mel was wearing underwear, but Bryant only wore a towel, and Alex could see his cock beginning to tent the material.

"Shorty," Bryant said to Mel, his eyes still glued to Alex's face, "watch the door."

It took less than a second for Alex to register what was going on as Mel posted himself outside the room.

"Fuck off, Bryant—I'm not doing this," Alex growled, trying to move past him and out the door. Although the room wasn't large, it suddenly seemed that the gap between him and the exit was immeasurably wide.

Alex managed to avoid the first swing and tried to respond with a kick to the midsection, but Bryant took the blow and bent over, trapping Alex's foot between his ribs and stomach long enough to grab him above the knee.

Alex hopped forward on one foot and brought down his elbow on the top of Bryant's head. Any other man, it would have knocked out, but Bryant's skull was especially thick around his pea-sized brain. Alex's funny bone sent a flash of tingling, numbing pain all the way to his fingertips.

Bryant reached out and snatched Alex's other leg, jerking it forward and pulling it right out from under him. The pain was like lightning exploding



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upwards from the base of his spine as Alex went down hard on his tailbone. *Surely, he must have shaken the floor enough that someone would come investigate?*

Alex tried to yell out, but Bryant pulled off the towel he was wearing and shoved the corner of it into Alex's open mouth, then pinned him to the floor, holding his arms above his head.

*Fuck! No! This wasn't happening!* Alex struggled under Bryant's weight, knowing that in this position it was entirely useless—the guy had at least fifty pounds of muscle on him—but he refused to submit without a fight. He could feel Bryant's cockhead drooling along his thigh. Alex's muscles burned and cramped as he tried to squeeze his legs closed while Bryant used his knees to force them open. He rubbed his crotch against Alex's cock, and, although Alex didn't want this, he started to get hard.

“Oooh, little Alley-cat likes playing rough. That right, pussy? You like that?”

Bryant's face was too close; Alex could smell his sour breath and it burned hot on his cheek. His stomach churned as if everything he'd eaten today had been host to maggots. The thought made him gag, but it did nothing to alleviate the situation.

*Fucking Mel! What was in it for him?* For a half-second, Alex's one hand was free as Bryant used the other to grab the towel Alex had been wearing. He did his best to pummel the man's face, managing to give Bryant a nosebleed, but a head-butt with that rock-like skull of his made Alex see stars. The pain started sharp and spread out around the outside of his brain and added to his nausea. Every time Alex blinked, it was like a flash of light going off behind his eyelids that distorted his vision when they were open.

While Alex was dazed, Bryant used Alex's towel to bind his wrists above his head.

Alex sucked in a sharp breath as he felt a wet finger trying to force itself inside of him down below. His body jerked on its own accord, trying to inhibit the invasion.

Bryant was on his knees, grinding them against the straining muscles of Alex's inner thighs hard enough that he'd probably end up with bruises. One hand was between Alex's legs, frigging him with his spit-slicked middle finger, and his other hand was making its way down Alex's leg to hook behind his

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knee and force his leg up. He was grinning down at Alex, his eyes wide and glazed-over like a lunatic's.

Alex tried to scream out through the terrycloth. The dry fibers stuck to the inside of his mouth, making his teeth ache. His heart was pumping blood and adrenaline to muscles that were already strained well beyond their capacity, feeling burned and bruised. He continued to see static at the edges of his vision from the blow to the head.

Alex bowed his spine, trying to tilt his pelvis low enough to keep Bryant from having an easy target, but the man was using his upper body against the back of one of Alex's legs, pushing Alex's knee up towards his chest. He had too much leverage and power for Alex to continue to struggle, yet he couldn't lie complacent, regardless of the fact that there was no way he was getting out of this. Bryant was going to hurt him, and from the grin on his face, he was going to love every minute of it.

“Gonna split you wide open, pussy.”

Numb. Alex was starting to feel faint and his limbs were tingling as oxygen only briefly filled his lungs. He clenched his ass as the first painful attempts of Bryant's uninvited entry assaulted him below. Inside his skull, Alex could only hear the roaring white noise of panic, so he didn't hear the door being slammed aside, or the strangled cry before Bryant's body weight dropped full and limp upon him.

Alex forced open his eyes, gasping for breath and focused on the cold silver eyes of Mentor Illythe. Beside him was one of the guards holding a stun baton, the end still dancing with tiny purple sparks.

“Unlock the room in the south chamber,” Illythe said to the guard, as he rolled Bryant's limp body from on top of Alex. Bryant landed on his back against the dresser, rattling the mirror and letting out a moan.

Alex should have been comforted by the fact that the man was still alive—for now—but currently he was imagining the many ways he'd kill him if he got the chance.

Before Alex could consider it further, without removing the gag, Illythe pulled Alex up by the towel binding his wrists, and began heading down the hallway.

Alex stumbled, half-crawling to try and keep from being dragged. As they passed an open hallway, Alex saw Mel peeking around a corner. *Had he gone to get Illythe, or simply run when he'd seen him coming?*

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There was a black “S” painted above an archway just as Alex had seen for the north hall. At the end of the empty corridor was a lone door, solid and black.

The heavy door opened inward, and Mentor Illythe rolled Alex in like a bowling ball until he landed in a tangle against the wall. Alex thought he saw Illythe’s silver eyes flash briefly red.

The door closed with a slam that sent a shock wave through the air, leaving Alex tied up, confused, and still with a mouth full of terrycloth.

Just about the time that Alex was regaining his right mind enough to get the towel out of his mouth, the door opened again, and Alex had to scoot out of the way to keep from being hit by Bryant’s huge body.

The bigger man groaned as he slammed into the wall, then flopped down onto his belly.

Alex blinked up at Illythe, his mouth too dry to speak.

The mentor glanced at Alex briefly, as if just noticing he was there. His features softened. Illythe crouched beside Alex, gently unwrapping the towel that held his arms. His eyes shot to a corner of the room and he looked back at Alex, his gaze imploring and apologetic.

Cameras. Alex understood completely.

This room was a place used for punishment.

There were chains hanging from the ceiling in the center of the square room, and a thick, raised bar bolted to the floor. Along the dark, gray walls were a series of tall cabinets. The room was dimly lit by a single cold, white beam aimed directly downward.

“Alex. You are all right?” Illythe murmured, so low, Alex barely heard him.

Alex bobbed his head, still incapable of speech. For the first time, he was beginning to understand just how much power was hidden beneath those robes. It was frightening, and yet it turned Alex on knowing that he had any sort of influence. Illythe was protective of him, something Alex had never experienced, always being the one to protect others in the line of duty.

Illythe rose and gathered up the heap that was Bryant, and dragged him to the center of the room, draping his hulking, limp mass over the bar. Holding Bryant in place with his hip, Illythe pulled down the chains. Bryant moaned as Illythe sealed the shackles around his wrists.

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Illythe moved to a control box on the wall, and the chains began to move up into the ceiling with a grinding sound that set Alex's teeth on edge. When the mechanism stopped, the chains had been shortened just enough to keep Bryant in a position of being partially bent over the bar.

Illythe then went to a cabinet and pulled down a long, thin black rod. He turned, presenting it to Alex.

"You have earned the right to punish Bryant, Alex." Again, his eyes darted to the corner, telling Alex that he had no choice but to comply.

Alex got unsteadily to his feet and found that his hand was shaking as he reached for the rod. He jerked his hand back, flexing and releasing his fist a few times until he was certain he could accept the switch without trembling.

The wrapped handle warmed against his palm as though it was a living thing.

"Ten," Illythe said. He turned and walked across the room, leaning against the wall.

"Ten," Alex repeated, and moved up closer to Bryant.

Bryant was staring at him from over his shoulder, and Alex relished darkly the fear he saw in the giant's brown eyes.

The first swat was clumsy, barely landing on Bryant's ass, but by the third swat, Alex was beginning to see the fruits of his labor in the deep, red welts crisscrossing Bryant's backside.

Bryant was gritting his teeth. His body dripped with sweat, and his muscles trembled as he braced for every strike. It made Alex feel powerful to see this man reduced to such weakness... and he hated himself for it.

"That's ten, Alex," Mentor Illythe said softly, after Alex's final strike. "You may fuck him now if you wish."

The exhilaration Alex had been feeling instantly spiraled down into dread. "What?"

"After all," Illythe was coming towards him, his body gliding smoothly like a panther stalking his prey, "he would have done the same to you."

Alex looked at the big man hanging from the chains. His face had gone slack with resignation, and it made Alex's skin crawl to imagine how much he'd enjoyed reducing him to that. He squared his jaw and handed back the rod to Illythe.

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“No. I won’t do that.”

Illythe sighed, but his features remained too impassive to tell if it was out of disappointment, acceptance, or relief. “You may go then. Get dressed.”

“What’s going to happen to him?” Alex asked, glancing briefly at Bryant.

“He’ll have a few minutes alone to think about what he’s done, and how lucky he is that you are so merciful.” With that, Illythe nodded to Alex, sending him on his way.

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## Chapter Eleven

Illythe sat in a chair, completely in shadow except for his eyes that occasionally caught the light like a cat's; two glowing silver disks suspended in midair. The Jowan, Admiral Kah, seemed to be paying Illythe no mind, but Alex was extremely aware of him.

The day had gone by so quickly that it had left Alex feeling like he'd lost some hours, even though he knew he could account for every one. As if nothing out of the ordinary had taken place, right after dinner, Illythe came for him in his room. Alex had showered again in the gym under the watchful yellow eyes of a house samurai, then he'd dressed in the outfit that Illythe had given him. It was similar to the one he wore regularly, only this one was made of black silk, embroidered with blue, vaguely Oriental-style motifs.

"Relax, young man." Kah chuckled, handing Alex a drink.

Alex accepted it with a nod and tried to focus on his Jowan client.

It was difficult to tell if Admiral Kah was considered handsome by Jowan standards. By human standards he looked a little like a basset hound. Thick curtains of skin hung down on each side of his face and puckered around his thin lips. His eyes were not red and watery like the Earth canine's, but they had that same mopey tilt. He was apparently in his early fifties by human reckoning, but Alex knew each race had their own ways to keep track of each year's passing, because most of them outlived humans by decades.

Alex took a long, slow sip of the beverage he'd been given. It was a little too sweet, a little thick, and left a mild burn behind like menthol. Mentor Illythe had suggested that it contained a mild aphrodisiac, and Alex hoped that it did. He could fake a lot of things, but acting as though he was attracted to someone was not enough to create a physical response. He glanced around the room, trying to determine where the cameras were, but even if they were out in the open, the room lights were too dim for Alex to see them.

The Jowan admiral began to undress. He was still wearing his uniform when he'd arrived, and now he folded each piece carefully and hung it over a bar on the wall that was there for that purpose. Alex tried not to look away as more and more of Kah's body was revealed. Jowan's had a ribcage that was twice the size of a human's, and its increased length gave their torso a barrel shape. The males had no nipples, but both sexes had rippling layers of flesh that

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draped at an angle from their sternums, and attached to long, thin tendons from their shoulders. As Kah stripped off his underwear, Alex took a large gulp of his beverage. Male Jowan sex organs were especially unattractive. The scrotum hung very low and the penis was somewhere near the middle—a thick stumpy thing, only about two inches long at full-erection. It was because the females had a sort of vacuum appendage that extended out and wrapped around a male's miniature cock during mating. As long as they could get hold of the thing, it didn't matter the size. Jowan was one race where perceived masculinity and penis size apparently were not interrelated.

Alex felt warmth beginning at his stomach and spreading out slowly with his heated blood as something in the drink took effect. He curled his lips under, making a tight line of his mouth, and he tasted the salt of fresh sweat. When the burn finally hit his cock, Alex swore he could feel every capillary become engorged with a molten river. He spread his knees, sinking low enough in his chair to loosen the material pulled tightly across his groin. He sent a smoldering look in Illythe's direction, then gave a little thrust of his hips. In his twenties, Alex had a boyfriend who wanted to watch while he fucked another guy. Alex protested at first, but he did it anyway. It was weird and hot and ultimately the end of their relationship, though the idea of being observed by someone he knew was getting off on it was very sexy.

He'd done it in the course of duty before, and it was just another part of the job, but this was different—more like that original feeling he'd had. He wanted to use his own body to seduce Illythe, even if it meant fucking another body in front of him.

He glanced at Kah as the man stood in an unsteady half-crouch a few feet in front of him.

“Crawl.” Alex gave him the order he understood that Kah had been waiting for.

Alex's eyes followed the Jowan as he got to his hands and knees and began to crawl towards him. Then he returned his attention to the darkness, catching the flicker of Illythe's silver eyes. He licked his lips, trying to imagine Illythe getting aroused by the scene playing out before him.

“M-may I undress you?”

The surprisingly timid voice from between his legs drew Alex's attention downward. Kah was looking up at him with those pleading, doggy eyes.

“Do it,” Alex ordered him, and watched the flicker of excitement move across the Jowan’s face. Alex looked again towards Illythe, and slid his hand down the front of his pants, adjusting his rigid length as Kah worked to free him.

“Touch it,” Alex said.

Kah let out a soft gasp when Alex’s cock came into full view, and immediately began worshipping it with his hands, rubbing it against his face as if it were some beloved thing.

The aphrodisiac had Alex so hard that his glans was almost purple, and shiny from the skin being pulled taut. Still, he wouldn’t risk losing his erection by watching Kah fawn over his cock like a magic rod. So he turned his face towards Illythe and imagined the ebony-skinned angel stroking himself as he watched Alex being touched.

Alex wondered what Illythe’s cock would look like. From the brief contact he’d had during role-play, it had felt very similar to a human’s. Alex imagined it as such, except as black as space, with a head the same deep violet tint as his lips. He let his mind wander, becoming less aroused by Kah’s touching, and more so by fantasizing about Illythe masturbating to him in the dark.

“Please, will you fuck me?” Kah asked in that odd servile tone. Alex blinked back to reality.

“On the bed, I want your ass in the air, lubed up and ready.”

Alex stood up, stripping off the rest of his clothing.

When he flexed, Alex’s muscles still twinged from his earlier workout, and the beating he’d given Bryant, but he wanted to give Illythe a show. Apparently, Kah appreciated his efforts too, as a soft moan emanated from the bed to his right.

Alex nearly glanced over at the bed, but he remembered the cock ring. He retrieved it from the pocket of his pants and slipped it around, squeezing it at the base of his cock to trap the blood inside. It would come off with a simple flick of a tiny plastic latch. Judging by what he saw when he finally looked at the admiral; he was going to need all the help he could get.

The man had his shoulders down and his skinny, droopy ass high in the air, as he stuck two fingers—shiny with lubricant—into his fleshy pink hole. *Oh yeah, thank god for the cock ring.*



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“Turn around—head at the side of the bed,” Alex told him. He wanted Illythe to see what he could have if he was willing to break the rules.

Alex put on the special condom, making a show of slowly rolling the material down over his engorged member. He felt the chemical reaction immediately. As Illythe had promised, it didn't burn, but it did add an extra layer of warmth that his already-heated body could do without. That is, until he lined up and pushed inside the Jowan's pink hole. The temperature of the condom regulated itself against the alien's cool insides.

From the very few times Alex had sex with women, he thought it felt a lot like that. It wasn't terrible, but it wasn't anything like the feeling of pushing through the resistance of tight muscle, and the hot grip and suck of a man's body around him. If it hadn't been for the low sounds of pleasure that Kah was making in his throat, Alex might have thought he was fucking a girl.

He thought he heard Illythe gasp when he drew out all the way, then slammed in deep, grinding his pelvis against Kah's ass. Alex kept his face turned to the shadows, letting Illythe read the determination and desire on his features—making it clear that he was using this man as an object of release, but what he really wanted was to be doing this to the man watching.

He smacked Kah's ass, bringing out a trill of surprise, followed by some grunted, breathy words that were not a human language, but that sounded very dirty. Alex delivered another smack, which felt like hitting a steak wrapped in plastic—cool, artificial, barely yielding. Then he dug his fingers into Kah's fleshy hips and began pumping hard, looking for some friction so he could come and get this over with.

“Touch yourself,” Alex murmured to Kah, but he was looking towards Illythe. “Make yourself come for me.”

“Yes, yes!” Kah whimpered, and soon Alex felt the spasmodic jerking of the other man's hips and a clenching around his cock as Kah achieved some sort of orgasm. Alex worked hard to reach his own, but found it was fruitless. Instead, he faked it—tensing his body and grunting as he ground into Kah's ass, driving him to the mattress at the same time he released the ring around his cock.

He pulled out slowly, holding the condom on to the base of his penis, then he pulled it off quickly and got up to flush it down the toilet.

As he was washing his hands at the bathroom sink, he felt the heat of a body moving up behind him, and he met Illythe's silver eyes in the mirror over his shoulder.

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“You did not climax,” Illythe said simply.

“Was it that obvious?” Alex frowned. He saw Illythe offer a tiny shake of his head.

“Not to the admiral. He’s sleeping now. Jowan do that after orgasm.”

Alex chuckled softly. “Sounds like at least a few of the partners I’ve had.”

“You are troubled about earlier... about Bryant’s attack on you...”

Alex shook his head. “I am more troubled by the fact that I enjoyed punishing him for it.” During the hours following, Alex had turned it over in his mind several times, trying to sort it out. He wasn’t like that, but from day one, this situation had begun to change him, and not necessarily for the better.

“I was impressed that you refused to take him while he was so helpless. You were kinder to him than others would have been.”

Alex sucked in a sharp breath when Illythe’s hand came around and cupped him.

“I am allowed to relieve you in these kinds of situations... unless you prefer to handle it by yourself.”

“Hell no.” Alex turned, feeling the brush of fabric against his backside. Was Illythe hard? Before he could find out, Illythe had dropped to his knees in front of him, pulling and twisting gently on Alex’s growing cock. Alex braced himself against the counter.

His balls felt a little bruised, and as soon as Alex thought that, Illythe’s mouth had closed around one, turning the ache into something else.

“Fuck, you’re good at this...” Alex panted, one hand gripping the sink top behind him while the other worked itself through Illythe’s feather-soft hair. Alex didn’t push or thrust, but simply let Illythe do as he pleased, because all of it was pleasing him.

Illythe hummed around him in response, then used his forked and studded tongue to lave the skin behind his scrotum as he gently pressed Alex’s balls upwards using the three fingers of his hand. He raised his silvery gaze to Alex.

The eye contact sent a jolt of electricity all the way from Alex’s cock to his brain, and then back again. He curled his toes on the woven bathroom mat, trying to stave off his orgasm for just a little longer... *for god’s sake, Illythe hadn’t even licked his cock yet and he was already this close to blowing!*

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Alex let out what felt like a full-body groan when those velvety violet-black lips wrapped around his shaft. Alex wasn't small—he proudly filled out at a little over eight inches—but Illythe sucked him in completely, rasping the line of studs (*Four? Were there four of them?*) along the length of his cock until Alex could no longer hold back.

His hips jerked forward and he spurted down Illythe's throat, feeling like he might never stop coming. Then his knees buckled, and he felt his cock flop out of Illythe's mouth. Strong hands caught him around the waist, keeping him from hitting the floor. Alex clutched Illythe, feeling the flex of powerful muscle beneath the silky cloth of his robes.

"It's the drink you had," Illythe said quietly.

Alex wondered which one of them he was trying to convince.

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The next morning the routine began again. Wake—breakfast in the dining room—gym—shower—and on to work.

Illythe was with them in the dining room this morning, and Alex felt a twinge of something dark and jealous when he saw that Mel was sitting beside him.

Bryant was there as well, glaring at the food on his plate, but looking no worse for wear.

"Good morning, Alex," Illythe said impassively, as he sliced into whatever protein-based product they were eating and took a bite from his fork.

"Good morning, Mentor Illythe," Alex said, trying to echo the lack of sentiment as he sat across from him and reached for the salt. He was aware of Bryant sneering at him, and looked at him with an exasperated grimace. "What?"

"How was it?" Bryant asked. "Get some gnarly alien ass last night?"

Alex opened his mouth to reply, but Illythe spoke first.

"We do not discuss clients, Bryant. Your first one is this afternoon, by the way."

"W-when is m-my first one, M-M-Mentor Illythe?"

"This evening, Mel. I need to space your first times so that I can be in attendance."

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“You’re going to watch us have sex?” Bryant blurted.

“I am there to be certain that the rules are being observed.”

An ugly grin stretched across Bryant’s face, and Alex gripped his fork tighter, waiting for the inevitable stupidity to spew from his mouth.

“That turn you on? Or do you join in?”

Illythe paused, holding his knife and fork above his plate as he turned his full attention to Bryant. “No.”

Alex let a little smile slip. Bryant apparently wasn’t used to being shut down without a fight and Alex could see that it was wreaking havoc with his ego. That, and the fact that he’d had his ass striped by them both maybe eighteen hours earlier.

Illythe got up from the table. “Finish your breakfasts, start your daily routines. Bryant, I will find you when it is time.”

Alex hastily followed Illythe out of the room. “Mentor Illythe... what about me?”

Illythe stopped and turned, glancing back at the dining room.

Alex was aware that the two men still there would be listening, and apparently, Illythe understood this fact as well. He turned away from the room. “Follow me.”

Alex felt tension rising along his spine and settling heavy in his loins. Again, he was being singled out from the group. He wasn’t certain if he should feel concerned or aroused, so he felt a little of both.

They went to Alex’s room, and Illythe turned to face him once they were inside.

“You impressed Admiral Kah very much last night,” he said.

Alex scanned Illythe’s features for some sort of emotional response. There was nothing, but again, Illythe seemed to be avoiding his eyes. “And this means...”

“This means that he has paid for your exclusivity. You will only be serving him.”

“Oh.” Alex wasn’t certain how to react. He didn’t find the Jowan admiral at all arousing, and hated that he had to serve him at all just to maintain his cover. But at the same time, serving him meant not having to serve anyone else, who

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could potentially be worse. Unfortunately, the man he would have gladly serviced and the one who turned him on was standing right in front of him, and he couldn't say a word for fear that, again, Illythe would flee.

Illythe cocked his head. "Alex? You are not happy about this?"

"Will you be there every time?"

Illythe looked down at the floor. "Of course not."

Something burning and greasy filled Alex's belly. "Will you be with them? With Bryant and Mel?"

"Yes, it is standard practice..."

Alex took a step forward, his body too close to Illythe's, and he knew this as Illythe stepped back against the wall.

"Will you relieve them like you did me?"

Illythe blinked as if momentarily dazed. Alex could feel the heat rising between them and wanted desperately to close that gap.

"Why do you ask, Alex?" Illythe's voice was softer than he'd ever heard it.

"Because I don't want them to know you like I do... I want to be... special." Alex sounded ridiculous and he knew it. The burn he felt was jealousy; possessiveness of someone who would never—could never be his in any way. It didn't stop him from wanting.

"You are." Illythe finally met his eyes, and Alex had the sensation of a mental slap in the face. He took a step back, suddenly breathless, as he realized the gravity of the statement.

"And that is why I can't be so close to you... in any sense."

Illythe pressed his hand against Alex's chest to push him away, except he didn't push. Alex saw Illythe's features contort as fleeting pain drifted across his face. He held Illythe's hand against his sternum, looking into his face and willing him to look back. But he didn't. Alex sighed, and stepped away when Illythe closed his eyes.

"Cameras here, too?" Alex asked quietly.

"Everywhere," Illythe mumbled, but he hadn't moved.

"What has you so afraid of him? What are you to the Scion?"

Illythe jerked his head up with the word, and his rigid shell slipped back into place.

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“You are off for the evening. You will be expected to serve drinks and provide light conversation when the guests arrive later, but you will not be going with anyone to a room.”

“Understood.”

“In the meantime, rest up.”

Alex watched Illythe leave his room. He sat down on his bed, resignation weighing heavily upon him. This was crazy. As a cop, he should be caring about the two innocent men trapped here with him, but he had a feeling that Illythe's imprisonment was far worse.

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## Chapter Twelve

Things did not go well with Bryant.

Illythe had tried to counsel him on what to expect and what would be expected of him, as the reason Bryant was selected for Willow House was because of this particular race of alien. But Bryant apparently wasn't listening. His eyes were busy scanning the room and the exits.

The client who had requested his services was Vedrian, a race of hairy, hulking bipeds that Bryant rudely made known he did not find enticing as Illythe introduced them.

“Chieftain Mur T'surra, this is Bryant, the man whom you requested be at your service this afternoon.”

“No fucking way.” Bryant curled his upper lip at the alien mercenary.

Instead of insulting the chieftain, it aroused him more, and he glanced at Illythe with a razory, yellow grin.

Illythe smiled tightly, knowing that this could turn out to be very ugly. The chieftain took special delight in humiliating things that believed they had some power or pride. He killed children just to watch their parents suffer. Mur T'surra was one of the Scion's closest allies, as well as his nearest enemy. Fortunately, the chieftain lacked the level of intellect possessed by the Scion, and cruelty without intelligence was short-lived in times of war.

Illythe took Bryant aside, excusing himself as he led Bryant to the hallway.

“Bryant, as I told you earlier—if you are complacent, he will have his time with you and get bored. You are the one he requested. I will be present to supervise. I promise he will not injure you if you do as I say.”

“What part of ‘no fucking way’ don't you understand? I'm not letting anyone—or thing—fuck me in the ass.”

The samurai guard in the hallway shifted his hand towards his gun, but dropped it when Illythe offered a little shake of his head.

“You are not here voluntarily, Bryant, but I will make certain that you are not injured. I will not place any of the house residents in harm's way...”

“Damn right you won't,” Bryant growled.

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He moved too quickly for Illythe to block the unanticipated punch in the face.

White exploded behind Illythe's eyes when Bryant's fist slammed hard against his nose. Illythe dropped his head forward, catching a gout of blood with this hand as he staggered back a step. Bryant shoved him against the wall and ran towards the exit door.

"No—!" Illythe cried out, but it was too late.

He heard the pulse gun, smelled the sickly sweet stench of burning human flesh, and then came the heavy thud as Bryant's body hit the floor.

He glanced at the samurai whom, he noticed, had not drawn its gun.

The Vedrian chieftain barked something in his harsh language, putting his pistol away. "Want another," he demanded of Illythe.

Illythe stared down at the blood on his hand. *Damn the Scion and his tenuous alliances.*

"You are banned from this house." Illythe stood up straight, glaring at the chieftain.

The brute laughed, his bulging eyes following the path of blood running down Illythe's face. He began to reach threateningly towards his pistol again, but Illythe anticipated as much this time.

Illythe used his body's memory and moved with the fluid grace of a warrior-by-birth. Grabbing the chieftain's wrist with both hands, Illythe let the brute's own responses lead their violent dance.

Twirling, he used the momentum of the alien's movements to pull his hand past the desired goal of his weapon. Illythe brought up his knee as he straightened the creature's arm, ramming it into the chieftain's elbow, and spinning until he felt the shift and pop of the bone being rent from its rightful place.

The Vedrian roared in pain, and Illythe completed his circle and released him, letting four of the house guards move into place, each one with a gun pointed at the chieftain's head.

"There is a reason why I was made master of this house," Illythe said to him. "You will not return here."

Apparently, the chieftain found it difficult to argue with several guns pointed at his thick skull, but that didn't stop the insults. "You are a whore and you will always be his slave."



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Insults were one thing, but as dumb as he was, the Vedrian chieftain knew better than to threaten Illythe—they all did. The insult was a statement of fact. Only the Scion was allowed to discipline his own pet.

Illythe watched the beast being escorted roughly from the house. Dabbing at his bloody nose, he sighed and looked over at Bryant's body on the floor.

There was no doubt he was dead. The pulse had been set high enough to burn a hole through his body and singe a dark spot on the artificial wood of the door.

"Please get something to cover him with..." Illythe said to a nearby samurai, as he crouched near Bryant. He ran his fingertips across the spikes of blond hair, looking down into the face of what had actually been a frightened boy hiding in a man's body.

It wasn't that he especially cared for Bryant. It was that he was just sick of all of the death that came to this house. True, many of these men would have died on the streets, at the hands of a violent customer, in jail, or by their own will, but that fact didn't make what happened here any less cruel.

"I'm sorry," Illythe said to him. He frowned as a few drops of blood dripped from his nose and landed on Bryant's arm. When he wiped them off, the skin was already cooling, and it made something curl uncomfortably inside him.

He should have paid more attention. He should have been able to see this coming, and stop it.

"Mentor Illythe?"

Alex's stunned voice preceded his arrival just ahead of the samurai bearing a special tarp to cover the body. He looked with horror at Bryant's body, then at Illythe's face as he rose.

"What happened?"

Illythe was not fast enough to draw away when Alex moved in on him, gently touching his face. He exchanged a quick glance with the samurai and pushed Alex's hand aside.

"It's not broken," Illythe said, too consciously aware of how such things as a broken nose could lower the value of certain merchandise. It was a foolish thing to say. He shouldn't care about his physical appeal when a man had just been murdered. It only went further to assure Illythe that he was far too jaded.

"Come with me, please." Illythe turned and led Alex down to the room at the end of the north hall. "Close the door."

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He watched Alex do as he was told, noticing the tension through his shoulders before the man took a deep breath and turned to face him once more. When he did, Illythe found himself unable to meet Alex's eyes. "I am sorry you had to see that, Alex. That should never have happened."

"What exactly did happen? Who killed Bryant?"

"Chieftain—a c-customer." Illythe swallowed down the bitter taste of blood that ran down the back of his throat. "He'll be punished. The Scion will put a contract on him... pay his own men to kill him, most likely."

It was a common practice among mercenaries. Whoever offered the most money earned their loyalty at any given time, and the title of Chieftain among the Vedrian was granted to whoever killed the previous titleholder. Mur T'surra wouldn't even make it off of Omanai.

"Let me see." Alex came to Illythe, dabbing at the clotting blood with the cuff of his shirt. He tipped Illythe's chin gently up to get a good look at him in the light. "Did the chieftain hit you as well?" Alex continued to gently dab and inspect Illythe's face, even wetting the fabric with his tongue to clean off some of the dried blood.

Illythe shook his head. "Bryant... He was... upset... he tried to run..." Illythe closed his eyes as the touches began to remind him painfully of Neil. That was when he should have called a halt to it. Illythe had been punished—one of the few actual beatings he had received in years at the hands of the Scion. Illythe had been unaware of a conflict between customers. Scheduling them too close together had caused a fight, which resulted in them both having been banned from the house. Neil had found Illythe in the hallway outside of his chambers where he'd wandered after he'd been beaten—too dazed from pain to realize where he was. Neil had touched him carefully, getting him to his bath to rinse the blood from his wounds... changing the pain to gentle pleasure...

"No—" Illythe pushed Alex away, then turned his back on him to keep his features from betraying his memories. He put his hand over his mouth, leaning heavily on a cabinet as his stomach tried to come up his throat. Nausea coiled like an icy worm inside of him.

"Illythe..."

Illythe scowled at the camera hidden in the artificial orchid, unable to look at Alex for fear he'd break down.

"Please... Alex, would you break the news to Mel?"

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After a tense silence that seemed to go on for too long, Alex said, "Sure."

Illythe did not trust himself to turn around until he was certain that Alex had left the room.

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Alex found Mel in his room, napping and apparently unconcerned about his upcoming evening.

"Mel, it's Alex," Alex announced himself as he tapped lightly on the hard doorframe.

"Oh, w-why are y-you here?" Mel was dressed in only his underwear when he answered the door. He was scratching at his chest, making red lines on his skin.

"I... uh..." Alex always hated this, regardless of who the victim was. And although Mel wasn't related to Bryant by blood in any way, because of their situation here, they had all become some sort of de facto family. "Bryant... he's dead..."

Mel blinked, and his hand stopped its movement across his chest. For a moment, Alex wondered if Mel would cry as he moved forward into his arms. He held the smaller man uncomfortably, something tugging at the tail of his intuition. A moment later, hands tugging at the drawstring on his pants confirmed his apprehension.

"Mel—" Alex moved the other man's hands away, taking a step back.

Mel's eyes were rimmed red. "P-please... I-I'm s-scared... j-just hold m-me..."

Although it was against his better judgment, Alex again enfolded Mel in his arms, and Mel leaned up, pulling him down into a kiss.

Alex turned his head, breaking the contact of their lips and holding up his hands to keep them apart. "Mel, I... no, I can't. Not like that."

"W-why—because y-you w-want h-him?" Mel's cheeks flushed and his eyes filled with tears.

"What? Mel, I don't know what you're talking about." *Illythe? Was that what Mel was getting at?*

"M-M-Mentor Illythe! I-I've s-seen how you l-l-look at him! H-how he lo-looks at y-you!"

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“Mel,” Alex started calmly, “there is nothing between us... I don’t understand where this is coming from... I think you’re just in shock about Bryant...” *That had to be it, right?* Everyone dealt with things like this in different ways; maybe Mel’s way was to seek comfort through sex. Even if the situation had been different, and sex between workers wasn’t forbidden, Alex didn’t think he could soothe him in that way.

“Y-you don’t k-know what I f-feel! Y-you d-don’t know a t-thing about me!” Mel turned his back on Alex and stormed to his bed, flopping down on his stomach. “I-if you’re n-not going to d-do anything, th-then ge-get the f-f-fuck out!”

Part of Alex wanted to go to Mel, but he understood that to do so would open up an entirely new set of complications—and right now he had more than enough to deal with.

“For what it’s worth, Mel, I’m sorry.” Alex slid the door closed and left him alone. Things were already way beyond the scope of his control. He needed to try to get a handle on the situation before anything else fell apart. Part of him had a sick feeling that if he did have sex with Mel—which was something he really didn’t desire—Mel would run to Illythe crying rape. He was nearly certain that Mel had betrayed Bryant, and his reasons hadn’t been based on a sudden concern for Alex’s well-being.

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## Chapter Thirteen

Alex was almost relieved to see the admiral come through the front doors of Willow House.

He'd been pouring drinks for the small entourage that had entered, watching Mel flirting shamelessly with his client for the evening. Some muscle-bound species with large black eyes, a slit for a mouth, and a tiny nose set into a bald head. As alien species went, it wasn't so bad—especially if one focused on the body and not the face, which Mel seemed to have no trouble doing.

Mel was straddling one of the man's meaty thighs. His face was flushed as he rocked his hips and pressed his cheek against his client's bared chest. Mel kept staring at Alex—maybe trying to see if his performance was getting to him at all. But Alex was too preoccupied between thoughts of earlier in the day with Bryant's death, and later this evening when Illythe would be in a room with Mel and his client.

“Alex.” Illythe's voice from close behind him startled him, and he barely avoided one of the guest's hands grabbing at his crotch. The men laughed as he jumped back.

“Alex,” Illythe said again as Alex turned around to him. “The admiral wondered if you might see him—it's not standard procedure, but he'll be gone for a few days and wanted to see you before he left.”

“Yeah, sure.” Alex shrugged. Frankly, he was getting tired of being pawed, pinched, and propositioned here.

“He's in the same room as last time. Your supplies are in the bedside table.” Illythe looked as though he wanted to say more, but didn't. He took the pitcher of wine that Alex had been pouring, and Alex headed down the dim hallway, hoping he could get through this without Illythe looking on.

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Admiral Kah taught Alex some obscene words in his own language and insisted that Alex call him by those words as much as he liked while Kah, again, fawned over his cock, then rode him as Alex lay back on the bed.

It turned out that Kah actually enjoyed it when Alex was unable to come for some time. Apparently, the respect he earned in real life could only be tolerated if tempered by these sorts of humiliation games. So Alex insulted Kah,

smacked his ass and pinched his sorry excuse for a penis, then finally achieved an orgasm after Kah's third, and went into the en suite bathroom to clean up.

When he returned, Kah was dozing again. The admiral seemed to blink out for a period of time right after sex. That was pretty much the only reason Alex thought he'd been able to come—during those times that Kah was sleeping, he'd masturbate and try to bring himself a little closer each time. It was especially difficult because thoughts of Illythe kept intruding. He wondered if he was taking care of Mel in the same way he'd taken care of him, despite Illythe's claims that Alex was special.

Alex laid down on his stomach on the bed, gathering the pillow up under his chin. He forced himself not to shiver when Kah's lukewarm hand grazed his spine all the way to his ass.

"Alex. You are such a treasure. Illythe has a keen eye for such fine things as you. I am glad he talked me into having an exclusive contract with you."

It took Alex a moment to process what the admiral had said. "Mentor Illythe suggested it?"

"Oh yes." Kah's finger was connecting the dots of a few moles on Alex's back. "Illythe knows my schedule is hectic. He also thought that you and I would get along very well. As usual, he is correct. It's no wonder the Scion trusts him enough to let him off leash."

Alex rolled onto his back, and Kah began fingering the dark wash of hair across Alex's chest, snuggling closer.

"Off leash?" Alex asked, trying to sound casual about it, as if only making conversation; although inside he was pleading for knowledge.

"The Scion owns him—he's... a spoils of war, I guess you could say. Illythe was a child when the Scion picked him up. He's the only one of his kind. Imagine, being the slave of a merciless warlord—knowing that you are the only one who has survived the attack that obliterated your planet... bound, frightened... Oh! Can we do that next time, Alex? We can pretend that you are the powerful human emperor and I am your captive! I know Illythe can teach you rope-binding..." Kah leaned up on his arms, his grin so wide that his face looked as though it might split in half.

"Uh, sure..." Alex said. He was trying to let everything sink in. "So Illythe was a slave?"

"He still is, but the Scion trusts him after so much time. It's been several decades by Earth reckoning."

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“And there was a war between Illythe’s planet and the Scion’s?”

Kah dropped back down, and Alex let him lay against his chest, pretending that he welcomed the Jowan as a lover as he wrapped an arm across his shoulders. “Not really. The Scion saw something of value in their planet with which they refused to part... some ore or precious metal, I suppose... so the big lug took it. He really can be quite demanding.”

“It sounds like you know him well. Are you friends?”

“Oh no. Business associates at best. The Gengein prefer not to have friends... they only end up killing them, you know. Illythe is his everything.”

Alex forced his hand to keep moving as every muscle in his body locked up. *Gengein*.

Gengein were not, and would never be, a Federation race. They were largely nomadic, drifting between galaxies to gather technologies and valuable natural resources. They never asked, they just took. It was one of the few races humans had encountered that forced retreat as a matter of survival.

Alex had never seen one up-close and personal—few humans ever had and lived to tell—but it was widely believed that they were enormous creatures that resembled something out of a Lovecraftian nightmare. *And Illythe belonged to such a nightmare.*

Alex had been a cop long enough to realize that even murderers held something dear to them, something or someone that they might even die to protect. It was difficult to imagine that someone who might think nothing of blowing up a space station full of innocent people might become suicidal with grief if his pet parrot died, or that men who ran with the black-market drug trade had their own precious children at home. It was human nature to make monsters out of those who did monstrous things. Alex felt ill when he wondered what sort of monstrous things Illythe had witnessed while being the Scion’s slave.

“The Scion is very possessive,” Kah continued to babble. “In fact, there was another human... oh it’s been a few years now, whom Illythe began to especially favor... I’m not certain what became of the young man... you remind me of him, actually... Hmm, what was his name... Nip? Nine? Some odd human name.”

“Neil?” Alex asked absently. He felt completely displaced from his own body. *Christ. Gengein.* Things really couldn’t get a whole lot worse.

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“Maybe.” Kah shrugged. “He became too attached to Illythe, so he was killed. Illythe took it very badly. Still, it’s nice to see that Illythe has been able to return and manage Willow House.”

Something beeped from the vicinity of Admiral Kah’s coat and Kah uttered a foreign curse. He struggled out of the bed and reached into the pocket, pulling out his comm device. “I can’t believe it’s already time to leave,” he grumbled. “Alex, thank you for spending time with me. I’ll return as soon as I can... I hope to have a big surprise for you when I do.” He grinned again.

Alex forced a smile. “You be careful out there, Admiral.”

Kah paused with one leg in his pants and offered Alex an unnervingly dreamy gaze. “You’re perfect for me Alex. Just perfect.”

Alex held his smile until his jaw cramped from the effort. By that time, Kah had gotten fully dressed and left the room. Alex sighed, feeling foul inside and out.

He stared up at the filmy fabric canopy that draped over the bed, raking his fingers across his scalp. There was no doubt in his mind now that Detective Neil Bradshaw was dead, and it had likely not been quick or painless. Alex had no idea if his cover had been blown before he was killed, or if he was killed out of principal by the Scion for showing an interest in Illythe.

Alex’s stomach knotted as he considered that he might be following in Neil’s path.

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## Chapter Fourteen

It was just after artificial sunset that the Scion came to pay Illythe a visit. He'd brought Illythe flowers and an ornate clip for his hair. Something bejeweled and feminine that Illythe would be certain to leave out to be stolen. He despised being decorated, but it never mattered what he wanted; it never had and it never would.

They went quietly over the house's books, briefly discussed Bryant's unfortunate death, then the large monster cuddled Illythe in his many arms as they lay together on the bed. Once upon a time, this might have soothed him. It might have convinced his warped mind that, without a doubt, everything that the Scion did was out of love for his precious pet. This pet, who was often ungrateful and misbehaved, deserved the punishments the Scion visited upon his body and mind.

When Neil had been killed, Illythe had no warning, and afterwards, his mind was so damaged that he could barely think, much less realize that the soothing hands that stroked him day and night were the same ones that had demanded his lover be put to death. By the time Illythe was at the point where he could consider revenge, he realized that to kill the Scion would absolutely mean his own death. Illythe, at that time, was not ready to die.

Perhaps it had been selfish of him, but dying for the sake of a dead man seemed a waste. It wouldn't bring Neil back, and Illythe was already too used to the pain of losing anyone he'd ever been close to.

But Alex wasn't dead, and he wouldn't be if Illythe had anything to say about it. Illythe rose from the bed to add more sweet crystals to the censer. Tonight he needed to lose himself in the calming vapors as much as he could.

"The Alex human..."

"He's not ready," Illythe said as he returned to stand next to the bed. Without prompting, Illythe understood that the explanation required a bit more to satisfy the master. "I need him to learn to submit a little more before I am satisfied with his progress."

"And the other?"

"Soon."

The Scion chuckled and tugged at Illythe's wrist, pulling him onto the bed.

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“I think you are just being greedy. Keeping those playthings to yourself.”

“Or perhaps I am jealous, Scion.”

Four yellow eyes raised up to Illythe's face, while two watched stubby brown fingers working at the sash around his waist. “Jealous?”

“That your desires will not all be visited upon me.” Illythe's eyes rolled back, and he moaned softly as his kimono was spread open and the undulating fringes that lined the Scion's mouth tickled against his cock.

The Scion responded by sucking him deeper into the fleshy cavern, rolling the botryose salivary sacks against his skin. The sharp tongue searched out his slit, dipping inside like a hummingbird seeking sweet nectar.

Illythe groaned, closing his eyes as his hands splayed across the Scion's head. The fleshy appendages encircled his wrists, and two arms curled around his waist, the others slipped lower behind him, one wiggling underneath to tease at his hole. He'd healed up quickly since their last encounter, although it would still be a few days before he was right as rain. He was not as young as he used to be.

The muscled rings in the Scion's throat began to squeeze Illythe at the same time a thick finger slipped inside his ass and pressed against the gland there.

Illythe cried out and his hips jerked spasmodically. He bit down into his lower lip as the Scion's tongue slipped in deeper, stretching him in a place not meant to be stretched, which burned as much as it tingled with pleasure. He whimpered and shuddered as the slick appendage pulled out slowly and the Scion raised his head.

“You are selfish, my little warrior. Your spirit never ceases to amaze me.”

Illythe held his breath, not daring to make a sound, and he forced his heart to maintain a regular rhythm. The Scion's yellow eyes demanded Illythe's full attention, and he gave it, although wished he could close them against that semblance of a smile twisting the creature's face.

Smiles—such as they were—on Gengein were frightening and horrible things. They were rarely the sign of happiness or innocent enjoyment, and the Scion's was likely the least reassuring because it was never easy to read. He'd observed humans so much that he'd learned to simulate certain moods and reactions. The last time Illythe had seen such a smile, he'd ended up vomiting blood for days.

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Illythe carefully steeled himself, preparing for the worst, as the Scion curled one hand around Illythe's cock and weighed his balls with another. He gritted his teeth when his testicles were given an uncomfortable twist.

"You believe me a cruel master... or perhaps a heartless lover who demands your loyalty while not offering my own?" The finger up Illythe's ass thrust lightly in and out.

Illythe shook his head, but knew his denial would do him no good. And yet it was expected, so Illythe had to maintain those expectations, lest his true feelings ever come to light.

"I have always protected you, Illythe. I have cared for you like the priceless thing of beauty that you are. I have even given you power in this place—allowed you to represent my will and exert it upon others..."

Illythe gasped as a third hand squeezed his throat.

"I have even removed your collar. But my precious thing, you must not forget your place."

Although his collar had been removed years ago, the same could not be said for his leash. Illythe gripped the thick forearm attached to the hand clamped around his neck, and he gasped for what little breath he was allowed to take. Black spots sparkled at the edge of his vision to be bleached out by the blinding white of pain as the Scion twisted his scrotum a little harder.

"The human, Neil, was an unfortunate weakness. I did you a kindness by eliminating it, did I not?"

Illythe swallowed the nausea that tried to rise up into his mouth, and he nodded as best as he was able. *Yes, Scion. Thank you, Scion, for making me watch my weakness being destroyed. Thank you for murdering the only thing I had ever loved.*

"He lied to you, Illythe. I saved you from making a horrible mistake. Does that not make me a benevolent master?"

Illythe couldn't keep his eyes open, despite fighting not to drop his gaze. His head ached like it had been driven through with metal spikes, and blood pounded in his ears. Each little movement between his legs sent a rush of dizzying nausea through his core. He focused on this physical pain so that he would not betray his heart, which still leaked out his life every time he heard Neil's name.

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Neil had come to Willow House with the story of a young man from the streets who had, more or less, chosen to live a life by his own rules. He was strong-willed and passionate, and Illythe was captivated by him. No matter how much he tried to break him, Neil continued to flourish.

Illythe's own breaking had been long and painful, and hadn't let up until the warrior inside of him withered and went dormant. Illythe sought to know the secret of this talent that Neil possessed. He realized, too late, that it was Neil's desire for him that caused him to misbehave just so he could be punished by his hand.

They began a clandestine affair that evolved into love... and Illythe learned that Neil was a Federation agent. They made plans to escape together, but the Scion found out. Illythe was forced to watch as his lover was raped and beaten to death before his eyes, then Illythe had been locked in a room with his ravaged body until it had been consumed by rot. The Scion wanted him to come to hate the thing that stank so badly while it decomposed—to hate Neil.

And he nearly did. He'd begged to be free of this putrid thing that had once been the human he loved.

The Scion's deep voice pulled Illythe up from the depths of his despair by replacing it with terror. "If such weakness continues within you, Illythe, a more permanent solution must be sought. Just like the *jaaro* that the humans call dogs, those who are too difficult to control, become quite placid when the source of their aggression is eliminated."

Illythe tasted blood and realized he had bitten into his lip, as crippling agony flared through his groin when the Scion added a squeeze to his twisting.

"I see, my pet, that you understand, yes?"

Despite the sickening pain, Illythe nodded his head. The Scion would have no problem castrating him, and it would not be painless. He remained frozen in place and silent as the Scion's mouth brushed against his cheek, leaving behind a sticky smear of salivary fluid.

"Humans are fragile, fleeting pleasures. Even with medical attention, they can't be repaired. Like a burst of sweetness on the tongue, they are temporarily enjoyed and quickly forgotten. But you, Illythe, you are a refined and perfected delicacy. Your flavor will outlast them all. You are my permanent, the one who brings me the most joy. It would make me happy to know that you would not let anyone lie to you again."

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And then the Scion pinned him, bending him in half on his back on the bed, and fucked him hard. There was no preparation and no antitoxin delivered before the orgasm, and Illythe screamed into the pillows, his body on fire. Billions of searing, microscopic spikes raced through his bloodstream until he knew nothing but pain through every cell.

The Scion watched him suffer, and Illythe knew that his master felt no pleasure in inflicting so much pain. He knew the Scion saw it as necessary and unfortunate. How often he had held him as a child after systematically pulling him apart, and then slowly, agonizingly, *lovingly* stitched him back together. He knew nothing of a world without his master. He knew of no other way to live, and that made him want for death.

Finally, as Illythe's body went into convulsions, and his skin became icy despite the acid burning within, the Scion administered the antitoxin. He injected it along with a sedative, through a needle in the vibrating artery of Illythe's neck. Illythe lay still, too raw and broken to move, until the darkness crept in and embraced him along with the warm arms of his master.

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## Chapter Fifteen

Alex woke up suddenly to a noise outside of his door, either real or imagined. It was too dark to see the clock hanging in his room, which meant that the lights outside were still off, maintaining the illusion of nighttime. Alex had paid attention to the timing and luminescence through the hours. The lighting mimicked the human circadian cycles perfectly—something else that made it apparent that the humans kept here were meant to be kept healthy; on a physical level, at least.

Another sound, like something sliding across the floor, came from the hallway, and Alex got quietly out of bed. He paused at the doorway to listen, and distinctly heard someone breathing as though each intake of air was as excruciating as it was necessary.

Sliding open the panel just a crack, he first noticed the guard posted outside. Below him, reflected by the shimmer of one lone lamp outside simulating moonlight, Alex could see Illythe's long, white hair as he crawled, and dropped down onto the floor. The guard seemed to barely notice him, and certainly appeared unconcerned. Despite the fact that Alex believed it was expected that he'd close the door and return to bed, he found the situation too strange to ignore.

"Mentor Illythe?" Alex moved forward, but caught himself, remembering the Brecchian guard.

The guard glanced at him briefly, then stared at the wall, but made no move towards its weapon.

Alex crouched as Illythe turned his face towards him.

Illythe's expression was slack, dazed. Alex wasn't certain if it was from whatever injury had caused blood to run from his nose and mouth, or some kind of drug in his system. It seemed that he didn't recognize Alex, and flinched when he raised his hand to examine him.

"Shhh, it's okay." Alex tried to reassure Illythe, but was confounded himself as to the nature of his appearance, as well as the apathy of the house guards. Regardless of where Illythe had come from within the house, he had to have passed at least two guards, yet still he'd been offered no aid.

"You're hurt," Alex said softly, and he grimaced when he noticed how Illythe's rumpled, pale robes glistened with dark patches under the contrived moonlight.

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Illythe's eyelids fluttered briefly, and he dropped from his hands and knees to his side with a whimper. Without considering the possible consequences, Alex gathered Illythe into his arms, holding him gently against his chest, as he felt at the blood on Illythe's robes.

Thankfully, it was cool to the touch, so it wasn't very fresh. Still, there was a considerable amount—enough that whatever injuries he'd suffered must be extreme.

“Why won't you help him?” Alex hissed at the guard. The guard fixed him briefly with his bulbous eyes full of boredom, then stared at the opposite wall.

Infirmary? There had to be some kind of place here where they had at least a first aid kit, right?

Illythe was moaning softly and Alex pressed his lips to his forehead. It felt too warm. He doubted that he could carry Illythe, and that compounded the frustration.

“It'll be all right. I'll be right back.” Alex reassured Illythe as he gently lay him down. He meant to head to the washroom at the end of the hallway, but another guard moved past him, shoulder-checking him hard into the wall.

“Ow—hey—!” Alex caught himself, and turned to see the guard bending down and hoisting Illythe over his shoulder like he was a sack of grain.

“Be careful!” Alex protested in Illythe's defense, as the samurai turned back around.

Illythe retched and coughed, and the wet sound of liquid splattering across the floor echoed in the corridor as he vomited. The guard carrying him did not pause, but shuttled him down the corridor and out of sight. It somewhat reminded Alex of an aggravated owner being sent to retrieve a wayward pet.

Alex stared after them, then his gaze dropped to the fresh, dark puddle on the floor. More blood?

The first guard gave him a shove, and pointed to the puddle.

Rubbing his shoulder, which would surely bruise, Alex glanced back down the dark hallway one last time, then went to get some towels to clean up the mess.

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## Chapter Sixteen

The next morning, Alex didn't feel like eating, and he certainly didn't feel like dealing with Mel, so he skipped breakfast. He'd tried to get close enough to Illythe's room to see if he was even there—or still alive for that matter, but he was threatened again by Illythe's guard.

Alex went to the gym to try and burn off some of the anxiousness he was feeling rather than succumb to his sense of dread.

He had to get them out of here. He had to get Illythe out of here. If there was a way, he would find it. He would do whatever he could to help Illythe acclimate to a new society where he could be free. It was a selfish fantasy where Alex was the hero, but he had to do his best to try and believe it was possible, or else they were all doomed. Learning that the Scion was Gengein stacked the odds very firmly against Alex completing this mission. Should he manage to get a signal out, even if half the Federation fleet showed up—depending on the number of Gengein—they could be coming into a massacre.

No. He couldn't think about that. Think about Bradshaw and what he might have done wrong. Identifying the mistakes was a way to avoid making them all over again. Even as Alex rationalized this logic, he realized he was about to ignore it when the biggest mistake showed up behind him in the room.

“Here you are. Is everything all right, Alex?”

*Illythe.*

“I was concerned when you weren't at breakfast.”

“What?” Alex balked. Then he remembered that Illythe hadn't been at all aware of him last night. Perhaps it was better not to say anything for fear of saying too much.

Illythe came around to stand off to his right. Alex could see him out of the corner of his eye. Today he was wearing blue, and the color made his skin seem cool; like black stone. Alex had the overwhelming urge to touch it, and make him warm.

When Alex got up and approached quickly, he realized that Illythe could easily avoid him just as he noted that he didn't. They moved until Illythe's back was against the wall. His gaze was downcast, but Alex understood he was not being coy.



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“I’m not him.” Alex pushed his hands against the cool composite of the wall, trapping Illythe between his arms, but Illythe still wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“I don’t know what you—”

“Goddamn it, Illythe—look at me!”

Illythe’s mirror-like eyes finally focused on Alex’s face. Alex felt his chest tighten to see the fear and the longing there. *Was Illythe even seeing him?* Alex touched Illythe’s cheek gently. He brushed away a blue-tinted tear with his thumb as it escaped to run down Illythe’s cheek.

“I’m not Neil.”

Illythe’s eyes widened. His mouth opened without sound for a few tense moments before he asked, “How did you know—?”

“Kah likes to talk after a light nap.” Seeing Illythe’s reaction confirmed that Alex had struck a nerve that was still very raw. “Where are the cameras?”

Illythe glanced high up to the left and then lower to the right. Alex did a quick calculation. “We’re not in range, are we?”

Illythe answered with a tiny shake of his head.

“Neil. He’s who you see when you look at me,” Alex said softly. He leaned closer to Illythe; so close, that he felt his ribs press against him with every nervous breath.

“Alex—it’s too dangerous...” Illythe’s voice was a pleading whisper, but he did not deny Alex’s accusation.

“You loved him. The Scion saw him as a threat.” Alex could see it all written in Illythe’s expression. The confirmation was like a smack to the face. Alex was jealous of a dead man.

“Is that why the Scion beat you last night?”

Alex saw Illythe’s dark skin turn nearly the color of ash as he paled. He caught Illythe as his knees buckled, then pulled him into an embrace.

“Illythe... I’m so sorry... please let me help you.”

Illythe clung onto him, his solid body trembling. “Alex... I don’t want you hurt.”

“Denying me won’t help... The longer I can’t have you—the more I want you.” The words slipped through Alex’s lips before he’d realized he was

speaking. He heard Illythe's breath catch. Alex pressed forward with his hips, letting Illythe feel that he was hard, and understanding that Illythe wanted him too.

"We can't..." Even as Illythe said the words, his hands moved to Alex's hips, not pushing or pulling, just resting.

Alex brought his lips to Illythe's ear, having to rise up slightly on his toes to reach it. "Would you if we could?"

"Yes," Illythe said it so quietly, that Alex was only certain he'd heard it when he felt him nod.

At this point, Alex told himself he wouldn't care if Illythe saw Neil instead of him when they made love.

Alex slid one hand down and found Illythe's erection buried beneath his robes. He rubbed him through the smooth material and tipped his head up, brushing across Illythe's lips with his own.

Illythe uttered a small gasp, but he did not push him away this time. "Please," he whispered.

"Please what? Please, more? Please stop?"

"I... I don't know..."

Alex felt a drop of moisture form between their lips and realized it was another tear.

This was torture for Illythe. This was cruel. As soon as Alex realized it, he felt ill. Although he was reluctant, he stepped back, setting Illythe free, and bowed his head.

"I'm sorry. This wasn't fair of me."

"None of this has been fair... for any of us," Illythe said, but did not move.

"Will you tell me about Neil? What happened to him?"

In a way, Alex was relieved to see Illythe shake his head.

"No. Never."

Alex sighed and nodded, raking his fingers across his scalp. "I'm sorry, Illythe. I wish I could keep myself from putting you in this position. I'm going to take a shower." He turned, pulling his shirt off over his head.

Although Illythe hadn't fled this time, he had every reason to.

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Alex took off his pants once inside the shower room, and stepped into the third stall, waving his hand in front of the sensor to get the water running. Although he should really be taking a cold shower, Alex cranked up the heat, maybe hoping to burn off some of the tension—sexual and otherwise.

The steam settled in a cloud between the tiled dividing walls, and Alex closed his eyes. Slicking his black hair back over his head, he let the mist from the shower wet his face. His cock was almost aching when he reached down to soap himself up. It took everything he had not to react in surprise when he felt a hand meet his from below.

*Illythe.* He was naked, his long white hair cascading over his shoulders and down his back. He looked up at Alex and raised a finger to his lips, gesturing silence. Alex didn't nod, but pretended to be going about his normal bathing routine, despite the fact that his heart was trying to punch its way out of his chest.

He swallowed hard and bit his cheek when one hand curled around his cock. It was going to be impossible to hide his reactions for long.

Alex crouched down, meeting *Illythe* face to face on the floor under the spray.

“Can the cameras see us here?”

*Illythe* shook his head.

Alex leaned forward on his arms, which forced *Illythe* to sit back, and he brushed a kiss to his neck. *Illythe* had a beautiful body—just as he'd guessed. He was thin, but sculpted by lean muscle under skin the color of night. Through his nipples were a set of silver rings that caught the dim light of the high frosted windows. His abs rippled down to the vee of his groin where he was hairless, but had an impressive cock. The deep violet head was also pierced; a silver loop that went down through the slit and came out through the skin on the underside of his head. It was very erotic, and Alex wondered if it had been attached for sexual purposes like those in *Illythe's* tongue, as decoration, or for control.

*Illythe* gasped and his cock twitched in Alex's hand when he touched it. A bead of pearly bluish precum formed at the tip, and Alex dipped his head to capture it with his tongue. It was very warm and slightly sweet. Even *Illythe's* skin had a different flavor. Smoky and rich, it reminded Alex of good coffee; something he hadn't had since this undercover operation began. Definitely, it was a flavor he could get addicted to.

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Illythe was clutching at Alex's shoulders, squeezing just shy of hard enough to bruise. He let out a small choking gasp when Alex took his cock into his mouth.

While his talent was nowhere near the skill level of Illythe's, with his forked and studded tongue, Alex knew he gave incredible head. He liked it, and especially liked to perform it on someone that he knew would never ask for it themselves; someone responsive like Illythe, who was now laying back on the smooth white floor, his hands over his mouth to stifle any sounds.

Alex took him deep, to the back of his throat, then pulled back, rolling the ring along his tongue. He tugged at it with his teeth, and Illythe's hips jerked up, the muscles of his thighs and abs tightening to steel.

With one hand still stroking him, Alex slid up Illythe's body. He relished the feeling of smooth, wet skin against his own, and how their colors looked together. Illythe's thighs and chest had developed a paler flush of red freckles, and it reminded Alex of the patterns of an exotic, rare animal. He could almost understand why someone would want to lock Illythe up and keep him all to himself. He wanted to see Illythe laid out for him, his hair mussed and body taut with need. He wanted to slide inside of him and hear all of the sounds he made when he came. And then, he wanted to hold him and make him feel cherished, rather than possessed.

Alex wanted all of these things—selfishness and benevolence—and he had to believe that there was a chance that he could have it all, even if it was only for one stolen moment at a time.

He pressed their cocks together, spanning them with one hand as he supported his weight with the other and began to move his hips.

One of Illythe's hands spread across his back as Illythe curled an arm around him, and the other moved down to join Alex's below. He met Alex's eyes, and Alex read the longing and disappointment in them.

This was it. All that they could spare, because someone was watching—waiting for Alex to rise after bending to lather up, waiting for Illythe to return to his room. Alex had wanted to make Illythe feel good. He'd wanted them to feel good together, but time was up.

With one last brush of his lips against Illythe's mouth, Alex released the grasp that held them together, and slowly stood up. Illythe looked guiltily up at him and crawled out of the stall in order to avoid the camera's lens.

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## Chapter Seventeen

Two days later, when Illythe announced that he'd be taking Alex with him to the market district, Alex was surprised.

“What about Mel?”

“His client from last night asked for an extension,” Illythe answered, putting up a parasol as he nodded to the Brecchian guards in escort.

Alex hoped that the extension was indefinite. Knowing that Mel saw him as competition had Alex looking around every corner, waiting for the little freak to stab him in the back. But from the way Illythe was hinting, Mel would be bought out before he got his chance to meet the Scion. Frankly, the little prick didn't have a clue how much better off he'd be if that was indeed the case.

Alex had been fortunate to have a reprieve from the admiral for a while, so he'd been doing more of the chores around the house, although thankfully, those chores did not include washing the sheets from the customer rooms. In that time, he and Illythe communicated through fleeting glances, or touches that seemed accidental to anyone who might be looking on. And Alex knew that someone was most definitely looking on. The nape of his neck prickled almost constantly, and he found himself turning often, only to realize the eyes upon him were the cameras'. Getting out beyond the wall would do him some good. Should he be lucky enough to stumble upon an active communications kiosk, there was the potential that it might do a lot of good.

Alex had not been to Omanai Station before his entrance to Willow House. Although it was a hotbed of criminal activity, it was outside the jurisdiction of the Federation, so their laws simply did not apply.

Aside from the occasional smuggler, it seemed that Alex was the only human here, and the locals were definitely taking an interest in him. It was hard not to, especially when he was wearing a collar and a leash and being led around by a jet-skinned geisha with snow-white hair. Illythe's eyes were lined with gold, and his lips painted to match. His hair was done up in some elaborate style and pinned with gold combs. The kimono he wore was bright red, stitched through with gold-colored threads in the shapes of cherry blossoms and willow branches.

Alex was also dressed in red, though in loose pants and a long-sleeved tunic. On his feet he wore black thong sandals, which was better than the *geta*

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that Illythe seemed forced to wear. They were accompanied by four of the toad-faced samurai who growled, raising their guns at anyone who ventured too close.

In a way, this section of Omanai looked like any market street on any other planet. Shops and carts ran parallel to the wide strip of walkway down the center. Above them, instead of sky, were the black metal beams and girders of the ceiling, and at the end was a high graffiti-covered wall and an elevator to the floors above.

The air was filled with the combined cacophony of a multitude of alien languages and accents, and the low whir and steady rumble of ships arriving and departing. Every once in a while, Alex got a peek through the clear composite wall that ran behind the row of shops, and could see the landing bays.

The smells here were overwhelming too. The sharp whiff of fuel from some of the older spacecraft, the scent of sweat and food from alien cultures... all of it had the potential to be overwhelming, but Alex had already dealt with some overwhelming things lately.

“Just once,” Illythe was muttering under his breath, “I would like to be able to walk outside without being the center of attention.”

“Impossible.” Alex smiled up at him. “You are too attractive to ever be inconspicuous.”

“I find that unfortunate, Alex,” Illythe answered with a weary sigh.

“Does the Scion make you dress up like that?”

Illythe looked around, apparently trying to find a particular shop. “Indeed. I am to represent and maintain the fantasy of Willow House when in the public eye.”

“But you don’t like it...” Alex filled in the words that Illythe hadn’t said.

“No. My father was a warrior king. I am dressed like a woman to remind me that I am not.”

He’d said it so casually that Alex had nearly missed the content of his words. “Warrior *king*?”

“Mm.” Illythe nodded, and his gaze rested on a particular stall. “He’s dead. They’re all dead. Everyone but me.”

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Illythe had said it as though commenting on the unfortunate price of dry goods, or the weather. According to Kah, it had been thirty years ago. Still, Alex wondered what it must be like to go through life knowing that Illythe would never see another person like himself, or being literally chained to the one who had been responsible for that event.

There were a lot of unimaginable things Illythe must have dealt with during his lifetime. Alex felt it was best not to dig too many of them up. At least not until Illythe was somewhere far away, and safe from the Scion.

Illythe's pace picked up a little, forcing Alex to jog a few steps so he wouldn't be strangled by his collar. Although it looked like red satin, underneath, it was a metal band.

They arrived at a stall that was a hodgepodge of both items and individuals. One little Drusian man seemed to be running the thing, waving his stumpy arms around and using his long, prehensile tail to grab items off the high shelves behind him. Among the multitude of strange weapons, knickknacks, and appliances scattered on the counter was a very wicked-looking dagger. It had a long, curving silver-black blade that was partially serrated and set with barbs. Alex didn't get a good look at it because suddenly the crowd was surging, separating him from Illythe and making their samurai guards nervous. Three of the Brecchian escorts were trying to keep people from getting too close to Illythe, who seemed determined to enter the fray, while one stood outside, now holding Alex's leash.

Out of the corner of his eye, Alex noticed a communications kiosk. He'd almost missed it. It was half-plastered over with fliers, and appeared to be in a state of disrepair. He inched a little closer to it, getting as far as he could until the leash kept him rooted. Twenty feet. If he could just get within twenty feet. Of course, by the look of the thing, it might not matter, but he had to try. This may be his only chance to get a signal out.

There was a commotion at the stall suddenly, and someone came running towards them. Alex stepped close enough to get his leash hung up in the runner's path, which resulted in the samurai's hold being broken, but not before Alex was nearly strangled. His throat felt bruised, and black spots danced at the edges of his vision. Alex let the guy shove him and he did his best to stumble and dive in the direction of the kiosk, skinning his knees and hands as he went down on the hard composite flooring. He prayed that he'd gotten close enough to activate a beacon somewhere in allied space.

“Alex, are you all right?”

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It was Illythe, his eyes wide as he crouched beside him.

“Uh, yeah... what happened? Who was that guy?” Alex blinked a few times, glancing at the kiosk behind Illythe.

“Thief. Pretty common here.”

Illythe helped Alex to his feet. He held his wrists gently, frowning down at the palms of his hands. “You’ve been hurt...” Illythe’s long fingers furtively caressed the backs of Alex’s hands.

“It’s nothing.” Alex’s eyes darted to their escorts and he frowned, realizing there was no way for him to touch Illythe back without notice.

Illythe’s hand on his cheek startled him and Alex met Illythe’s eyes.

“It’s good that you didn’t hurt your face,” Illythe said, as he ran his thumb over Alex’s lips.

Alex flicked at it with his tongue, and saw how Illythe wet his own lips in response. Too soon, they were again surrounded by their guards, and Illythe took Alex’s leash, turning away.

“Did you get what you came for?” Alex glanced back at the stall. It seemed that the chaos had died down a little.

“They didn’t have it,” Illythe said, averting his eyes. “Let’s go.”

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How utterly appropriate. Illythe couldn’t have asked for a more obvious sign.

The rare junk dealer was not a stall he visited often. It was normally the apothecary that took up his few coveted trips off the house grounds—purchasing condoms, lubrication, medicines... But he’d heard a rumor—one of the clients had mentioned a strange blade that the junk dealer had acquired recently. No one used blades for protection anymore; it was pointless when there were such a prevalence of guns.

Whether it was authentic or just a copy didn’t matter. The blade was a ritual knife from his own people. He recognized the rare metal immediately, and the mark on the blade... was that his family’s symbol? It was familiar, but it had been so long since he’d seen his written language or heard his native tongue, that he couldn’t know for certain.

The price being asked was exorbitant, though even if he could have afforded the cost, Illythe would have had to steal it. The guards would not let him have



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such an item. Even the decorative katanas found around Willow House were too dull to draw lines in the dirt.

Illythe expected that he'd be caught, but another thief had chosen just the right moment to make his own move, and had made off with something far more valuable than an overpriced, decorative dagger.

Illythe sat in his hidden spot in his room and removed the blade from the deep sleeve of his kimono. He was fortunate that it hadn't cut through. The weapon gleamed in the red glow of the room, coloring the metal like blood, and Illythe's own heart pounded in response. The Scion's blood was not red. It was ichorous black. Illythe only remembered this from his few rebellions as a youth—when he'd bitten, punched, or kicked the creature that had explored his body without permission. And in return, he was touched more—harder—painfully until he was nothing but a whimpering lump of clay to be molded around the Scion's cock.

Illythe drew his finger down the edge of the blade, raising a line of blood. He watched it bead deep crimson for a moment, before he sucked on the cut. Then, he stashed the weapon away under his cabinet, turning the handle so it would be easy to grab when the time came. That time would be soon. But first, he had something very important to do.

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## Chapter Eighteen

The atmosphere around Willow House had been growing steadily heavier since Bryant's death. Except for the few clients that already had appointments, there were no more groups coming in. After Mel's contract was indeed bought out, Illythe closed the house temporarily. It was probably a good idea, and Alex wondered if it was standard practice. The guards were jumpy, and it would be bad for business if a customer were shot.

As soon as they had returned from the market, Illythe disappeared to his own chambers, and it took everything Alex had not to follow him. That brief contact in the market had made him desperate for more, though he knew it was something he couldn't have. Before he'd fled, Illythe had promised to come talk to him this evening. He seemed as eager to leave this place as Alex, and he claimed he had a plan.

In the meantime, Alex had no clue whether or not he'd gotten a signal out. Either way, sitting around and hoping the cavalry might come was as foolish as hoping that the Scion would have a change of heart.

Alex hadn't realized he'd dozed off until he woke up to the soft reverberation of his door opening and then sliding closed along its track. He opened his eyes and leaned up on his elbows, but the room was too dark to see anything.

"Illythe?"

He heard a quick rustle of fabric, then Alex felt the bed depress. *Yes. Illythe.* He had only a moment to process the heated brush of a bare thigh against his own before Illythe was over him, on his hands and knees, his long snowy hair settling softly on the pillow when he leaned down.

"Alex." Illythe brushed his fingers over Alex's lips. "Tonight this all ends. I have a plan."

Alex's hands moved up, sliding over the smooth, firm skin of Illythe's waist. "Tell me."

"Later... first, there is something I need to do."

Alex felt the caress of heated breath a moment before Illythe's mouth slanted over his own. The kiss was hot, needy, and surprisingly unskilled. There was a delightful innocence about it—Illythe was not a man who kissed often,

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and it was flattering to realize that Alex was one of the few whom he'd ever kissed.

Alex opened his mouth, inviting Illythe's tongue inside, caressing the studs with his own, and dipping into the vee of the shallow fork. He coaxed a moan from Illythe; the sound was a soft vibration through his body, thrumming through to Alex's core.

"Ungh, god..." Alex arched his neck, breaking the kiss as one of Illythe's hands burrowed beneath his underwear and gave him a gentle squeeze.

Without moving his hand, Illythe began to work his way down Alex's body; his skin sliding hot and smooth against him. Alex threaded his fingers through the silk of Illythe's white hair. The sensation of it was like the fur of some exotic animal. He imagined being bound with it, wrapped in the webbing, and sensuously devoured.

Alex shuddered as Illythe's forked tongue laved one nipple, teasing it with his line of studs. At the same time, Illythe's hand worked on Alex's cock. He moved his thumb along the groove of his glans, and gently teased the slit by inserting the pointed tip of his fingernail.

The sensation nearly caused Alex to jump out of his skin. Although not painful, it was incredibly intense; reminiscent of that raw feeling that came after orgasm. Illythe soothed the sting by replacing his nail with his tongue, moving one satin point just inside the opening before taking Alex fully into his mouth.

Alex raised his hips, tensing his buttocks to keep himself from thrusting inside that searing, wet heat. He needed to hold out—he needed more, and Illythe's skilled tongue had only ever allowed him to last for so long before pushing him fiercely over the edge.

"Want you..." Alex grunted, barely able to get out the words. He curled his body and brought Illythe's face up from his lap, tasting himself as he pushed his tongue into Illythe's mouth, taking back his control with a kiss.

Illythe responded and crawled back up; pushing Alex's shoulders gently back into the pillow.

Was this it? Were they finally going to go beyond the few stolen moments outside the camera's lens? Alex wished that their first time wasn't in such darkness. He wanted to see Illythe's body, watch pleasure flush his skin. *Next time*, Alex told himself, and there *would be* a next time—many, if he had anything to say about it.

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Illythe's erection pressed between them, leaking hot beads of precum from the tip, and searing Alex with the metal ring that absorbed the rising temperature of their bodies. He painted his arousal along Alex's belly as he rubbed against him, his kiss growing more desperate. Those long, thin fingers pressed hard into Alex's skin, clinging to him as though he was afraid he would fall.

But Alex never wanted to let him go. He slid his hands down over Illythe's back, feeling a pattern of scars that seemed too ornate to be randomly laid. Although curiosity nearly made him linger, he reminded himself that there would be time later—when they were safe on a Federation vessel, headed back to Earth.

Alex's hands continued lower, his fingertips gliding again over smooth skin. He cupped the firm globes of Illythe's ass in his palms, kneading the muscles.

Breaking off, Illythe sat up, and a small whine of frustration escaped Alex. *No—not again.* He couldn't bear Illythe running away as he usually did when things became too heated.

And then, Alex felt Illythe's long fingers encircle him, rubbing the wet tip of his cock around the tight entrance to his body.

"God... yessss..." Alex hissed as he breached the barrier, gritting his teeth to keep from thrusting upwards and impaling Illythe forcefully on his cock.

Illythe opened to him; his body gripping and sucking him into a heated embrace. Alex felt several rings of muscle circle and slide down the length of his shaft until he was seated deep inside, up to his balls.

*Incredible.* Although Illythe's body was alien, Alex felt as though they fit together perfectly. Alex mapped each line and curve of Illythe's body with his fingers and his mouth; drawing from him shudders and soft moans of pleasure as Illythe began a slow rocking rhythm with his hips. And Alex rose to meet him, catching occasionally the silvered outline of his graceful neck as Illythe threw his head back and began to ride him harder.

Alex felt his orgasm building, as the tension curled tighter at the front of his pelvis.

"Illythe—I'm going to come..." Alex warned through gritted teeth, as his fingers tightened around Illythe's slim hips.

"Come," Illythe urged, breathless, and he pressed one hand on Alex's chest for leverage. He raised himself higher, until only the head of Alex's straining cock was inside of him, then he slammed himself down hard.

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And he did it again and again; his movements becoming faster, harder, more desperate, until Alex found himself digging his short nails into Illythe's smooth flesh and pulling him down as he thrust inside.

He felt Illythe's orgasm a moment before his own. The heat inside his body became molten, drawing and locking Alex within, and a tremble moved through his taut body. Wet heat streaked across Alex's belly and chest, and then he felt only the fire of his own climax ripping through him.

Alex crested; every muscle in his body locked as his orgasm traveled through his spine and burst out of him in a jolt of lightning. He thought he cried out, but currently all sensation was focused on that part of his body seated deep inside of Illythe, filling him with pulse upon pulse of wet heat.

"Illythe!"

Alex clung to him as Illythe stretched out over his body, kissing his neck and jaw through an orgasm that he thought might never end.

But it did, and just before the aftershocks set in, Alex felt the wetness of tears on his cheek, then the sting of a needle under his jaw.

Coolness flooded his veins, bringing behind it a soft cloud of oblivion.

"I love you, Alex." Illythe's voice was somewhere, far away. "Please always remember that you were the one who finally made me free."

The long white curtain of Illythe's hair settled around Alex as he was kissed with all of the passion of a man going off to war.

"No... Illythe... why..." Alex struggled to speak as his tongue turned to sand. He tried to fight the drug's effects, but his thoughts were slowly falling away, dissolving, and becoming liquid like his muscles.

He lost consciousness with the taste of Illythe in his mouth.

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## Chapter Nineteen

Illythe knew that the monster would be coming for him. Although the Scion wouldn't have been due back for several days normally, Illythe had prompted his early return by disabling the cameras.

Illythe was on the small couch in the center of the room with only the red lanterns glowing. He had not primped as would have been expected of him when his master came, and he wore his *yukata* without a sash keeping it closed. The Scion would not know this until he arrived. He also would not know that four of his hired samurai guards were dead, and that Illythe had siphoned off some of the house profits to pay the rest to leave. With any luck, neither of them would live long enough for the Scion to find this out.

Nor would the Scion live to kill Alex. Illythe had taken Alex through the tunnels to the landing bays, and hidden him in plain sight. The dock where he'd placed him was the only one large enough to hold a Jowan military vessel. He'd paid the remainder of the house profits to a dockworker in exchange for him keeping an eye on Alex until Admiral Kah could arrive.

It had been so difficult to leave Alex. There was so much they hadn't shared, but what love Alex had shown him in the short time they had been together was more than Illythe had known in a lifetime. Kah would be good to Alex, take care of him. Of all of the Scion's associates, Kah was the most honorable. He would not betray this arrangement to the Scion. Alex would be safe.

This time, Illythe would not fail the man he loved.

"The cameras—who has disabled them?"

The Scion's body filled up the exterior doorway; the fleshy tendrils around his head were tipped poisonous blue and waving wildly.

More frightening than a Gengein's smile was a Gengein's rage.

Illythe swallowed back the gall burning up his throat, and tensed his muscles to keep himself from cowering—from scrambling to please his angry master.

He flinched when a tall cabinet near the door was hurled across the room. It bounced off one of the bedposts, breaking it, and landing with enough force to make the floor tremble and the glassware nearby rattle.

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“I said—”

“I believe I must have disabled them... Scion.” Two very serious infractions for a slave: interrupting the master in midsentence and denying him his honorific. Although Illythe had been allowed this freedom on occasion, to do so when the Scion was already angry was either impetuous or stupid. *Or performed by someone who was not afraid to die.*

Thoughts rose in his mind: of saving Alex, of what he should have done to save Neil but hadn't, and how by remaining alive, Illythe had disgraced his people. The idea of making it all right eased him into a state of punishing calm.

Behind his back, hidden by the cushions, Illythe flexed his fingers around the hilt of the ceremonial dagger. He'd initially thought of bringing it to the bed to try and kill his master while in the throes of passion—but frankly, Illythe wasn't in the mood to be willingly violated by this monster tonight. He wanted to die with Alex's taste in his mouth, and the imprint of their first, and final, lovemaking on his flesh.

The Scion narrowed his two sets of yellow eyes at Illythe. “You believe you disabled them for what reason, Illythe?” His voice was low, but edged with a serration that threatened to rip Illythe to pieces.

“I believe it is because I am tired, Scion. I am tired of being watched. I am tired of being yours.” Illythe did not lower his gaze. For this moment, he felt a sense of completion, a sense of power. He'd said the words he'd been too afraid to say out loud for many years. It was a good valediction.

Heat preceded the Scion's rapid approach. As ready as Illythe thought he'd been for it, those thick fingers around his throat sent him into a state of panic. He released the blade as he was lifted into the air, kicking and struggling to breathe.

“I should put you to your final rest then? Is that what you seek?”

The voice echoed oddly in his brain and Illythe realized that he was close to passing out. Already, his vision was distorted by the black haze filling his brain. No—he couldn't. If the Scion left this room, he would see what had been done—he would find Alex and he would tear him apart. Tears spilled from Illythe's eyes with the memory of watching Neil violated and beaten before him... how Neil had looked to Illythe for help, and how Illythe had been helpless to do anything but watch...

In his neck, Illythe felt something pop, and tasted blood.

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No. He would not let Alex suffer like that. He would not let Alex die at the hands of this monster.

Illythe focused what little strength he had remaining, and delivered a kick to the Scion's midsection. The monster roared in anger and hurled Illythe's body against the sofa, sending the furniture toppling.

The blade slipped from under the cushion, but remained out of the Scion's range of sight. Illythe stared at it, trying to will any stores of power he had to his muscles.

It was difficult to breathe; the Scion had crushed something enough to damage his trachea. When he swallowed, it felt like his throat was being cut, and his respiration was reduced to quick, sharp gulps of air. Although Illythe's species could heal quickly from most injuries, he believed he would not survive any given to him tonight. As long as he could remain breathing long enough to do what he had to do, that was all that mattered.

Illythe remembered his father then. A proud warrior, he'd fought hard to save his people and his only child. He'd fought even as his body was charred and mangled by bursts from plasma rifles, even as he'd been blinded and broken beyond recognition. Illythe used to think that his father's death had been in vain, because in the end, his successor, his little prince, had been reduced to an obedient whore. But now, he thought he understood. His father had loved him enough to fight for him, and that kind of love knew no fear.

It was fear that had kept Illythe bound to obey, and despair that had sapped his will to fight. For nearly three decades, he'd groveled, and been fucked, to keep this creature content. He'd kidnapped, and all but murdered, innocent young human males for the Scion's pleasure. For the first time since becoming a slave, Illythe was not afraid to displease his master—he was not afraid to die if it meant saving the life of someone he loved.

Illythe closed his mind to the pain; he closed his mind to fear, and let his warrior's vengeance take hold.

The Scion lunged towards him, reaching out with his arms and the waving cords of flesh around his head. Illythe rolled, grabbing the hilt of the dagger as he did. Bits of pale fluff yawned from a rip in the cushion as he yanked the blade free. He squeezed his eyes shut, bringing the blade down in an arc as the Scion came within striking distance.

Blood rained down across his torso accompanied by bits of flesh and bone. He'd taken several fingers off of one of the Scion's hands, and severed a few of the Scion's waving appendages on one side of his head.



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*He'd done it*—Illythe had hurt a creature he'd come to believe was indestructible.

His heart stuttered in his chest as he fought the dichotomy between his training to comfort, and his urge to kill. The young warrior prince howled in triumph, yet the slave pleaded forgiveness. Illythe swayed, and tears flowed from his eyes even as he licked his master's blood from where it had spattered on his lips.

There was a moment of stunned silence that seemed to stretch into countless hours. Master and slave locked eyes, and it was all Illythe could do not to drop to his belly and beg that his punishment be swift. Before he could consider it further, the Scion roared and came at him again.

Illythe anticipated the hand going towards his testicles and he smashed the hilt of the knife against the Scion's wrist, breaking through the fragile bone that stuck, jagged now, through open flesh. The Scion used his remaining hands to grab Illythe by his hair, and the appendages coiled around his arm holding the blade.

Illythe struggled against the bonds that tried to force the weapon from his hand. The ropes of flesh squeezed and twisted until his fingers went numb, as muscle and tendons were stretched beyond their range.

Illythe gave a silent cry as his wrist was snapped, and the dagger fell out of his grip, landing with a heavy thump on the rug. In the past, this would have put an end to Illythe's fighting. He would have realized that he couldn't win, and become a limp doll for the Scion to beat and rape until he felt that Illythe was effectively subdued. And then, the Scion would comfort and care for his wounds. He would take him apart, only to put him back together: being killer, doctor, lover, and father all at the same time. It was those times when Illythe lost sight of anything but relief.

But for once in his life, he was seeing things very clearly.

Illythe thrust out his other arm, fighting through the tentacles that grabbed at him and peeled the skin away from muscle and bone as he powered through. He found two of the Scion's pus-yellow eyes and, with his fingers, drilled through them like overripe fruit, digging in by hooking a nostril with the talon on his thumb.

The Scion made a horrible shrieking sound and dropped Illythe. He landed like a bag of rattling bones on the rug, limp and weak from the exertion. The secretions from the Scion's tentacles burned through his skin, and Illythe felt

like his brain would explode inside of his skull from the pitch of his master's pained cries.

*He had to get to him. Illythe had to cradle and comfort his master, then appreciate his recovery by letting his master take out revenge for his pain on his precious slave's body...*

Illythe choked on the bile rising to his throat. Blackness was starting to close in as his brain blinked through waking nightmares and memories. He was losing his faculties, and knew that it was only a matter of time before he passed out completely. And then, the Scion would go after Alex...

Through the tunnel of waning awareness, Illythe felt around for the knife, using the elbow of his broken arm to crawl towards it, *like the worm that he was*.

He'd only just brushed the hilt with the tips of his fingers when the Scion grabbed him by one leg and dragged him away.

The shrieking had stopped. Illythe's head became clear enough for him to twist and level a kick at the bloody mess of the Scion's face. Unfortunately, the Scion was now expecting his disobedience and the tendrils of flesh curled around his calf before he could deliver the blow. They began to coil in opposite directions, peeling back his flesh and smearing the raw nerves with stinging acid.

He met the condemning gaze of one of the Scion's remaining eyes through the black streaks of blood on his face, and Illythe's own blood turned to ice. The Scion was going to kill him. It was going to be painful. He knew this without question, regardless of whether or not Illythe managed to get in a killing blow himself.

No. He *would* get a killing blow. He couldn't let this creature live another day. They would die together as they had lived—bound in battle.

Illythe arched himself back, stretching his vertebrae until his spine popped. Already numb to the pain, he felt his femur dislocate from his hip as he forced himself beyond his body's range. And then, he felt the warm rubbery grip of his blade. Curling his numbing fingers around it, Illythe focused everything he had into delivering one last blow.

With a wail that was equal parts rage and grief, Illythe rolled forward, slamming down the dagger between the Scion's blinded eyes. Driving it into his skull, he heard the sickening, yet satisfying, crack of bone.

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All at once, the Scion's body went limp, and Illythe dropped to the floor on his back with the weight of the creature on his legs.

Panting, Illythe lay there frozen, feeling the dampness of their mingled blood cooling on his body. He tried to hold his breath long enough to listen for the sound of his master's breathing.

Nothing.

It was a surreal sensation; the realization that he had taken the life of this creature who'd been his entire world. The Scion had loved him in his own way, and Illythe had loved him back, but in the way a beaten animal relies on his owner for the affection of a meal. He was sad, but not sorry.

Illythe caressed his master's bloody cheek. The air moving through his lungs became thinner and more difficult to take in as he laughed and cried simultaneously. He closed his eyes, waiting to see who would receive him in the afterlife—Neil, his father, or the Scion.

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## Chapter Twenty

Alex woke to bright lights flashing behind his eyelids.

“Alex...”

The voice was somewhat familiar. Alex struggled to place it as he wrestled himself back to consciousness.

Alex's tongue felt too thick in his mouth, and his skull was full of mud. He vaguely remembered being naked and in his own bed, but had no idea how much time had passed since Illythe had shot him full of sedative.

*Illythe. You fucking noble, stupid creature.* Thinking about it pushed Alex up onto his elbows, even before he could manage to open his eyes.

“Alex, what has happened? Illythe told me you were in danger...”

“Admiral Kah?” Alex's eyes flew open and rested on the Jowan's doggy face. He swallowed back the sick that had surged up his throat as he tried to keep the room from spinning.

“Where am I?”

“You're on board my ship. You were passed out, just inside the airlock. How did you get down here?”

“Illythe... shit...” More bitter taste in his mouth. Alex struggled to sit up, his head still spinning from whatever Illythe had put into his system.

“Son, maybe you should—”

“No! Goddamn it...” Alex's short fingernails pressed crescents into the padded table. He had no idea how much time had passed, but he did know that he wasn't going to leave without trying to get to Illythe. The thought that he might already be too late coiled hard and cold in his guts, but he pushed it aside.

“Please, Admiral... you have to help him. I know that you are loyal to the Scion but...”

“*P'sheetchi!*” Kah spat out one of the swearwords he'd taught Alex... the Jowan equivalent of *bullshit*, if he remembered correctly. “I have no loyalty to that monster. I told you, it was a business arrangement. What's this about helping Illythe?”

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“Please... I think he’s going to try and kill the Scion... help me...” Alex pleaded, and shoved himself off the table. His knees buckled and he caught himself against the uniformed man. Despair flooded through him, leaking from his eyes as tears, as he clutched the Jowan admiral’s arms. “Please... I’ll do anything... you have to help me get to him...”

Kah’s jaw tensed and released. He glanced over his shoulder at someone Alex couldn’t see, then he returned his attention to Alex and offered a terse nod, holding Alex to help steady him.

“All right.”

“Thank you.” Alex nodded, barely able to get out the words.

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The ship’s physician gave Alex a dose of something to help clear out the effects of the sedative, while a group of Jowan soldiers were assembled to go into Willow House. Alex took a shuddering breath. Illythe had to be alive—or he had to at least convince himself that there was a chance that he was. *Damn him. Why had he gone in alone?*

“Now I understand why Illythe was so adamant about me coming for you. Alex... if Illythe finally decided to try and kill the Scion, it’s unlikely that he succeeded...”

Alex could not respond with what was on his mind. “I appreciate your help very much, Admiral. As I said before, regardless of the outcome, I will pay you back... whatever you want.”

The thought of having to have sex with Kah in any way was barely tolerable. Much less so if it turned out that he was right, and Illythe hadn’t survived. Maybe just as bad, was the thought that Illythe had changed his mind completely, and decided to stay with that monster.

Kah moved forward and cupped Alex’s cheek with his hand. “We’ll talk about it later.” His voice was surprisingly soothing, and almost disturbingly father-like.

Alex offered a slow nod, watching Kah’s expression change to the hardness of an admiral as he moved away to address his men.

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As Alex had suspected, there was a tunnel that went from the docks and came out just outside the high wall that surrounded Willow House.

The front gate was ajar, and that was surprising as well as concerning. *Where were the Brecchian samurai?*

The question was at least partially answered when Alex peeked through the opening and saw a dead house guard. Who, or whatever had killed it, had apparently done so with some measure of stealth. Alex could see no blood, nor did he notice the telltale scent of flesh burned by a plasma burst.

The group moved silently through the gate, many of the soldiers flanking the house to keep watch on the doors and windows.

Alex stumbled over a datapad left on the front porch. He picked it up and nearly dropped it when it activated.

Unencrypted account data and records from Willow House, left out where he'd be sure to find them.

Alex gritted his teeth. "Fuck, Illythe..."

"Interesting," Kah said, cocking his head towards the datapad. "May I?"

"All yours." Alex handed the device over. He was fighting to keep his cool.

Even though they tread carefully, once inside, each footstep seemed to echo on the paneled walls. Alex's ears filled with white noise to compensate for the overwhelming silence. Although the air was still, it felt charged, like the atmosphere just before a storm.

The group picked their way carefully through each room, following a large cyclops drone. They had encountered three more dead Brecchian house guards—two with broken necks and one with a severed spine, but as of yet, no signs of life and no Illythe.

The killing had appeared too subtle to have been done by Gengein. Alex felt his muscles turn to ice-cold lead. *A raid? Maybe some enemies of the Scion had attacked the house... or could it possibly have been Illythe?*

Alex remembered Illythe telling him that his father was a warrior king. Holding onto this possibility tightly, Alex prayed that if Illythe had done this, he'd also managed to do the same to the Scion and, more importantly, survived.

"You're very special to him," Kah said to Alex as he rose from examining the last dead samurai they'd found.

"Uh...?" Alex thought he'd had words to reply, but couldn't seem to make them come out.

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“To Illythe. You know that, right?” Kah brushed his hands off on the front of his slacks and approached Alex, his expression unreadable.

“He’s very special to me,” Alex said, meeting Kah’s gaze levelly.

“Ah well, my loss I suppose.” Kah shrugged and smiled. “I hope so, at any rate.”

The Jowan’s smile faded. “The reason that I became involved with the Scion was because my people were being threatened by an enemy we couldn’t hope to defeat. I am not just a Jowan admiral, Alex. I am the Jowan Ambassador and Head of Council. With the Scion’s assistance in the matter, we were able to hold our enemies at bay. As collateral, he accepted some of our people as staff. I am certain you realized the cook at Willow House was Jowan.” Kah paused briefly and looked at Alex, obviously awaiting some response. When Alex nodded, Kah continued.

“I wasn’t pleased with the deal, but I had no other choice. I cared about the welfare of our people under the Scion’s employ, so I came to look in on them periodically. That’s how I met Illythe... Illythe eased my mind and cared for those I’d been forced to leave behind. I owe *him*... which is why there is nothing I will take from *you*.”

“Why are you telling me all of this? I don’t understand...”

“Politics, Alex. Politics are an ugly thing. Stronger than any man or army. For years I have wanted to help Illythe, but politics kept us bound to the Scion. We are not part of the Federation... too small for their notice.”

Kah held up the datapad again. “But this is going to make me a very rich man. And I’m certain the Federation will notice the Jowan people when they find out that I have the financial information and contact lists for some pernicious enemies. Will you help me present this evidence to your Federation?”

Alex nodded. “Of course, Admiral.” He was beginning to understand more now. If the Scion should happen to be alive, by helping Alex, Admiral Kah had just put his entire species at risk.

“And you think they will accept us under their protection as a sovereign race?”

“I can’t promise anything, Admiral, but I will do whatever I need to,” Alex pledged, “even if I have to pick up a gun and fight for you myself.”

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Admiral Kah sighed and nodded with an appreciative smile. “Thank you, Alex. Now let’s locate Illythe.”

Slowly, each section of the house was verified to be empty of life, until finally, they reached that dark and silent corridor which lead to Illythe’s private chamber.

Kah waved his people into place and all of them gathered along the walls, weapons aimed. The cyclops drone hovered near the ornate double doors, ready to blast them open once the command was uttered.

Even with the doors closed, Alex smelled blood, and his heart dropped into his stomach.

“Alex.” Kah placed his hands on Alex’s shoulders. “Whatever we find in there...”

Alex again swallowed the burning lump that rose to his throat. “Let’s just get in there.” Whatever he found in there, he would have to deal with. Alex just wasn’t quite so certain that he could.

On the off chance that there was someone alive and armed in there waiting for them, the element of surprise was their best bet. The admiral quietly spoke the drone’s command line, and the armored sphere shot through the door latch, then barreled through the doors, opening them before the metal had even stopped sizzling.

When Alex stepped inside, the stench and sight made him heave.

“Gods...” Alex vaguely heard Kah exclaim behind him, but no gods of man or beast could account for the demon that lay dead, partially atop his obsidian-skinned angel, on the floor. Was that the Scion? Alex prayed silently that the monster was dead.

Alex’s imaginings of what a Gengein looked like were far tamer and less frightening than the reality. Part insect and part mythical sea-monster were the only comparisons for the wounded creature whose long tentacles of flesh were still wrapped loosely around Illythe’s arms and neck. A heavy blade—the blade Alex had seen in the market—protruded from the top of the Gengein’s skull.

Illythe was on his back. His white hair was spread out around him and streaked with gore. The monster was sprawled across his lower body, slicked with black oily liquid that Alex guessed was blood.

Alex ran to Illythe, collapsing on his knees beside him. He began to try and shove the monster off of him, swallowing a sob of frustration.



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“Illythe...” Alex’s voice cracked as he continued to struggle with the beast. He couldn’t tell how badly Illythe had been injured, or if he was even breathing. The Gengein was too heavy—too much for him to move by himself.

Alex appreciated the others coming to help, because he was unable to find his voice to ask them. As each section of Illythe’s body was revealed, Alex’s hope that they might still be in time to save him dwindled. One arm was badly broken, the bone and the raw red muscle exposed, garish against the black of Illythe’s skin.

*Skin Alex had touched not so long ago...*

“Goddamn you, Illythe...” Alex choked out a sob. Illythe’s elegant throat was covered with welts and contusions. He’d been strangled, and from the looks of things, some traumatic damage had been done. There was blood running from his nose and glistening at the corners of his lips. Alex covered his face with his hands as a few tears fell onto those lips, mingling and mixing pink with the blood.

He’d seen death before. Over the years, he’d lost a few good friends and a close coworker. It hurt. It always hurt, but nothing had ever hurt quite as badly as this.

“Goddamn you...”

Illythe’s silver eyes flickered open and they blinked up at the ceiling. Silver-blue tears streaked down his temples as Illythe gasped and then struggled to breathe. When Illythe rolled his head towards him, Alex wondered whom he saw.

“...lex...” Illythe’s voice was barely a graveled whisper, but Alex heard him.

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## Chapter Twenty-One

It had taken six weeks of submersion therapy to administer the proper treatments and repair Illythe's injuries, but he'd survived and insisted on keeping the scars to prove it.

Alex thought that the addition of the scars did nothing to detract from Illythe's good looks, and if anything, attracted more attention to him—as if a six-foot-five black-skinned angel with snow-white hair was not uncommon enough on Earth—or anywhere, for that matter. Especially one who now dressed in a manner that left no doubt as to his strength and sex.

As Illythe had been recuperating, Alex returned to Omanai Space Station to witness the Pleasure District—specifically Willow House—being razed. Everything was leveled to the decking and the fake trees were sent off to be recycled somewhere. The Scion deserved no monument for his cruelty.

Alex's successful mission broke open hundreds of cases all across the Federation's jurisdiction. The Scion had been involved in everything from illegal prostitution, to drug smuggling, to genocide. And his records of clients read like a most-wanted list.

Because of this, Alex had been offered some very high honors—Human Council Representative among them—but frankly, he was ready to retire. All of it felt too much like prostitution, and as he'd told Illythe, he'd been trying to get away from that lifestyle.

Illythe, too, had achieved an uncomfortable level of celebrity. He was the only one of his kind, and the one who had killed the Scion to protect the man he loved. Thankfully, Illythe shied away from the limelight as much as Alex. Let the myriad of actors cast to play his part in the movie adaptations absorb all of the fame. Not one of them, however, could ever hope to be as amazing as the real thing.

Today, all of that *amazing* was about to be Alex's for the rest of his life—not as a slave, but as a bonded mate—in a ceremony practiced by Illythe's people—the *Suujarin*.

The bond truly lasted for a lifetime. When one mate died, the other followed voluntarily. That meant that Illythe would potentially be giving up close to a century of his own life to be with Alex. When he'd first learned this, Alex had tried to argue, but realized if the situation were reversed, he would maintain the tradition gladly.

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Alex wore a more traditional human tuxedo for the ceremony; white and tailored perfectly to his physique. Illythe had found someone to make him an outfit that resembled the costume worn by the Suujarin for this occasion. His long hair was plaited into a series of tiny braids woven through with gold thread and strung with beads. His arms and legs were crisscrossed with bands of gold that made up the lacing on his high sandals and fingerless gloves. The rest of the garment was white; an open-back halter that showed off his tribal scar pattern, and a loincloth that hung to the floor in the front and the back, decorated with patterns of more gold thread. It was definitely making Alex think about the second half of the ceremony—the bit done in private.

They stood together, face to face, with a small group of witnesses watching them speak their pledges to one another, sealing them publicly by piercing a set of matched rings through the cartilage of one ear. Recognizing the human tradition, they also exchanged wedding bands; Illythe having only three fingers wore his on the center digit.

When the ceremony was finished, Alex was eager to get on with part two, but decorum—and a Jowan admiral—got in his way.

“Not so fast.” Admiral Kah held up his hand. He was fumbling with a recorder unit, trying to program it and hold a champagne flute at the same time. He was dressed in civilian clothes—Earth civilian clothes; a garish red tuxedo that he’d picked up after their visit before the Federation Representatives. Things had gone remarkably well; it hadn’t hurt that the human ambassador had a soft spot for underdogs... and possibly dogs in general. The Jowan Council couldn’t have asked for a more sympathetic audience.

“Let me see.” Kah’s date—an attractive young human male named Josh, who’d fit Kah for his tux—took the device. As with most alien species, Kah had no clue about human fashion, what went together, or why that should matter. He wore what he liked. Apparently, what he liked in a tuxedo were ruffles, and Josh had given them to him in a Hawaiian print. For the admiral, it was true love at first sight.

Alex figured that Josh had seen Kah undressed, so he knew what he was getting into. *More power to them.*

They held the ceremony in a hotel suite, and Alex looked longingly at the door that led to the bedroom as he slid his arm around Illythe to pose for yet another picture.

“All right,” Josh said, setting the device free.

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Kah tramped over to them and wormed his way between them both, then grinned at the floating recorder.

“Don’t blink,” Alex said through his teeth to Illythe as he smiled for the camera, “I don’t know if I can hold out for another picture.”

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One aspect of tradition they skipped was having their guests wait outside while they consummated their union during the second part of the ceremony. Since neither of them was a bride in the traditional sense, there was no need to prove chastity with a stained bed sheet (or whatever it was that they did). When he’d attended these ceremonies on his home planet, Illythe had been too young to be allowed to stay after part one, so he and Alex agreed it was fine to make it up as they went along. Aside from that, Alex’s experiences of having sex for an audience were now, and would remain, in the past.

“Alex... I’m wondering if you might indulge me...”

They had finally made it into bed together and had made love once. Well, they’d had a quickie with Illythe bent over the bathroom sink because Alex hadn’t been able to wait a second more.

Alex propped his head up on one hand as he watched Illythe sit up, the covers pooling around his slim hips.

“Anything. What is it?” Alex smiled when Illythe shivered from his fingers lightly stroking over one thigh.

“You should hear me out before you agree,” Illythe cautioned. He ran his long fingers through his hair with a sigh, shaking loose a few more braids. “I have never been the one inside.” Illythe said it quietly and averted his gaze as if he was embarrassed by this confession.

Alex chuckled softly and reached up, touching Illythe’s cheek. “So it seems one of us is a virgin.”

“Does that count?” Illythe raised his silver eyes once more to meet Alex’s gaze.

“I think so. It’s kind of hot to know I’ll be your first.” Alex winked, and moved his hand down, curling it around Illythe’s cock. It immediately began to stiffen in his grasp. He ran his thumb over the silver ring, moving it through the glans.

Illythe hissed, and his hips rose as he closed his eyes.

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“C’mere.” Alex rolled onto his back and propped his head up against the pillows, patting his chest. He smiled at the flushed red pattern that washed over Illythe’s cheeks and down his torso as Illythe straddled him. Alex took him into his mouth.

It had been a while since Alex had been a bottom—by choice, anyway, and Illythe was proportionately large, so Alex reached down to prepare himself a little while he sucked Illythe’s cock, inserting his own fingers. He’d almost forgotten how it felt, and nearly lost himself to the sensation when he tasted the salty tang of Illythe’s precum on his tongue.

“Alex—I’m getting too close...” Illythe gasped, his fingers gripping the headboard.

Alex released Illythe from the heat of his mouth and removed his own fingers. *Damn, that was close.* “Okay. Lie down.”

Illythe lay down on his back, his cock beating against his belly as Alex reached over for the bottle of lubricant and slicked them both up. He planted his feet on either side of Illythe’s hips and reached back between his legs, curling his fingers around Illythe’s cock.

Illythe’s hands made fists on Alex’s thighs.

“Ready?” Alex asked, although he was asking himself as much as Illythe.

Illythe nodded quickly, his sharp teeth pressed against his bottom lip.

Alex held the head of Illythe’s cock against his lubricated hole and slowly guided him in. The stretching felt like a bruise, but the deeper Alex took Illythe inside, the more relaxed he became. Alex had refrained from anal sex mostly because he never found it anything but uncomfortable. But as before, when they had first made love, Illythe’s body fit to his in a way he couldn’t imagine was possible. At least it had never been possible with another human being.

“I’m going to move now,” Alex said, once Illythe was seated completely. Illythe’s only response was a moan and his fingers spreading out across Alex’s thighs.

The piercing through Illythe’s cock pressed against Alex’s prostate as he raised and lowered his hips, sending jolts of ecstasy that shot tingles all the way through to his fingertips. “Oh my god—” Alex groaned and wrapped his arms around Illythe when he sat up to capture his mouth.

The height difference worked perfectly in this situation. There was no straining to maintain their kiss as Alex rode Illythe.

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Illythe rubbed his back, raising his hips to meet every downward thrust until finally, Alex sensed they were both going to come. Illythe came first, crying out against Alex's lips as he filled him. The sensation of his body flooded with warm, wet heat, and the ring grinding up against that sensitive bundle of nerves inside of him, soon sent Alex over the edge as well.

His body locked around Illythe, and Alex came with a shout, slicking both of them with his orgasm and continuing to come even after he'd emptied his balls.

"H-holy hell..." Alex went limp in Illythe's arms as his bones turned to jelly.

Illythe kissed his temple and lay them both gently back onto the mattress.

Alex muttered softly in protest as Illythe's cock slipped out, leaving him feeling surprisingly empty. That position was good—too good. Too much of that and both of their lifespans would be cut short.

"Thank you, Alex." Illythe brushed his lips against Alex's cheek. "You have honored me, and I am content."

Alex chuckled. "I would have hoped you'd be more than content. Christ, Illythe... that was... incredible."

"Do you prefer it?"

Alex didn't miss the tinge of disappointment in Illythe's tone. "It's all great, but I am hoping that we can save that for special occasions... like when I don't need to use my legs the next day." He raised his head, smiling down into Illythe's face and was warmed by his smile in return.

"Thank you, Alex. I'd never expected any part of my life would be so happy." Illythe's eyes were shining in the dim lighting of the room.

"That makes two of us." Alex brushed his lips along the corner of Illythe's mouth. "I love you, Illythe."

"Alex... you too." Illythe sighed, and Alex saw that his eyelids were starting to droop.

"Sweet dreams." Alex kissed each closed lid and settled himself down to sleep.

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Illythe felt the kiss, but was too tired to respond. For the first time since he was a child, he knew what it was to be safe, and it was all because of this beautiful human who had risked everything to come back for him.

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*“You’re happy now,” the dream-memory of Neil said. For once, in the dream he was alive and smiling.*

*“I’m happy,” Illythe confirmed, smiling in return. He watched Neil’s image begin to flicker.*

*“I can go then. I know you’ll be all right.”*

With that, the memory of Neil faded, taking with him every part of the guilt and hurt that his dying had caused Illythe.

There would always be a place in Illythe’s heart where Neil remained, but the love now belonged to Alex.

Illythe sighed, turning towards the brightness of his future, and felt those broken pieces of himself beginning to mend.

He was finally becoming whole.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Lia Black tends to do everything the hard way; beginning with being born backwards into the world and now raising a preteen by herself in upstate New York. Her career choices are no less extreme, including occupations of fine artist, computer geek, firefighter, and mortician's assistant—just to name a few.*

*Black's creative mind has been lovingly described as a "glorious kaleidoscope of fuckedupery". Her characters often suffer through the worlds she creates for them, which leaves them a little cranky and sometimes less lovable than others in a romance genre. Yet Black swears that someday, "there will be comedy".*

*Lia currently resides in upstate New York with her daughter, a mortgage, and three obnoxious cats.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# WILLIAM'S WHIMSY

By Susan Beck

## Photo Description

Two formerly straight young guys holding hands... the distance between them showing a fledgling relationship with some uncertainty and hesitation in their affection... the clasped hands indicating the desire for connection and their attraction to each other... will love conquer social and family expectations?

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I know this is a difficult task, but you may be just the person to take it on. Write a contemporary, HEA, **double** gay-for-you. What makes this a challenge? Well gay-for-you is always a challenge, and a double-gay-for you has been done very well by a select few. But these stories are dynamite.*

*See these two guys in the flannel shirts? Well, this isn't insta-love, but they are taken by surprise by the growing attraction, and it causes them to question who they are. The ramifications are different for each one. What will make this story fun and hot is how they get to the HEA. Awkward situations, soul searching and above all, believable based on their characters. The old miscommunication thing is not as interesting as internal conflict. Maybe they've been friends for years? How do they ease into the physical side of the relationship? Or maybe they don't ease into it, who knows. Be explicit, go wild! No Paranormal, Sci Fi or BDSM please.*

Sincerely,

Dacia

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** gamers, sweet/no sex, friends to lovers, gay for you, disabilities, men with pets, HFN, mute

**Word Count:** 14,824

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*Acknowledgements*

I'd like to thank Tim, Mary, Fiona and Alison for being wonderful beta readers and editor. Without their input, this story would not be readable at all. I'd also like to thank the real-life Josh who graciously accepted a role as my muse for this story.

*Authors Note*

This short story is the first part of a novella. An expanded, full version will be made available for purchase in 2015.

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## WILLIAM'S WHIMSY

By Susan Beck

*Ohmygod! I'm starting to suspect this woman doesn't need to breathe.*

*Perhaps she breathes through her ears?*

*How can anyone talk non-stop like this and not need to breathe?*

*I wonder if she can tell my brain is spending more time trying to stop my eyes from rolling than actually listening to the verbal barrage of instructions that she, as my Shift Supervisor/Trainer, has been spewing at me in an annoyingly pitched monotone for the last thirty fucking minutes!*

*I think I'm developing an eye twitch.*

*Don't roll your eyes. Don't roll your eyes. Don't roll your eyes.*

*Oh thank fuck. She's stopped telling me how the scanner thingy works and now we are going to explore the stock room. Yippee.*

*God I hope there isn't a test at the end of this training session. About all that I could tell them I've learned is that their shift supervisor has hellacious halitosis and the power to render me catatonic halfway through her initial sentence.*

\*\*\*\*

From my slumped position on the couch, I could see my brother getting out of his car. I called him *Seth the Beautiful*, but I couldn't quite imbue the name with the right amount of derision because, well, he was awesome. Despite the fact he'd had to look after me since our parents died, he'd only ever treated me with kindness and respect. This town was our new start; a chance for Seth to live his dream. So, here we were, the Emo and the Cop. Or should I say, the Check-out Chump and the Cop?

"Hey, Josh," Seth said with one of his cheery, movie-star smiles as he walked past the doorway.

He knew better than to wait for me to respond. He even *respected* my right to be an antisocial emo. God, he made it so fucking hard to be surly and, well, emo-ish.

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I pushed myself up from the couch and followed him into the back part of the house where our kitchen and laundry were. I could hear him starting up the washing machine in the adjoining laundry and felt a twinge of guilt that I hadn't done more chores before he got home from work. My job today hadn't been all that taxing unless one counted the energy required in refraining one's self from stabbing one's supervisor in the eye with a Bic pen.

Seth emerged from the laundry and pulled the door closed behind him to block the sound of gushing water. "How was your first day at work, Josh?"

I slouched against the wall and tried to glare at him through my fringe. Unfortunately, his earnest, open, almost hopeful expression made it hard to be honest. I knew he felt guilty for dragging me away from my friends to live in this microtown, and I didn't want to add to that guilt by being honest and saying, *I nearly stabbed my supervisor with a pen and would rather lick cats' arses than work in that place another day*. No. Instead, I mumbled, "Fine, I guess."

Seth beamed at me in pleased relief and swept me up in an exuberant hug before giving me a kiss on the top of my head.

"That's awesome, Josh. I'm so proud of you!"

Gently depositing me back on my feet, Seth scampered away toward the fridge. Jesus Christ on a pogo stick. Living with Seth was like having one of those big, blond, happy dogs. You know the ones they use for the blind? Golden retrievers. Yeah, Seth the Golden Retriever: earnest, loving, happy and easy-going. I was more... um, shit! Why'd I have to pick an analogy using things I know nothing about? Anyway, if there is a dog that is tall, skinny, morose and snappy, that'd be me.

The sound of the fridge door closing pulled me from my musings.

"Thanks for doing the shopping today, Josh."

"S'okay. I was there anyway," I replied with a shrug.

Seth gave me a quick smile before continuing, "Did you have a meal plan in mind when you picked out the items?"

Poor Seth. Any normal bloke would have ripped me a new one for filling the fridge with chocolate custard and tinned peaches, but not my Seth. I reckon he read a book on positive parenting the day after our parents died and burned it into his psyche. Regardless of how much I appeared to fuck up, he'd always be there with a smile and a positive word. So, instead of telling me about how tired

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and hungry he was, how he wanted a decent meal and that the fridge was filled with crap, he waited, ever hopeful his younger brother had thought of someone else aside from himself for once.

With a smile, I opened the freezer to expose the neatly stacked boxes of premade dinners. “Ta-da! They were on special, so I bought heaps!”

Seth’s face lit up in surprised relief as he grabbed a couple of the boxes and started ripping them open. “You having one, Josh?” Seth paused and glanced up at me.

“Nah, I had something earlier. I’m heading out to the hobby shop I saw today to see if there are any table gamers in town.”

Seth gave me a thumbs-up before turning back to the microwave and his pending meal.

\*\*\*\*

The hobby shop I’d noticed a few days ago lurked down a side street and had an old house attached to it. The fly-specked glass of the front window showed a display of remote control planes and boats, but a box, almost obscured by a Simpsons’ chess set, gave me hope. A start-up box for the game *Staff and Claw*. I’d had an awesome table set-up back in the city, but we’d been unable to bring it with us. I hoped I could join a local campaign and return to the world of noble ratty knights and their epic battles.

Inside, the store was dusty and cluttered. The geek behind the counter gave me a startled glance before returning to his comic. It surprised me to find a great selection of *Staff and Claw* figurines, cards and weapons in such a hick town. I spent some time lusting after the weapons upgrades on display before I noticed the catalogue. My hands shook as I reached for the glossy book. These things were like gold, and I’d only ever managed to buy one other. In the city, they sold out in seconds and then reached ridiculous prices on eBay hours later. Who knew that this crappy little dive of a shop would have a copy? Clutching the book to my chest, I called Seth on my mobile.

“Ewow?” I’d obviously called him midmeal.

“Seth? They’ve got a *Clawpedia*,” I whispered into the phone. I don’t know why I’d suddenly become all covert and secretive, but until I’d paid for the treasure in my arms, I had the irrational fear that it would be snatched from me by hordes of gamers who were just waiting for me to speak above a murmur.

“What? Josh? Are you there?”

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I furtively turned my back on the store guy who was probably too engrossed in the shenanigans of Superman to give a fuck about me anyway, and whispered slightly louder into the phone, "They've got a *Clawpedia!*" I may have squeaked on the last syllable, but I was too excited to care.

"Yeah?" I could clearly hear the "So?" Seth hadn't said.

"CanIbuyit?" I breathed into my phone.

Now before you get all incredulous about me not having my own money, Seth and I only managed to survive by living with a tight budget. When I had my own income, I got to keep some of it to spend on whatever I wanted. Seth was real good about that, but the move to this dinky town had seriously depleted our savings, and I still hadn't been paid at my new job.

I panted into the phone as I waited for Seth's reply.

"How much is it?"

I glanced down at the glossy cover and closed my eyes in despair. Forty-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents. A shitload to pay for a catalogue. I whispered the price and held my breath in anticipation.

I could hear Seth's sigh and braced myself for rejection. "Okay, Josh. Get it if you want to, mate."

I blinked in surprise before the rush of relief made my knees weak and my shell of emo disdain crack. "Ohmygodthankyousomuch."

I could hear the smile in Seth's voice as he replied before disconnecting, "S'okay, Joshy. See you soon."

Pocketing the phone, I stared down at the *Clawpedia*. I may have petted it a bit too, but I'll deny it if I'm ever challenged. The cough of the store clerk roused me from my adoring contemplation.

"Um... mate? You gonna buy that? It's just that I need to close up."

I wiped the counter off with my sleeve and gently placed the book on the now dust-free glass. The clerk's eyebrows hitched at my action but I didn't care.

The clerk reached for the book and turned it around so he could see the price. I resisted the nearly overwhelming urge to slap his hands away but it was a near thing.

After he rang up the price, I handed over my card to pay. "We have a table out back if you like to play," he said.

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I stared at the clerk as I tried to make sense of his words. I'd been rendered stupid by the overwhelming awesomeness that was the *Clawpedia*. Then I remembered the reason I came into the store in the first place.

Before I could form a coherent reply, the clerk handed me my card and receipt and spoke again, "We'll be starting a new campaign on Friday night if you wanna join?"

I couldn't believe it. *Staff and Claw* was a boutique game not played by many people, and yet I'd lucked out and found a town with an active table. I smiled and we spent the next few minutes negotiating times and the logistics of snacks and drinks. It seemed they had a roster worked out for who brought what and when, and adding a member to the roster without some sort of committee meeting was a huge fucking drama. In the end I offered to pay for pizza to be delivered and said I'd bring my own bevvy's. Getting anal over who bought the Skittles and dip just wasn't on my to-do list.

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Seth glanced up as I dashed past the lounge room door on my way to my room, catalogue clutched to my chest.

"Do ya wanna watch telly with me, Josh?" Seth shouted as I stepped into my room.

"Not tonight, Seth!" I replied as I simultaneously slammed the door and kicked my shoes across the room.

I quickly shucked my clothes and dived under the blankets. Shoving a couple of pillows under my chest, I reverently placed the *Clawpedia* on the sheet in front of me. Then, taking a deep breath, I opened the catalogue and became instantly transported to the world of warring rats, magic and chivalry of *Staff and Claw*. The pictures were so evocative that the lack of words wasn't a loss. You could see the story of epic battles and heroic deeds unfolding in the intricate pictures. Once past the vivid imagery, the *Clawpedia* reverted to a standard catalogue listing the various figures, cards and weapons you could buy for gaming. I looked with covetous eyes on the pewter figurines. Although they were no advantage in battle, I still admired their beauty. I owned the basic plastic set and had spent hours painstakingly painting each figurine.

I made a note of any new weapons I wanted to purchase before turning to the community chat at the end of the book. Here, gamers were able to make suggestions and send in pictures of their tables and collections. I'd never sent in



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anything because I couldn't buy the '*pedia* regularly but perhaps, if the hobby shop proved to be a consistent source, I'd send in some of my many photos and drawings.

Eventually, I got to the stunning final page. The pièce de résistance of the *Clawpedia*. Every edition featured an original painting by the creator of *Staff and Claw* depicting the crest of one of the gamers featured in the community blog. One day, I promised myself, I'd see my clan crest in the book.

Glancing at the luminous numbers on my clock, I realised I'd spent hours pawing over the '*pedia* and regretfully, I closed the book and rearranged the pillows under my head. Switching off the lamp, I closed my eyes and planned the upcoming campaign in my head. Battle cries and heroic charges with the clash of weapons pervaded my dreams.

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The next morning, Seth got me up for my first real shift at the store. I'd set the alarm but it had woken Seth and not me. I couldn't believe I had to start work so frickin' early. Who goes grocery shopping at six in the goddamn morning?

Seth made me a coffee as I showered and got dressed. I say showered but really, it became more of a lean against the wall and get wet. After once forgetting to rinse the soap from my armpits and having to suffer the itch and irritation all day, I didn't make the mistake of thinking I could function predawn. The water woke me up but I'd have a real shower, with soap, later after work.

When I got to the store, I waited outside and watched a young guy sitting on a bench near the doors. Dressed casually in jeans and a blue flannel shirt, I couldn't work out why someone who didn't *obviously* need to be up this early for work would voluntarily choose to do his shopping in the darkness of dawn.

After the doors were unlocked, I dropped my jacket off in the staff lunch room before following the directions to the register nearest the shift supervisor. I could no longer see the guy from outside who'd followed me inside, so I assumed he'd be wandering the aisles somewhere in the bowels of the store. The store appeared still and silent apart from the nauseating Muzak. After another few minutes we started getting a steady stream of customers who, by their clothes, were on their way to work. During a brief lull I noticed the guy from earlier hovering near the service desk. The supervisor chick hadn't noticed him as she talked into the phone so I wandered over to offer my inept help. God

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help us both if he wanted to know where items were in the store. I was completely clueless unless he needed chocolate custard, peaches or TV dinners.

“Can I help you?” I asked with, what I hoped, was a pleasant smile. Smiling wasn't usually my forte. Lip-curling sneers were usually more my thing.

The guy looked slightly panicked and started to shuffle his feet. I couldn't work out what his problem was because I may be tall but my stick-thin frame was not what most people would consider threatening.

We stood there in awkward stalemate until Ms Killer-Breath finally finished her call and turned to see the two of us standing behind her.

“Oh. William, I'm so sorry I didn't see you there.” Her tone of voice startled me. She had just talked to this William dude like he was retarded... and maybe deaf.

I tuned back into the one-sided conversation.

“William, let me introduce you to our new Customer Service Officer, Josh,” she said slowly and with exaggerated diction.

I smiled at the William dude again and wondered why, when no other customers were getting personally introduced, this William bloke got special attention.

Turning to me, I got the full effect of the halitosis from hell as Killer-Breath whispered in my ear. “William will need you to check his shopping list to ensure he hasn't forgotten anything.”

Weird but whatever I thought as, with a blush, William handed me the handwritten note. Clearing my throat, I started to read. “Milk, bread, yogurt, peanut butter...” I glanced at the conveyer belt to check each item appeared as I read it off. I could see that William was embarrassed by the whole procedure so I decided to try to lighten the mood as I continued reading the list out loud. “...mayonnaise, tomato paste, pasta, rice and, final item, a rat.” My decision to add a rat as the last item was heavily influenced by my mild obsession with *Staff and Claw* but I waited to see if William would register or react to my addition. William continued to add the last few items to the conveyer before looking up at me and, with a smirk, reached into his jacket and bought forth one of the hugest fucking rats I'd ever seen. He gently placed the rat on the conveyer belt before quirking his eyebrow at me in an obvious challenge. Ball was in my court and I didn't really know how to react. Before I could recover from my shock, a screech came from behind me as Killer-Breath noticed the rat sitting placidly on the conveyer belt alongside the groceries.

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“William!” she shrieked. “Put Darktan away right now!” Shaking in outrage, Killer-Breath leant across the conveyer belt and whisper-shouted at the unrepentant William, “If you do that again, I will have to ban Darktan from the store.”

Again, her tone was that of an adult chastising a child, which I could see pissed William off. He retrieved the rat and stood silently while I processed his shopping and Killer-Breath continued to harangue and hiss reproachfully at the silent William. As he paid for the groceries the store phone started to ring, which distracted Killer-Breath long enough for William to make his escape.

The rest of the shift passed uneventfully and after my five hours I gladly donned my jacket in preparation to leave. I'd nearly made it out the door but Killer-Breath saw me and waved me over to the service desk.

“Josh, you did good today. I just wanted to warn you that you'll probably have to deal with William every morning as he can't seem to remember more than a few items and tends to do lots of small shops rather than one large shop a week.”

Slightly taken aback by the *warning* I reassured Killer-Breath that I could cope with the onerous duty of reading a shopping list for the poor dude, and when the phone again distracted her, I left.

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The next couple of days dragged by with the same routine at work sans Darktan making an appearance. I could see the lump of his body under William's jacket but the beady eye of Killer stopped me from requesting another look-see.

Despite my attempts to engage William in conversation, he remained silent. After the second day of shy smiles and no talking, I asked Killer about him. Turns out the poor bugger couldn't talk because of some kind of brain injury he'd suffered as a kid. After that, I just chattered away without expecting a response and by the end of the week, William started participating with body language and his expressive face. Turns out I could talk enough for both of us when I switched off the emo long enough to form sentences rather than just grunting.

One Thursday, a few weeks after starting work, I again found myself checking the shopping list for William while telling him all about my new job at the supermarket. I'd already told him all about Seth and our move to his town. I prattled on, happy to provide all the dialogue. It didn't seem one-sided

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because he was an attentive listener and could speak volumes with hand gestures and his facial contortions. Chatting to him had become the highlight of my days, which is what probably caused my disappointment when I didn't see him waiting outside the supermarket the next morning.

The day seemed dimmer and the shift longer without the highlight of William's visit. I had just started to consider closing my register when a handwritten shopping list appeared in front of me. My mood improved instantly and with a grin I started to check the items on William's list with the groceries laid out on the conveyer belt. Once I'd served him, I finished closing the register in preparation for leaving. I chattered away to William as I tidied up my station.

"Sleep in this morning, did ya?" I asked.

William shook his head and with a blush mimed that he wanted to walk with me.

I gave him a grin and told him to wait on the bench outside while I clocked off and grabbed my jacket from the staff room.

Exiting the store, I looked around for him and saw him waiting where I'd asked him to.

"Since you've got cold stuff in your bag, how's about we walk back to your place, drop the shopping off and then find something to buy for lunch?"

William gesticulated and mimed as we headed toward the wooded hill that arose behind the shopping centre.

Despite our limited time together, I understood William perfectly, and he seemed to appreciate having a mate who could, or would, bother chatting with him.

William led me through a small break in the fence at the bottom of the hill and we followed a well-worn path through the trees until a house appeared on a small terrace about a third of the way up the hill. A well-maintained weatherboard, its veranda faced the town so that you could see everything laid out like a 3-D map. I could see the ocean as a faint smudge of blue in the hazy distance. The panoramic vista kept me so captivated that I didn't notice the man sitting at the end of the veranda and startled when he started to talk.

"So, you're the one William's been chattering about," he said in a gravelly voice.

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I walked toward him until features became clearer in the shadowy gloom. “I didn’t think William *could* talk,” I replied.

The man turned to contemplate the view and I started to think he wasn’t going to answer me when he fixed me with a stern eye. “If you know how to listen to William, you’ll understand what he’s saying.”

At that point, William stuck his head out the door and started gesticulating madly. I could feel the close perusal of the man as I watched William intently. Finally, I figured out the gist and, with a smile, told him I’d love to stay for lunch with him and his father.

I looked at the man, feeling smug. He nodded before turning again to look out over the town spread out below. I walked toward the door where William had disappeared but halted when he started to talk again.

“I’m his grandfather. His parents were killed in the accident that damaged William,” he said without looking at me.

I waited to see if any more information would be forthcoming and after being ignored for a minute or two, entered the relative gloom of the house. I followed the sounds I could hear from the rear until I found William making sandwiches in an ancient kitchen. I noticed that the ever-present Darktan lump seemed to be missing and asked William about his absence. He quickly pointed toward a door at the back of the kitchen before continuing with his sandwich preparation.

The door had probably originally led outside the house, but through a window above the kitchen sink, I could see the walls of a new extension where once would have been a lean-to laundry and Hill’s Hoist-dominated yard. I itched to explore but William distracted me by walking past with a teetering pile of sandwiches. I followed him into a lounge room near the front of the house and settled myself into a chair, whilst William grabbed a plate and some sandwiches and disappeared out the door to the veranda. I could hear William’s grandfather thank him for the food.

Happy that his dour grandfather wouldn’t be joining us, I spent the time while we ate, and then tidied up, regaling William with tales of battles won and lost in *Staff and Claw*. Eventually I noticed the increased gloom and told William I’d have to leave so I’d have enough time to get home, shower and change clothes before meeting my fellow gamers at the hobby store. As I prepared to go, I noticed William’s bereft look.

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“Do you want to come and watch us play?” I asked. “You’ll probably get bored but you’re welcome to come.”

William nodded and raced out to his grandfather. I followed and watched the *conversation* between them. Eventually I clarified my invitation to have William come to town and watch me play. I told William to meet me at the supermarket in an hour and he raced off inside, to get ready I assumed. I turned back to his grandfather, who watched me closely.

“We have pizza at the game. Is that okay?”

Although William was a similar age to myself, I didn’t know how much autonomy his grandfather allowed him and I didn’t want to jeopardise our fledgling friendship by antagonising this stern man.

“Should be fine. He don’t like pineapple on his pizza though,” came his gruff reply. I turned to leave but paused as he started to talk again. “Don’t break his heart.”

I spun around and stared at the old man. What the fuck did that mean? “What do you mean?” I asked in confusion.

“Just because he can’t talk don’t mean he can’t feel. People can’t be bothered with him after a while. Find *talking* to him too *hard*,” he said with a sneer.

I stepped up close so he could see the sincerity in my eyes in the dusky light. “I’d not do that. William’s been a good friend since I moved to town. I wouldn’t... I *won’t* treat him like that.” After seeing his nod of acknowledgement, I spun around and jumped off the veranda. “We’ll drive him home after the game,” I yelled over my shoulder as I jogged toward the track.

Back home, Seth and a mate were ensconced in front of the Friday night footy show on TV. I gave him a brief wave as I dashed to the bathroom. I couldn’t muck around if I wanted to be on time to meet William. After my shower, I dressed in my emo garb of black jeans, T-shirt, boots and jacket. Usually I would add some eyeliner and black lipstick but the shocked looks from my fellow gamers on that first Friday meant I now tempered my emo-ish look so as to not frighten the natives. We were in the country after all. Although I missed the city and my friends, the games and the friendship I’d developed with William were going a long way toward making me happy here.

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After a last look in the mirror to check my appearance, I grabbed my gaming kit and headed toward the front door. At the lounge room I paused to say goodbye to Seth.

“I’m off to the game,” I said over the football commentator’s excited babble.

Seth leant back in his seat so he could see past his mate to me at the door. “Have fun, Joshy.”

“Can you pick me up tonight?” I asked.

Seth wasn’t typically a big drinker; him being a cop and losing our parents to a drunk driver meant we were extra careful about drinking and driving. Usually he only drove when completely sober, and I could see a couple of beer cans on the coffee table.

Seth grimaced and looked at his watch. “I’ve already had a couple, Josh.”

Seth’s mate leaned back and started to scratch his balls. God, some men were Neanderthals. With a burp that rattled the windows, he started to talk. “I’ll pick him up.”

Seth and I both stiffened. And then I saw the flush of anger cover Seth’s face. “You are such a stupid dick, Mick. You’ve had more to drink than me!” Seth yelled, inches away from Mick’s face.

“Dude! Chillax!” Mick said. “Two beers won’t put me over the fucking limit!”

I could see Seth trying to calm himself as he carefully modulated his tone. “Josh and I don’t get in a car with anyone who’s had a drink. Ever.”

I hated that I’d caused all this angst between Seth and his mate and rushed to end the argument. “Don’t worry about it, Seth. I’ll be walking my friend William home after the game so I’ll be later than normal.” Before I could cause any more problems I dashed out the door.

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Approaching the supermarket, I could see William sitting where I’d seen him that first morning all those weeks ago. He had Darktan out and petted the rat as he watched the people entering and leaving the shops. Calling out a hello, I jogged up to him as he greeted me with a beatific smile. I led us toward the

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hobby shop and continued my tales of epic battles as we walked. Darktan, sitting on William's shoulder, seemed as engrossed in the stories as his owner.

Entering the hobby store I glanced at the magazine display rack on reflex to check for a new *Clawpedia*. I knew one'd be out soon and my fellow gamers and I were eager to pick up the next instalment. Just as I spied the glossy cover of a new catalogue, Shaun, aka Yellow Fang, rushed into the store.

With an excited squeak, he dashed over to his shop counter and started to rummage around. "Dude. You're the new character being released next month!"

"What the fuck, Fang?" I asked in bemusement.

Popping his head up above the glass counter he elaborated. "Remember the gossip about a new mage character being introduced?"

"Yeah?" Everyone'd heard that rumour but it still didn't explain what he'd meant with his earlier comment.

"Welllll," Fang said, "the character is you!"

"Are you calling me a rat?" I said, perplexed. Every character in the game, up until now apparently, had been a rat. I was seriously confused.

Expelling a huff of exasperation, Fang ducked back down and continued to rummage around. With a grunt, he finally slapped the merchant's product guide on the glass of the counter and started flicking through the pages. We'd all drooled over this book's predecessor in weeks previously but hadn't had an opportunity to peruse the newest edition. Although the *Clawpedia* contained the same information, we all felt more comfortable wearing out the less ornate merchant copy while fantasising about the ultimate clan rather than reducing our precious catalogues to a dog-eared condition. We all revered our *Clawpedias* and treated them with virtual kid gloves. Fang drew me from my musings when he slapped his hand on the open page of his catalogue and turned it around so I could see what had caused his excitement.

Holy shit! On the page in front of me was a figurine that bore a striking resemblance to me.

"Far out!" I muttered.

"I know!" Fang squeaked. "You should see the illustrations in the *Clawpedia*, dude. That shit is just freaky."



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I handed Fang the money I'd hoarded for this very transaction and picked up the glossy book, the cover of which was dominated by a picture of the new mage character. Manga-esque in appearance, I stared at the stylised image of what I saw every time I looked in a mirror. I sensed movement beside me and glanced up. In the kerfuffle I'd forgotten all about William. He was looking at the picture on the cover of the *Clawpedia* with a small smile on his face.

Giving William a nudge to indicate direction, I herded him toward the back room of the store. This would probably be our final night of this campaign as Fang had formed an alliance with Stumpy and they were crushing Rex and myself with their overwhelming strength. I had to admire their strategy but had plans for our next campaign that would derail their warrior and weapon combination and hopefully give my clan ultimate victory.

With a final perplexed glance at the *Clawpedia* cover art, I carefully stashed it away in my kit bag and, with a running monologue for William's benefit, started setting up my clan figurines where the toothpick-flag markers indicated I'd finished up last week. Armies finally in place, I ordered pizza, and while we waited for it to be delivered, the delicate process of developing strategy commenced. Using the twelve-faceted dice, we all took turns letting luck determine our strength and weaknesses for the night. I heard Stumpy groan after his throw but quickly became distracted by the colours and numbers I'd thrown. I sat back with William leaning against my shoulder as I whispered my plans for the clan's defence of our fortress.

Darktan used our touching shoulders as a bridge to me and my open-necked shirt, and disappeared down under the fabric. Although I'd gotten used to him over the weeks of speaking with William, this was the closest I'd been to a real rat and I found myself frozen. I didn't know if I'd be bitten if I moved around too much so ended up tensing and breathing shallowly in an attempt to not disturb or annoy him. William laughed at my obvious discomfort and encouraged me to continue talking and I found myself relaxing and forgetting about the warm lump nestled against my belly.

Once the pizza arrived we all grabbed a few slices and migrated toward the table so we could modify our troops, their weapons and placement dependent on our dice results. William gave me another one of his smiles when I handed him pizza sans pineapple and I got a little swoopy feeling in my tummy. I'd never felt that before and decided that I'd try to earn more of William's smiles in the future.

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The addition of pizza had another effect: the drowsing Darktan had decided to investigate the smell and had been banished to the couch after he'd tried to steal my food. Although mortified by Darktan's behaviour, William had broken off a piece of his crust and given that to the rat so that we could both eat unmolested.

When we'd all finished eating, we did a quick tidy up and started the game in earnest. I explained the moves and strategy to William as the game progressed and he surprised me with his avid interest. I thought he would be bored, but instead, he seemed fascinated by the game and our interactions with each other. As predicted I lost and we sat back to watch Rex's inevitable defeat. While we watched the wince-inducing death throes of Clan Rex, Stumpy's girlfriend arrived.

I found Clair irritating but Stumpy seemed oblivious to his girlfriend's annoying traits. Despite the fact that Fang and Stumpy were midmanoeuvre, she demanded a kiss and seemed to take great delight in delaying the game with her cooing and petting. I noticed a flushed-faced William watching the overt display and resented the fact that Clair had made him uncomfortable. I gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze and reluctantly started to pack up my kit in preparation for leaving. By the time I clipped my kit bag closed, Clan Rex had been eliminated. Clair squealed and clapped before congratulating Stumpy with an overenthusiastic kiss. Again, William blushed in reaction to the overt PDA and I decided to take him home rather than staying for a post-battle munchy and movie fest. With a wave to Rex and Stumpy, I herded William toward the shopfront and said goodbye to Fang as he locked the door behind us.

As had become our routine when together, I started to prattle away to William as we walked. I explained that Seth couldn't drive us home so I'd walk him home before going home myself. Although the hobby shop was away from the main shopping district, we needed to walk through the busier part of town to get to William's house. Being a Friday night, there were crowds of people outside the restaurants and pubs in the main street. William seemed fascinated by everything and I found myself matching my pace to his so that he could take his time and look his fill. Suddenly William halted and stared at a couple who were propping up the wall outside the pub. The woman had wrapped one of her legs around her guy's hip and they were, to all intents, fucking in public. William's rapt look became contemplative as we continued to walk. I started to suspect that he hadn't been exposed to sex much if his reactions were to be understood.

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After a couple of minutes William started to gesticulate and mime. I watched him intently until I thought I understood what he was saying or rather, asking.

“You wanna know what they were doing?” I confirmed.

At William’s nod I cleared my throat and tried to determine how much or how little I’d have to explain. I decided to do some reconnaissance first.

“You know about ‘the birds and the bees’, right?” I asked.

At William’s look of confusion I muttered a few choice curse words and slapped at William’s hands, which were currently swooping around as he tried to determine what the fuck I was talking about birds and bees for. Taking a deep breath I started explaining what we had just witnessed.

“You know the basics, right? You know what kissing is?” I looked at William and noticed the blush on his face as we passed through the glow of a street light. William nodded but then made gagging actions and I gathered that he’d found the display put on by Stumpy and Clair as revolting as I had. I continued with my impromptu sex education.

“Yeah well, Claire and Stumpy are not the best examples but when you really like someone... when you *love* someone... you kiss them and do other stuff with them,” I finished lamely. I decided that it was much harder than I thought to talk about sex and discovered some belated sympathy for Seth as I remembered the awkward conversation we’d had years previously.

William seemed to ponder what I’d said and then started humping the air in a parody of the couple we’d seen outside the pub. I quickly interrupted his impromptu lewd street performance and decided on a different strategy.

“You know how Naomi really likes Ryan in Neighbours?” I asked.

William looked at me like I was losing my mind.

“You have watched Neighbours, right?” I asked with a rising sense of the surreal. I couldn’t fathom how anyone could call themselves Australian and not watch the flagship soap opera. Unless William’s issue prevented him from processing what he saw on a TV as well as what he read?

I suddenly realised that William was trying to tell me something and I shook off my musings and concentrated on him and his actions. Eventually it clicked that he didn’t watch TV. I stared at him in horror.

“What? Never? You don’t *ever* watch TV?”

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William shook his head and continued gesticulating. When his message finally clicked, I let out a sympathetic “Dude!” I had no idea how one could survive with no television at all.

I pondered the concept of never watching TV as we again started walking toward William’s home. I then realised that his innocence was more profound than I originally thought if he’d never had the education we all received subliminally from the shows and advertisements available 24/7 on TV. *Help*, I thought to myself as I considered the daunting task of educating William about sex. We continued our trek in silence as I pondered a solution that didn’t involve me personally having to explain all the ins and outs of sex, no pun intended. Then, I remembered *American Pie*. The one movie guaranteed to educate William in the ways of lurve with minimal input from me. I decided to hire the DVD and treat William to sex education... movie style. I gave myself a virtual pat on the back and turned to William to ask him over the following night to watch the movie. The invitation earned me another of William’s smiles and vigorous head-nodding.

At the house I checked with William’s grandfather about the following night’s plans before trudging back into the town and letting myself into the dark and silent house.

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The next morning I woke to an empty house. Seth had obviously already left for his early shift and either his mate had gone home the night before or had left when Seth had in the predawn dark. I spent the day cleaning and catching up with the accumulated laundry. Although not favourite activities for a day off, I worked a lot less than Seth and felt my efforts to keep our home neat and tidy made his life easier. When he arrived home later in the afternoon, I followed him around the house as he showered and dressed, chattering away at him about the plans I’d made for the night ahead.

At one point I noticed the bemused smile on Seth’s face and halted midsentence. “What?” I asked.

Seth pulled me to him and almost smothered me in a hug. “It’s good to finally see you happy is all, Josh.”

I wriggled until he finally let me go and I stepped back to glare at him. “What do you mean?” I snapped. “I was happy before.”

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Seth ruffled my hair and laughed. “Yeah but it was so hard to tell under that emo mask of silent suffering.”

My reply was eloquent. “Fuck off!”

Seth donned a look of fake outrage and started to stalk me. “Now, Josh...” he said as I backed away from his steady advance. “I might have to arrest you for offensive language.”

With a snarky smile, I tossed a “Fuck you!” at Seth before dashing out the door and down the hallway. I heard Seth’s heavy tread behind me and felt a pluck at my shirt before I dodged into the lounge room and pulled away from his tenuous grip. Dashing to the far side of the coffee table, I turned to face my brother.

“Getting old, bro,” I taunted.

With a roar, Seth charged around the table toward me and I gave an unmanly scream as I jumped up and over the coffee table and back toward the hallway again. I could feel Seth’s presence at my back and knew he would catch me soon unless I could find a barrier big enough to separate us. Dashing into Seth’s bedroom I frantically started crawling across his bed in an attempt to put it between us. With a triumphant shout, Seth grabbed my ankle and dragged me back. My grasping hands snagged the sheet and it untucked and dragged with me toward Seth, who was currently spanking my bum in mock outrage. I wriggled and writhed in an attempt to escape but Seth was just too strong. Eventually he stopped and flopped down on the mattress beside me, panting from exertion. In the wrestle all the sheets and blankets had slithered to the floor, leaving the mattress bare and forlorn. I propped up my head and looked at Seth as he regained his breath.

“I’m not making your bed, old man,” I said with a smile.

Seth looked at me out of the corner of his eye and I braced myself for more attacks upon my person.

“How’s about you *help* me with the bed and you can tell me all about your awesome plan to educate your friend about the ways of love,” Seth said as he rolled into a sitting position on the edge of the mattress.

With a huff of annoyance I agreed and we started to untangle the mess of linen beside the bed as I told him my plan to watch *American Pie* and leave the explaining to the Hollywood experts.

Seth stopped sorting the blankets and looked at me with incredulity. “*American Pie*? Seriously?”

“What?” It seemed like a reasonable plan to me.

Seth started laughing and I started to get pissed off the longer he continued. “What’s wrong with *American Pie*?” I asked with asperity.

Seth tried to stop laughing by breathing deeply. Wiping tears from his eyes he giggled before making an effort to answer me. “I dunno, Josh. It just tickled me that you’d use that movie for Sex Ed.”

Again I failed to see the issue Seth had with the movie. It had cyber-sex, drunk sex, MILF sex, girlfriend sex and it fairly clearly showed what *not* to do with masturbation. I thought I’d covered all the bases fairly well. “What would you suggest then, *oh sex guru*?” I snarled.

“Porn,” Seth said as he continued to chuckle weakly while sorting out the blankets, completely oblivious to my shock and horror. Eventually he noticed that I wasn’t helping him and looked up at me from his position crouched on the floor. “What?” he asked.

“I can’t show him porn!” I whisper-hissed at Seth.

Seth’s face scrunched up in confusion. “Why not?”

I spluttered and waved my hands around as I tried to find a way to articulate my perturbation at his suggestion. Eventually I gave up on a coherent response and just went with, “That would just be icky.”

“Icky?” Seth asked with renewed chuckles.

“Yes,” I said as I slumped back onto the bed. “Icky.”

“Um. Okaaaaay,” Seth said as he got up to loom over my prostrate form. “Have you ever actually watched any porn?” Seth asked with a suspicious twitch to his lips.

I rolled my eyes with pretend disdain as my face flushed hotly. “Of course I’ve watched porn! Ijustdidn’tlikeit,” I mumbled.

Seth’s eyebrows shot toward his hairline as he looked at me speculatively. “Hmmm,” he said with a hard stare. “How’s about I find some soft porn with a plot?” he asked. “I think I’ve got some of that shit left over from when Sonya and I dated. She always wanted a frickin’ storyline.” The eye roll was apparent in his tone.

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“You watched porn with Sonya?” I asked in a horrified voice. “But she was so nice!” I moaned from behind my hands. This was all too much.

Seth laughed and pushed me off the mattress. I landed on the floor with an indignant yelp and glared up at him.

“Go and get your mate and I’ll organise the food and entertainment,” Seth said as he gave me a hand up from the floor.

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By the time I made it to William’s house, I was puffing from my hurried pace. I spied him sitting on the steps of the veranda with a small bag at his feet and Darktan in his lap. When he saw me emerge from the trees, his face lit up with a smile and I felt that weird swoopy feeling in my tummy again. Grinning back, I walked the remaining distance until I stood over a beaming William. Leaning down to give Darktan a scratch behind the ears, I asked him if he was ready to go. Looking up as William stood, I spied his grandfather sitting in the gloom of the veranda.

“I’ll walk William home tomorrow?” I called out.

Receiving a nod of acknowledgement from his grandfather, I turned and started walking back toward the track with William in step beside me, Darktan trailing us both as he snuffled and explored the path behind us. When we reached the bottom of the hill William made a weird clicking sound and Darktan bounded toward us and ran up William’s legs and body until he perched on his shoulder. Now that we weren’t setting our pace to suit Darktan we sped up and were soon entering the house.

I led William to my room, pulled the trundle out from under my bed so he could dump his bag, and gave him a quick tour of the house before leading him to the lounge where Seth and his mate were again watching football on the TV. Seth’s mate was sprawled on the couch and with Seth in one armchair, there was only the second armchair left for William and myself.

“This is William,” I said as we squeezed into the only remaining armchair. Seth gave a vague wave with his beer and Seth’s mate belched loudly as he completely ignored us. I knew we’d have to wait for an ad break so I told William I’d be back and I dashed to my room for the latest *Clawpedia* and my scrapbook. Once I’d wriggled and squeezed myself back into the cramped space beside William, I proceeded to flick through the *Clawpedia* while whispering a continuous stream of chatter about my dreams for my clan. I

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showed him my designs for a new table and my many sketches of flags and emblems I had drawn for my clan. William seemed engrossed and sat beside me as I prattled, patting the drowsing rat in his arms with a small smile on his face.

Eventually the half-time siren sounded on the television and Seth muted the TV as he turned toward William and myself. "Sorry about that," he said with a self-depreciating grin. "I'm Seth," he reintroduced himself as he leant forward with a hand extended for William to shake. "And the slob taking up the entire couch is Mick."

Mick glanced away from the TV at the sound of his name and looked startled to see William and me sitting in the chair beside him.

"Oh. Hi," he mumbled before leaning forward to get another beer from the cooler on the floor.

The position obviously put a strain on him because he let out a window-rattling, trumpeting fart that made Darktan startle and scramble to William's shoulder.

Instantly, chaos broke out as Darktan's movement drew Seth and Mick's attention and they both reacted like girls and screamed while scrambling as far away from the rat as the room allowed.

"What the fuck is that?" Mick squeaked as his eyes practically popped from their sockets.

Stifling the giggle I could feel bubbling up, I gravely introduced Darktan to the two cowering men across the room. Recovering from his fright, Darktan started bruxing and I couldn't stop my laugh as I watched the two men shudder at the grinding sound.

Eventually, after Seth and Mick had moved the couch and armchair a significant distance from where William and I were sitting, we were all seated and calm.

Seth and Mick started talking about what kind of pizza they were going to order as Mick opened the beer he'd dropped in his flight from Darktan.

"Guys?" Seth and Mick turned to look at me. Mick's shudder as the bruxing became audible in the quiet nearly made me laugh again but I rushed to get my opinion heard before the next half of the footy game started and Seth and Mick, again, became oblivious. "William and I had pizza last night. Can we get Chinese or something?"



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Seth looked to Mick who shrugged to indicate his indifference to the change in plans and Seth turned back to me. “Sure, Josh. How’s about you two order it so it arrives at the end of the game and we’ll eat it with a movie?”

Levering myself out of the cramped space between William and the chair arm, I led him toward the kitchen as Seth unmuted the TV and the game recommenced.

In the kitchen I laughed at my memories of Seth and Mick’s dash away from the rat and when William asked me why I was laughing with look and gesture, I reduced him to giggles and tears with my imitation of their flight across the room to cower against the wall.

Recovering somewhat, I grabbed the Chinese takeout menu from under the magnet on the fridge and opened it on the bench so William could help me choose what we’d order. William looked perplexed at the menu items and I couldn’t believe that he’d never had Chinese food before. With his virgin palate in mind, I ordered a range of dishes and entrées as well as the ubiquitous special fried rice so we could share and William would be exposed to the best flavours, in my opinion, that Chinese food could deliver.

Back in the lounge room there were shouts and cursing coming from Seth and his mate as the game continued on the TV. “Do you wanna go to my room until tea arrives?” I asked William.

He gave me a relieved nod and after collecting my *Clawpedia* and scrapbook, we headed to the relative quiet of my bedroom. The next forty minutes were taken up by me showing William all my game figurines and the weapon upgrades I’d managed to collect. We were interrupted by the sound of the doorbell and I reluctantly shepherded William out of my room and toward the lounge again. Telling him to have a seat, I dashed to the kitchen and grabbed the plates, cutlery and drinks I’d prepared earlier and carried the teetering pile back toward the sounds of the victorious team’s song.

Seth helped me set everything down on the coffee table and I served up an enormous plate of food for William before serving myself a heaping plate. Because the chair was cramped, I ended up sitting on the floor with my back against William’s chair and his legs providing me with something to slouch against.

William had taken a few tentative bites of the food when I first handed it to him and now scarfed it down with obvious enjoyment. The wrap-up

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commentary still played on the TV but I knew that when we'd finished eating, Seth would let me watch the movie we'd hired for the night.

It didn't take us long to finish everything on our plates and Seth volunteered himself and Mick to clean up and do the dishes so I could put the movie on. Mick grumbled about slave drivers as he desultorily picked up the empty beer cans and carried them toward the kitchen.

While I set up the movie, William went back to my room to get Darktan and as he re-entered the room I directed him toward the couch. Joining him a few moments later, I hit play on the remote and settled back to watch the movie. After the scene where the boys all talked about their pact to lose their virginity before the end of school, William huffed a laugh and turned to me with a questioning look. I grinned unrepentantly and confessed my plan to educate and entertain. He shook his head at me but soon became engrossed in the disastrous tale of pubescent angst that was *American Pie*. He gasped in horror at all the right places and groaned in commensurable pain as the characters stumbled from one humiliating scene to the next.

Once Seth and Mick had finished tidying up, they joined William and me in front of the television. Instead of watching the movie though, they used each scene unfolding on the screen to regale each other with stories of their sexual prowess or the disastrous things they'd done in the pursuit of pussy. I listened in mortified silence but William seemed to enjoy their banter and spent more time listening to the tall tales from the men than the dialogue from the movie. With an exasperated huff, I got up to make popcorn and left the room with my face flaming. Although not unknowledgeable about the *theory* of sex, I'd yet to practice the real thing and the earthy commentary from Seth and Mick made me feel mildly anxious. The older I got, the anxiety about still being a virgin became more acute.

I stood in front of the microwave as the popcorn bag expanded and jumped on the slowly spinning turnstile inside. This night wasn't quite going to plan but I consoled myself with the knowledge that William would be left with a good idea of what *not* to do if and when he found love.

As I poured the popcorn from the bag into a couple of bowls, Seth came into the kitchen and opened the fridge door. "Not a big talker is he?" he said as he grabbed another six-pack of beers from the fridge. I realised then that William's voice, or lack of one, was something I no longer noticed.

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“Um... yeah... sorry, Seth. I forgot to tell you that he’s mute,” I stuttered in reply.

Seth stood in front of the open fridge, looking at me in confusion while he tilted and wobbled in the glow from the fridge. Eventually his alcohol-addled brain processed what I’d said and he shut the fridge door with a shrug.

Back in the lounge room I noticed with mounting horror that the DVD had been swapped for some kind of porn if the “acting” was anything to go by. A large-breasted blonde lay on a lounge watching an oiled Adonis as he cleaned an immaculate pool.

“Seth!” I screeched as I made a grab for the remote control. With a laugh he tossed it to Mick and fielded my attempts to batter him senseless. I continued to berate him but all he did was put me in a headlock and knuckle my head.

After extricating myself from Seth, I made a valiant effort to wrest the remote from Mick but somehow ended up being used as a seat cushion as he calmly passed the remote back to my conniving brother. With his now free hands he started to tickle me and I screamed and flailed in an attempt to stop the torture. Suddenly Mick stopped and over my gasping breaths, I could hear groaning from the TV. Men groaning. Canting my head backward from my awkward position, I glanced at the screen to see the big-titted blonde being fucked by the pool Adonis. As the camera panned back, I saw a second guy crouching behind the Adonis and starting to line his condom-covered cock up with the Adonis’s arsehole.

“What the fuck is this?” Mick asked as he lifted his weight off me.

Seth sat in stupefied silence with his beer halfway to his mouth and I could see William’s wide-eyed face in the flickering light from the movie.

A loud groan issued from the TV and that seemed to be the impetus required for Seth to hit the pause button on the remote.

“That dirty cow!” Seth murmured.

Mick grabbed up the DVD cover and read the title out loud. “Innocent Bystanders!”

“I don’t think he’s just standing by...” I said pointing to the screen where, heads thrown back in apparent ecstasy, the ménage had been paused midcoitus.

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Whipping his head around to glare at the screen, Mick winced then threw the cover onto the seat beside my head. "Oh," I said as I read *Innocent Bistanders* on the cover in neon-pink bubble writing.

Seth giggled weakly in his seat and William still seemed transfixed by the scene on the screen. What a perfect night I'd managed to create.

Mick picked up his beer and with a sigh, sank down onto the couch beside a wide-eyed William. He contemplated the frozen image for a while with a bemused expression before opening his mouth as if to speak.

We were all mesmerised by the scene glowing in the darkened lounge and I didn't think any of us knew what to say or do. Eventually Mick shuddered and broke the strained silence. "That's gotta hurt."

Seth nodded silently and I could see William's eyes flash in the gloom as he looked from Mick to Seth.

"Although..." Mick started to say. "There was this chick I knew..."

I sprang from the couch and pulled William up from his seat before pushing him toward the door. "Nonononono. We are not sitting here listening to you talk about butt sex," I said as I continued to push a laughing William out of the room. As we headed toward my room, I heard the unmistakable sound of football coming from the lounge and I briefly wondered if this had been some subtle ploy by Mick and my brother to retain ownership of the TV for the night. I internally chastised myself for my cynicism as I remembered the look of shock on Seth's face.

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Safely behind my closed bedroom door, I started to stutter an apology to William for the movie disaster. "Oh god! I. Am. Sofuckin' sorry! I can't believe Seth put a porno on. Well I can, because he threatened to do it, but I still can't actually believe that he went through with it..." I was babbling but I couldn't seem to stop. "And to put on gay porn too! Which is fine!" I rushed to add when I saw the blush on William's cheeks. "If you're gay, gay porn is just awesome..." I finally stopped babbling and looked at William more closely. "Are you gay?" I almost whispered. I had an awful feeling that I might have inadvertently offended him and my heart clenched with the idea that I'd hurt him. William looked frustrated and I suddenly realised that he was, for the first time in our relationship, finding it hard to communicate.

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Sliding off the bed I'd sat on at some point in my ramble, I leant back against the bed and patted the floor beside me. Eventually, a tense William sat down where I'd indicated. As he settled, Darktan emerged from his shirt sleeve and William patted him with his head down and face hidden. I realised that I'd have to try and answer the unasked questions because I didn't like this aloof, distant version of my friend.

“So...” I started, encouraged by the look William gave me out the corner of his eye. “After muddying the waters with the disastrous choices in documentaries,”—I was pleased to see a twitch of a smile appear at the corner of William's lips—“let me try to fill in the gaps.” The next thirty minutes were some of the most excruciatingly embarrassing of my life as I tried to explain the various permutations of relationships available. I came to the conclusion by the end of my bumbling attempt to clarify, that Seth's idea of using porn for educational purposes had merit because I was fucking exhausted.

William looked introspective as I finished and I suddenly wished that he could tell me what he was thinking.

After a few more minutes sitting in companionable silence, William gently transferred a slumbering Darktan to the pillow on the trundle bed and then opened his pack. Pulling out a toothbrush and what looked suspiciously like flannel pyjamas, he turned to me expectantly. I struggled up from the floor and gave him a hand up. Leading him to the bathroom I quickly brushed my own teeth before leaving him alone to finish his before-bed routine. Back in my bedroom I started to undress. When down to my undies, I hesitated. Normally I slept naked but tonight, I wasn't sure what to do. Perhaps the sexual-innuendo-charged evening was to blame, but I didn't feel comfortable being naked with William sleeping in the same room. I decided to keep my undies on and slid between the sheets on my bed to await William's return from the bathroom. I'd already turned the main light off and had turned my bedside lamp on after realising that unlike other friends I'd had sleepovers with in the past, we wouldn't be able to talk in the dark.

The opening door heralded William's return and I listened to him shifting around below me on the trundle as he settled in. I'd just started to wonder if he'd fall straight to sleep when a book arced up from the floor and landed frighteningly close to my balls. “Arse,” I grumbled as I picked it up to read the title on the well-worn, tattered cover. “*The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents.*” I rolled to the edge of my bed and looked down on William. “Do you

want me to read this?" I asked. Knowing that William couldn't read, and often became embarrassed by that, I was surprised that he'd brought a book with him. I got a warm, fuzzy feeling in my tummy when I realised that he trusted me enough to share this with me.

Rolling back onto my bed, I opened the book to the first chapter and started to read. "One day, when he was naughty, Mr Bunnsy looked over the hedge..." I rolled back over and peered down at William. "Dude! What the fuck?" William rolled his eyes and gesticulated for me to continue reading. With a huff of exasperation I flopped back onto my pillow. I couldn't believe that I was reading nursery rhymes to a twenty-something guy. With a sigh, I continued. "Mr Bunnsy looked over the hedge into Farmer Fred's field and it was full of fresh green lettuces." Again I paused, but before I could whine about the reading material again, William's head appeared above the mattress and he glared at me. Obviously my halting oration wasn't appreciated. I glared back for a moment before lifting the blankets between us. William hitched his brow in question. "Hop in with me," I mumbled. "It's too hard to talk to you when you're down there."

William crawled up onto the mattress beside me and settled down with his head against mine as I started to read out loud again. I found it strangely distracting feeling his body lying against mine. Distracting, yet at the same time, nice.

By the time I'd reached the closing paragraph of chapter one, I was hooked and William was asleep, snoring softly in my ear.

After a few more hours of reading, I heard Darktan, whose name I now understood, scratching in the corner of my room where William had earlier set up a small litter box. I'd been impressed when he explained that Darktan was toilet trained. I could hear the rat exploring my room as I continued to read until eventually, I felt a pulling sensation on the sheet and realised that he was attempting to get up onto the bed. Putting the book down, I rolled over and reached down to hoist him up. The minute his paws hit the mattress, he scurried over to William and curled up in the corner created by William's neck and shoulder. He regarded me balefully with one beady eye and then appeared to promptly fall asleep. I looked at the sleeping William and rat and found myself getting the swoopy feeling in my tummy again. I was so very thankful that I had found him and that he was my friend. The idea of not having him in my life gave me a pain in my chest that I just didn't understand. Never before had I felt like this about a friend, or for that matter, anyone. After spending a few more

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minutes contemplating the sleeping tableau, I turned the light off and snuggled under the blankets.

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When I woke up in the morning, I could feel my nose being tickled by William's hair. I slowly opened my eyes and promptly reared back in fright, toppling off the bed and onto the floor. In my panic, I ended up dragging the sheets and blankets with me and also dragging the disgruntled Darktan along for the ride. Holy fuck, his teeth were freaky scary when seen from only inches away. I shuddered from the memory of the ratty yawn that had startled me into my flailing flight off the bed. William's bleary-eyed face appeared over the edge of the bed and his laugh at my predicament made me grudgingly smile. While I untangled myself, Darktan scampered over to the toilet corner and William swung his legs over the side of the bed putting his crotch level with my eyes. For some reason, I was unable to look away from the morning erection that tented his... ohmygod! ...his Superman pyjamas.

Dragging my eyes away from his crotch I smirked up at him. "Nice jimjams!"

He blushed in embarrassment before launching himself at me. With a growl of mock outrage, he started trying to smother me with a pillow, and I writhed and gasped with laughter as I fought him off. As the wrestling continued, the blankets slipped down my body and I felt William's residual erection rub against my own. I went from amused and mildly aroused to hard as a fucking rock in seconds and desperately tried to push him off before he felt me. I didn't know what the fuck was going on with my libido but I felt certain that inadvertently humping him would freak him the fuck out as much as me getting hard in the first place did to me. What. The. Fuck?

Keeping myself draped in the blankets, I pulled on my discarded jeans from the night before and crammed my recalcitrant hard-on into the too-small space behind the zipper. I seriously regretted my penchant for wearing skin-tight jeans this morning. Eventually, the actual pain I felt as the zipper finally closed helped deflate my erection and I discarded the blanket and stood without too much humiliation. William waited by the door with Darktan in his arms and I told him he could use the bathroom first and I'd start breakfast.

Staring into the fridge, I could see enough Chinese leftovers for a couple of people. There was also the ever-present chocolate custard and tinned peaches. I opened a cupboard to see what cereal we had and apart from an unopened box

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of Fruit Loops, we were out of traditional breakfast foods. I was still standing, staring into the cupboard, when Mick wandered in and flopped into one of the chairs at the table.

“Make us a coffee, would ya?” he mumbled before laying his head on the table.

Obviously, the night before was making him feel fragile. I put the kettle on and wandered down to Seth's door. Opening it up I was nearly knocked over by the smell of stale beer that escaped the room. Covering my nose I stuck my head around the door. “Seth.” I whispered. When he didn't move, I decided to be a bit louder. “Seth.” I wasn't yelling but the flinch from the bed indicated that I'd been heard. “Do you want the leftover Chinese for brekkie or can William and I have it?”

Seth started gagging so I took that as a no and softly closed the door. Poor bastard, I thought to myself as I wandered down to the bathroom.

I couldn't hear the shower running so I knocked on the door and waited. William opened the door with a towel wrapped around his waist and I was instantly hard. For some reason I couldn't look away from his nipples. They were tight and puckered and I really, really, really wanted to play with them. My hand twitched as I thought about what they would feel like.

What. The. Fuck?

Dragging my eyes up to William's face, I was met with a sardonic eye brow lift and a foamy mouth with toothbrush sticking out. I imagined licking the toothpaste foam off and felt a throb from my dick. Not. Good. William shrugged and started closing the door and I realised I hadn't asked him what he wanted for breakfast yet. I started to babble about Fruit Loops and Chinese to halt the closing door and finally, I managed to get a coherent sentence out.

“Do you want Fruit Loops or Chinese for brekkie?” I'd decided to keep my wits by not looking at William and now became mesmerised by the sight of a rat bathing in my bathroom sink. He crouched on the soap holder and every few seconds, stuck a paw under the dribbling tap before using the water to wash his face. Cutest fucking thing ever and thankfully enough of a distraction for my dick to deflate. If this kept happening, I'd have to invest in some looser pants 'cause I risked my 'nads every time I got a stiffy in my skinny jeans.

William clicked his fingers in front of my face to get my attention and pulled the side of his eyes out giving them an Asian look. Chinese it was then.



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With a nod, I stepped away from the door and headed back toward the kitchen.

I entered the kitchen just as the kettle clicked off and I decided to deal with the coffee first. Turning to Mick, I started to ask him how he took it when I noticed his face relaxed in sleep and a growing pool of drool on the table. With a shudder of revulsion, I made his coffee standard and placed it on the table with a strip of ibuprofen. I had just opened the fridge to retrieve the Chinese when my phone beeped. I retrieved it from my pocket and saw that it was a text from Seth. Really?

*\*Coffee, drugs, bucket\** was the succinct message.

I quickly made up another cup of coffee and popped a couple of the pills from the blister pack sitting near Mick's head before grabbing a mixing bowl and heading up the hallway to Seth's room. The funk was, if possible, worse than before and I tried to hold my breath as I dashed to the bed, depositing coffee and pills on the bedside table and plonking the bowl on the bed beside Seth. I then quickly walked over to the window and opened it up to clear the air. The parted curtains let in some light and made Seth whimper from the bed.

"Turn the light off, Joshy," he croaked.

I let the curtains fall closed again and tiptoed from the room.

I could see that the bathroom door was open so I hurried back to the kitchen. Dashing past the now snoring Mick, I pulled a couple of containers of leftovers from the fridge and shared the food out between two plates. Putting the first plate in the microwave, I watched it slowly spin while I thought about what had happened earlier. Never before had I reacted so strongly to anyone. I'd had girlfriends in the past but I realised now that I considered them more buddies than romantic partners. Even my memories of seeing William's naked chest was enough to make me start chubbing up. Was I gay? I mean, I was obviously attracted to William but was that a one-off or a sign of burgeoning homosexuality?

Mick made a snuffling sound and I turned my head to look at him. Did I find Mick attractive? I contemplated the snoring man. Face mashed into the tabletop and lips twisted and puckered by his awkward sleeping position. Uh... no. Mick did nothing for me. I then considered the men I'd seen briefly on the porno; bulging muscles, oiled skin, cocks like a baby's arm. Nup. As the microwave dinged to indicate it was finished, William wandered into the

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kitchen and I was again instantly hard. Oh god. Whatever the fuck was going on—gay, straight, or bi—William was obviously it and a bit as far as my libido was concerned. Awkward.

I gave William the plate from the microwave and, keeping my crotch discreetly pressed into the under-bench cupboards, put the second plate in to heat up. William mimed that he wanted rings and after a couple of minutes I realised he wanted the Fruit Loops. Weird, but okay. Realising I'd have to turn around to get them out of their cupboard, I pointed to where they were kept so I could keep myself covered. I definitely needed looser jeans. Or a long shirt. Or both. Fuck.

William poured a small serve of Fruit Loops into a bowl and placed the bowl and a squirming Darktan onto the table. The rat scurried over to the bowl and perched on the side before delicately picking up one Fruit Loop in his hands and starting to nibble. Every time Mick snored or grunted, Darktan paused his eating, which made me laugh.

We took our food into the lounge so that we didn't have to share the table with the drooling Mick. When I'd finished eating, I turned on the TV and left William and Darktan watching morning cartoons while I had a shower. Back in my room, the only loose pants I could find were some old track pants of Seth's but I decided that discretion was better than fashion in this case and pulled them on. All my T-shirts were tight too, so I went into the laundry and grabbed one of Seth's out of the ironing basket. Decently covered and hard-on well camouflaged, I collected William and Darktan and we headed back to his place.

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Out in the morning light and fresh air, I found myself slipping back into my usual role of chatterbox. I was still hyperaware of William but I pushed the weird attraction into the back of my mind by distracting myself with a running monologue on what I wanted to do with my clan when the next *Staff and Claw* campaign commenced.

The day had started warming up and I was sweating by the time we reached William's house. His grandfather, already ensconced on the veranda, got a quick hug from William before he headed inside to drop off his bag. I sat on the steps and contemplated the view.

Within minutes, William reappeared with two towels. Miming swimming, he beckoned for me to follow him. I was a bit surprised because I was fairly

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sure I would have noticed a swimming pool and the beach was a decent drive by car. I trundled after William with a shrug as he led me further up the hill behind the house. The trees created a cool oasis and our pace became languid as we allowed Darktan to snuffle along the path. When we crested the hill, William scooped the rat up and led me down toward a rocky outcrop. The closer we got, the more clearly I could hear the sound of gushing water. Eventually, we reached the edge of a cliff and I stared down into a deep, green pool being fed by the churning water beside us. William led me back up the creek a way to a shallower stretch where we could cross and then we followed a switchback track down into the damp hollow that contained the pool.

It was like entering an alien world, the air, cool and moist from the waterfall spray. Ferns clung to the wet rocks, their fronds waving in the turbulence created by the waterfall nearby. The air became cooler as we descended. At the bottom of the track William plonked Darktan on a small beach and started to undress, completely unselfconscious of his nudity. I couldn't stop looking as more and more skin was revealed. He was beautiful. I stood there unmoving as he stripped the last few items away and dived into the water. While he swam away from me toward the cascade of the waterfall, I quickly stripped and plunged into the, frankly, freezing water before he noticed my wayward cock. The temperature of the water sorted my problem out within seconds and I wondered if my poor dangly bits would ever reappear as the cold made my balls shrivel and suck up.

With my arousal now negated by the cold water, I relaxed. The otherworldly feel of the place kept me mute and I floated on my back staring at the circle of sky exposed above. It was an almost spiritual experience and I felt blessed that William had shared it with me.

The temperature of the water soon became refreshing as the heat of the day started to reach the dank depths and the humidity rose. I wanted to stay here forever but the prosaic needs of our bodies soon became apparent as first my, and then William's stomach rumbled with hunger. We quickly dried off and started our trek back up to the world above.

Stepping out of the shadowy depths and into the sunlight again was startling. I hadn't noticed the absence of birdsong until it once again appeared. I had a strange ringing in my ears from the noise of the waterfall and I found myself following William in an almost dreamlike state. He led us back up the creek to the crossing and, with Darktan perched on his shoulder, started to cross. About halfway to the other side, William stumbled and I watched in

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horror as Darktan got thrown into the fast-moving water. William tried to grab him but the water had already pulled the frantically swimming rat out of reach. William's screams wrenched me back to reality and I watched as he desperately waded down the creek in an attempt to rescue Darktan. The speed of the churning creek water pushed the rat toward the falls' edge faster than he could wade. Without even being conscious of moving, I found myself running alongside the creek, past the struggling rat. I waded into the thigh-high water and braced myself against the current that tried to push me toward the fatally high fall behind me. I could feel the yawning space of empty air behind my back as I watched Darktan being washed and tumbled by the water closer to where I was braced. At one point I thought he would slip past, but a rock under the water created an eddy that sent him tumbling into my waiting hands. Turning, I saw a distraught William waiting for me on the bank and I carefully waded to the creek edge and handed him a limp Darktan.

William took off his shirt and wrapped Darktan up, crooning and sobbing all the while. I rushed over and peeled back an edge of the cotton cocoon to see if he was still alive and was reassured to hear the sound of bruxing. With a sigh of relief I turned my attention to William, who still wept in obvious distress. I pulled him into my arms and started to try and soothe him. Running my hands up and down his back, I whispered soothing words in his ear. "Shhh," I kept on saying. "Shhh."

I guided William down and despite the fact we were almost the same size, he curled into my arms. The sobbing had stopped but he was still wracked by the occasional tremor. Darktan peered out of his cocoon and William gently petted his nose as I held them both.

I don't know how long we sat there beside the creek. William had stopped crying a while ago and if his tummy hadn't rumbled again, I would have stayed there indefinitely. William looked up at me with wide eyes out of a face ravaged by the crying storm he'd just had. I pulled my T-shirt off and using the damp bottom edge, wiped his eyes before holding it up and instructing him to blow.

Now relatively calm and tidied up, I pushed him gently off my nearly-numb legs and stood. We quietly walked back down the hill toward his home with William casting me looks out of the corner of his eye.

Back at the house, I told William's grandfather what had happened while William entered the house with Darktan. He'd seen William's red and swollen eyes as we stepped up onto the veranda and become concerned but relaxed after

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I'd explained. I entered the house and started to search for William. He wasn't in any of the rooms I passed and it wasn't until I reached the kitchen that I found him. He'd just shut the door to the extension with his arms full of clothes. With a wan smile he beckoned me and I followed him into a large, old-fashioned bathroom. He handed me a pair of jeans, a white T-shirt and a blue checked flannel shirt. Not my usual attire but with my pants saturated and my, or rather, Seth's T-shirt covered in tears and snot, I was grateful for the dry clothes William offered. We stripped out of our wet clothes and dressed in companionable silence. Today felt like one of the longest days of my life but it seemed to have cemented my friendship with William in some way. When doing up the flannel shirt, I suddenly found myself with an armful of shuddering William.

"Hey," I crooned. "It's okay. He's okay." I hugged him tight and buried my nose in his hair. This felt so right.

William pulled back slightly and looked at me. Slowly, he leant forward and touched his mouth to mine. The barely there pressure was enough to make me whimper and I tightened my arms to pull him closer. I was instantly hard and when I pushed myself against William, I could feel an answering hardness against my erection. Opening my mouth I deepened the kiss. Touching William's warm tongue with mine, I started to rock my hips to increase the friction between us. I'd just grabbed his arse to pull him harder against me when the slam of the front screen door made us push apart from each other. We were standing in the bathroom panting. William looked at me with a startled expression and I watched the movement of his tongue as he licked his lips. I wanted to taste those lips again but not here where his grandfather could disturb us.

"Come home with me?" I whispered.

William smiled and held out his hand. Grasping it in mine, I held him steady as he stepped over the wet clothes piled on the floor and led him toward the front door.

"I'll bring him home later," I shouted toward the kitchen where I could hear movement and then led the smiling William off the veranda and toward the town below, all the while rubbing my thumb across the back of his hand, almost as if to reassure myself that this beautiful man and what we'd shared was real.

**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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## Author Bio

*Susan Beck is an irreverent middle-aged woman with too many children, a warped sense of humour, and a husband who doesn't want her to use her real name when writing porn. You can usually find her ignoring the housework whilst reading her kindle with a coffee close by.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#)

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# WINDOW

By Ali MacLagan

## Photo Description

A beautiful, toned man lies on a bed of white linen, naked but for a black cord around his left wrist, and a sheet barely covering his lower body. His left arm is bent, his hand resting against his temple. He is lifting his right arm up, away from his body. Mussed, brown hair hangs low over his forehead, and thick stubble covers his chin. His dark eyes throw a questioning glare toward the camera.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I shouldn't have come. He doesn't want me here. How many times do I need to hear him say it, shout it, snarl it at me, before I get it through my head that he means it? I wish I could turn my back on him and leave, and find someone easy. Someone warm and welcoming who would laugh when they see me, and give me a hug.*

*But even though he doesn't want me here, I still think, deep in my heart, that he needs me. And I just can't walk away.*

*Or maybe, I'm the one who still needs him.*

Please no shifters, no BDSM, and at least a HFN. Otherwise I'm open to just about anything.

*Sincerely,*

*Kaje*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** HIV, angst, bartender, accountant, fellating of fruits and vegetables, cheating scumbag ex-boyfriend

**Word Count:** 29,530

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And to the entire DRitC crew, without whom none of this would be possible, thank you. Please know that these two words do not go far enough to convey the gratitude I feel for helping me with this story and letting me be part of your family.



# **WINDOW**

**By Ali MacLagan**

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## Prologue

God, I wanted a beer. I wanted to drop my bag, grab a beer from the fridge, plop my ass on the couch, and not move until Monday. Tax week had been a bitch. But finally, three days after the dreaded April 15, I was home. I had the weekend off, and all I wanted to do was spend the time with a beer in one hand, the remote in the other, and a blow job or two, *or ten*, thrown in there for good measure.

I opened the door. The house was quiet and dark.

“Greg?”

The only sound to answer me was the low hum of the refrigerator.

He should be home. My commute was a half hour, but his was only ten minutes down to Commercial Street, unless he was traveling to some insurance conference or training session.

I set my bag down by the coat rack and made my way to the bedroom. I'd come home many times over the past few weeks and found Greg huddled under rumpled sheets and blankets, snores echoing off the walls. But this time, the bed was empty, made as neatly as it had been when I'd left for work that morning. The floor was even clear of Greg's dirty clothes which always seemed to litter it.

I flicked the light switches on as I headed back to the kitchen. The mugs we'd used this morning were washed and sparkling clean in the dish rack. I slid my phone from my pocket, checking for missed calls or texts. Nothing. Maybe he was planning a surprise. I didn't see this side of Greg often. But every now and again, I'd come home to a clean house, and Greg would be there with a smile and whisk me out for a night on the town. Those smiles were what soothed any niggling doubts I might have had about us.

My hand was on the fridge handle when I noticed the envelope. It was a standard, business-sized envelope, held to the door of the refrigerator by a magnet from the accounting office I worked for. My name was written on it in block letters, the only way Greg could write legibly. I grabbed a beer, popped the cap, and headed back to the living room where I flopped down onto the overstuffed cushions of the couch. I took a long pull from the bottle and closed my eyes enjoying the cold, brown ale on my tongue, before I placed it on the

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coffee table and clicked the television on. Curling my feet beneath me, I turned my attention to the envelope.

I ripped it open making sure not to tear the folded papers inside; there were two sheets. The first was just plain notebook paper with words handwritten in black ink. As my eyes scanned the letter, my hands started shaking, and the rest of my body followed suit. Bile rose in my throat, and I sucked in a quick breath. My feet jerked out, kicking the coffee table and spilling the beer over the side and onto the carpet. I pushed myself off the couch, and half-ran, half-stumbled to the toilet... where I promptly threw up.

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## Chapter One

Twinkle lights? Seriously? There were twinkle lights in the window. *Nothing* about this place screamed, or even suggested, *clinic*, except the red ribbon painted on the window, but even that blended with the potted plants on the sill. The only thing identifying the place at all was the address listed on the plate glass door. *ONE SPRING STREET*. It was eclectic, more like a place where someone would go to have their palm or tea leaves read, to find out what their future held... so maybe it was appropriate after all.

Because this was a clinic. This was an HIV clinic. A place where people came to find out if they were sick or worse. The second piece of paper in the envelope was a printout of Greg's lab results. "NEG" was listed next to everything; except the one thing we all feared the most: HIV, and next to it, printed in undeniable clarity, I read, "POS". He was positive. That information, and the thought of all I had done with him, had stopped my heart and turned my stomach. Suddenly, everything in my world—my hopes, my fears, all of it—was now pinned to three letters: P-O-S or N-E-G. Everything was about to change, or possibly end, and there was nothing I could do about it. I had no control and... I was being melodramatic; HIV was not the end of it all. I knew this. But I also knew, regardless of my results, my life would not be the same.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and turned up my iPod, trying to drown out the sounds around me, wanting to lose myself for just a few more moments in ignorant oblivion. The song was upbeat. It sang of happy days and lustful nights. Something I thought I'd had.

Tears were pricking behind my eyes again. My treacherous thoughts had circled back. They hadn't left in the four days it had taken me to work up the courage to get off the couch nor the two and a half weeks since. I couldn't sleep in the bed. It was still our bed, our room. The place we had made love. Now it seemed dirty. Because now, it was so painfully obvious Greg and I had never made love. We'd fucked. And then he'd fucked me over. *When had he started cheating on me?*

For ten months, I thought I was in a monogamous relationship. I thought I was in love. I was faithful. Thirteen weeks ago, I took *us* to get tested, and we both came back negative. And now here *I* was... surrounded by twinkle lights and falsely cheery prints. Waiting for someone to tell me I was sick. Because really, how could I not be? We made lo—no we fucked. Fucked. There was not a lot of hope for me. All because I was a fool. Because I believed in a lie—

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*Thump.*

Something hit my arm, bringing me out of my tailspin. I opened my eyes and turned to see some guy in a hoodie, two chairs to my left. He looked at me, obviously annoyed. I glared back at him and pulled one of my earbuds out.

“What?” I snapped. Niceties were not that high on my priority list. I had enough to worry about.

The guy cocked his head, his mouth drawn up almost in a sneer. “Are you Tom?” he asked as he jerked his head toward the receptionist.

“No.”

“Oh... They’ve called the name twice now.” He stared at me pointedly, his eyes dark and angry. He jerked back into his chair, leaned his head back against the wall, and pulled his hood down over the top half of his face. “I just want to get this shit over with,” he muttered.

“You and me both,” I said, half to him and half to myself. I leaned back, my body mirroring his. God, how I wanted this over with. I looked up at the ceiling. It was white, smooth, and clean. I wondered how many other people had sat in this very same chair, looking at the same ceiling, wondering if their world was about to crash.

“I’m Jeremy.” I really don’t know why I said it. No one came to the HIV clinic to make friends.

“Aaron,” the guy grumbled. I turned my head to look at him. He looked around my age, twenty-eight, give or take a year. He was sprawled in his chair, legs stretched out and spread. I could see a hint of pale skin through a hole in his faded jeans. His hands were in the front pocket of his sweatshirt. Despite his relaxed pose, there was a tension radiating from him. He wore it like some invisible shield, not letting anything get through. I turned my eyes back up to the ceiling.

“Jeremy?” A female voice called from the hallway leading to offices and exam rooms. A woman was standing there with a bright smile on her face, holding a clipboard. Her dark blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail. I didn’t know how to react to her. I looked at Aaron, who had pushed his hood back and looked up at me. His lips were tight as he gave me a quick nod and straightened himself up in the chair. I turned up the corner of my mouth in an attempt at a small smile before I picked up my messenger bag, trudged over to the woman, and headed back to face my fate.

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I don't remember most of those first few minutes I spent in that sterile office. I remember the nurse asking me questions, and I remember responding. Telling her my partner had just tested positive, and my last test was just over three months ago. I remember feeling empty and detached when telling her the last time I'd had sex was twenty-four days ago, and *no*, we had not used a condom.

Outside the window, the sky was bright and blue with puffy, white clouds. Sea gulls flapped their wings about, squawking as they looked down searching for some sucker to shit on. People walked on the street below, moving about their lives, smiling and laughing, as I sat there and opened my mouth so some woman could run a white stick over my gums.

"Jeremy?" Her voice was soft. "It's going to be okay. Whatever happens, it will be okay." I didn't want to look up. I was too afraid of the pity I might see. I felt enough for myself, I didn't want anyone else's. I felt her hand on my arm and looked down to see her perfectly trimmed, nonpolished nails. I moved my gaze to the floor.

"All right," I said determinedly. I straightened up, shaking off her hand. "What now?"

"Well, we have a twenty minute wait for the results. There are some things we need to go over. Would you like some coffee, water, anything?"

The thought of ingesting anything at that point made my stomach turn. *Twenty minutes*. The thought of staying in this room, even for a short time, was too much. I wanted to leave. I needed to leave. But, I couldn't leave. I knew if I left, there was a very good possibility I wouldn't be back. I put my hands under my thighs, and my right knee started bouncing.

"No. No, I'm good, thanks." I let myself look up at her. On her badge, the name, Carrie, was printed with the letters BSN underneath. I wanted to focus on anything but the words she was about to say... or on the white stick that was stuck into the contraption on the desk behind her... or on the timer next to it. *Eighteen minutes, twenty-seven seconds*.

Carrie had clear, blue eyes with little crinkles in the corners. There was something about her that made me think she'd lived a happy life. She gave me a gentle smile as she reached over to grab a couple of pamphlets and handed them to me.

I looked down, and the only things I saw were letters: HIV and AIDS. I placed them in my messenger bag and clutched at my knees.

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“Okay, Jeremy. Here’s some information you need to know. Firstly, whether or not the test result is positive or negative, you will need to be tested again. If, and this is an *if*, it is positive, we will need to draw some blood and send it to the lab to confirm the results. This would rule out the possibility of a false-positive.”

My stomach twisted again. My hands gripped tighter. I stared at an orange speck on the speckled gray-tiled floor for just a moment before raising my eyes again. *Sixteen minutes, forty-eight seconds.*

Her voice was still soft as she continued. “If the result is negative, you will need to be tested again three months after the last time you had unprotected sex. This is because of HIV’s window period; the time it takes between the point when someone was infected to when the body has produced the antibodies the test detects.”

I knew this. I’d been learning about HIV all my life. Every gay man knew this. A thought occurred to me: maybe I was a victim of the window. Maybe Greg hadn’t cheated. We’d only been tested that once. Maybe he had it before we ditched the condoms. Maybe—I slumped in my chair. We’d been supposedly exclusive for five months before the test. There was no maybe.

“Jeremy? You with me?” I was starting to resent that kind voice and the way my name sounded when she uttered it. The way it grounded me and forced me back to the here and now. I tried not to glare at her.

*Ten minutes, eleven seconds.*

“Yeah, yeah, sorry. Blood test if it’s positive, three months if it’s negative. Got it.” I looked up into her eyes again, and she gave me a reassuring smile.

“Correct. The numbers aren’t exact, but there are estimates that fifty percent will test positive twenty-one days after being infected. That number rises to around ninety-seven percent after three months. If that test is also negative, and because we know you were exposed, you should then get tested at the six month mark as well, to be completely certain.”

I let out a long breath. “Okay.”

“I’m sure you probably realize this, but regardless of your results today, you still need to be careful. No unprotected sex. Always, always use a condom, for both oral and anal sex, regardless of whether or not you are in a monogamous relationship. And kissing is safe, even with tongue.”

She smirked. I harrumphed. *Yeah, that was going to happen.* I just found out my boyfriend of ten months had been cheating on me. Fuck that. Fuck

kissing. Fuck relationships. Fuck sex... I let out a small giggle and felt my cheeks redden over the oxymoron. Carrie's smile grew bigger. *Oops*. Maybe I'd actually said that out loud.

"Well, in case you change your mind—" *Yup... said it out loud. Damn.* "Here are some condoms and lube packets." She handed me a small brown paper bag with the top folded down. I felt like I was a school boy, and she was handing me my lunch. Only this was not something I would have pulled out in the middle school cafeteria.

"No, I would think not." Carrie chuckled. *Damn!* I really needed my mouth and my brain to get in sync. This diarrhea-of-the-mouth was going to be the death of me, if AIDS didn't do it first. I looked back down at that orange speck and took another deep breath. I closed my eyes and just sat there. I thought of the sea gulls and the boats I had seen from the window. Of how it would feel to just sail out into nothing but blue. Of how it would feel to have wings and soar above, looking down at how small the world looked. To just stay on a course until the wind shifted and took me somewhere else...

*Beep. Beep.*

The timer brought me back, and I looked up to see Carrie turning to look at that awful white stick. This was it. *Oh God...*

"Come over here, and I will explain this to you."

I didn't want to. I really didn't want to. But I sat up and grabbed the bottom of my chair, turning and dragging it, letting the legs squeak and scratch against the linoleum, until I was sitting next to Carrie instead of across from her. Sitting in front of the stick. I felt my whole body shaking. My breath felt erratic. My heartbeat felt like I was sprinting the Boston marathon. I started breathing through my nose and exhaling through my mouth in an attempt to bring my body back under my control, but I could still hear it stutter. My eyes looked frantically for the trash can because I was positive I was going to vomit.

"Jeremy." There it was again. Her voice was still soft and kind. Her hand was back on my arm. "Jeremy, honey... come back."

I took another deep breath and held it for a second before slowly letting it out and looking up at her.

"Look." I slowly let my eyes drift over to the white stick. "There's only one line. Negative."

Negative. I slumped back into the chair. Carrie was still talking, but I couldn't hear her.



Negative. I closed my eyes and breathed a sigh of relief... and then my brain started working again.

Three months. Fucking. Window.

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## Chapter Two

With my messenger bag slung over my shoulder, my pamphlets and “lunch bag” tucked safely inside, I stepped out onto the sidewalk and sucked in a lungful of air. It wasn't exactly fresh. It smelled of exhaust fumes and salt water. But I was outside, away from that stifling office, and I could breathe. I reached into my bag and pulled out my earbuds.

“*Oomph!*” Something pushed me from behind, and I was thrown off balance. I was about to do a perfect face plant onto the Spring Street sidewalk while watching my iPod and attached earbuds do a hop-skip-and-a-jump into the middle of the road, when I felt hands at my hips steadying me. The hands were firm and strong. I stood up quickly as a memory of the last time my hips were gripped that way flashed through my mind. Pushing the thought aside, I whirled around to see who had managed to shove me—and save me.

*Aaron.*

“Sorry,” Aaron mumbled. His hood was down, and outside in the sunlight, I could see auburn streaks running through his dark brown hair. Those hadn't come from a bottle.

“I'm okay. Thanks.” I stared down at the sidewalk, not knowing what else to say. I wasn't especially good with people before this life crisis started, and my ability certainly had not improved any since. I felt the sidewalk tremble a bit and heard the engine of a truck as I felt the whoosh of air behind me.

“Oh fuck...” I looked up to see Aaron staring past me and into the street. I slowly turned around letting my gaze follow his, to land upon my now-crushed iPod lying on the pavement six feet away. I took a step toward the road to pick it up when I realized how futile it was. Letting out a defeated groan, I let my legs give way and sank my ass down to the curb; my legs spread out into the road. My shoulders slumped, and I fell back so I was lying on the sidewalk with my arms stretched out beside me. It was the last straw. *I loved that iPod.*

“Hey man, I'm really sorry. Like really, really sorry.” Aaron's voice sounded sympathetic, with a mite touch of desperation. I couldn't blame him. I wouldn't want to be the only witness to some strange guy having a mental breakdown on the street in front of an HIV clinic. The puffy, white clouds were still floating above me, and I remembered being a kid, lying on the hill behind my Nana's house staring at the sky, and trying to make out different shapes:

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animals, monsters... Right then, I wanted those clouds to take the form of a giant twister that would come down and whisk me off to Oz where I could ask the wizard for a new iPod... or maybe a new life.

I could hear cars whizzing by. It wasn't like this was a quiet street. The Civic Center and a hotel or two were in one direction, and coffee shops, boutiques, and art galleries in the other. Maybe there was a bank or two in there somewhere. I don't know why all of this was going through my head. I wasn't about to change professions and become a tour guide in Portland, Maine.

A giggle bubbled out of me. *Welcome to Gay Portland. Here we have the city's most popular gay night club, with the state's premiere HIV clinic conveniently located next door, so after you spend some time in the back alley you can*—Another giggle bubbled up, followed by another, and another. They kept coming until the tears were dripping down the sides of my face and into my ears. I was losing it. I couldn't stop.

“Okay, seriously guy. Jeremy, right? Man, you gotta get up. I don't want to stand here and watch as your legs get flattened like your iPod.” I knew Aaron was speaking to me. His voice didn't sound really sympathetic anymore. Now it sounded more desperate—and annoyed.

The sun and clouds and sky disappeared, and there was just a man-shaped shadow above me, grabbing my arms and attempting to haul me upright. I felt a bit like a marionette, and Aaron was the puppeteer. He'd yank, and my body would follow. After a couple of unsuccessful tugs, he moved onto the street, his legs straddling mine as he stood above me and yanked my arms with a force that brought my entire torso upright and my face straight up into... denim. *Fuck!* My face was planted squarely in Aaron's crotch. I closed my eyes and inhaled. Laundry detergent, musk and man... all man—*What. The. Fuck?* Where the hell had that come from? I quickly jerked my head from side-to-side trying to dislodge the thought, which only succeeded in my nose rubbing back and forth across his fly.

“Jesus!” Aaron jumped back, and I was brought back to reality quickly enough to hear a car honk its horn. I instinctively reached out and grabbed Aaron's sweatshirt to yank him back toward me as I saw the car swerve and heard some curse words muffled through the windows.

“Shit,” I muttered, letting go of Aaron's shirt and pushing myself up off the ground. “I'm sorry. Really. I don't know what just happened.” Aaron stepped back onto the sidewalk. He took a deep breath and ran his hand up through his hair.

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“Are you okay?” I asked, feeling more than a bit mortified.

“Yeah. I mean, yes. I’m fine. Thanks.” He looked up at me then. His eyes were dark blue, and as the sun hit them, they almost sparkled. A smile quirked on his lips as he shook his head. “Man. What a fucking day,” he uttered as he tossed his head back and looked up at the sky. I think he was talking more to himself than to me.

My lips drew up in a smile. A smile I actually *felt*, which hadn’t really happened in weeks. “You can say that again.” Because really, what else could I say? My mouth made the decision for me, before my brain could tell it to shut the hell up. “Do you want to go for coffee?” I clamped my jaw shut quickly and looked down at the sidewalk before glancing back up at him. *This diarrhea-of-the-mouth stuff really had to stop.*

Aaron looked over at me with raised eyebrows. “Seriously?”

I paused my ruminations to look at him. We’d both had crap days, and despite me nuzzling his groin and then inadvertently throwing him into traffic, he was still standing there. Hell, I had thrown myself down on the sidewalk like a four year old, and instead of turning and walking away as fast as possible, he had stayed and helped me—even though it was probably one of the last things he wanted to do. It was something a friend would do. And though he wasn’t a friend yet, I was beginning to think I wanted him to be.

“Yeah, seriously. Just as friends. ’Cause honestly, I could really use one today.” I bent over to pick up my messenger bag to avoid looking at him. If there was pity in his eyes, I didn’t want to see it after I’d just admitted how pathetic I was. I felt him brush by me, so I turned my head to watch. He checked to make sure there were no cars coming and went and picked up the remains of my iPod.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” I repeated his word back to him, making sure I heard him right.

“Yeah, okay. Let’s go get some coffee, new friend. I have a condition though.” He looked at me, and I could see a mischievous side of him hiding beneath the surface. His eyes gleamed.

“What’s your condition?” I gulped.

“It’s on me.” Aaron walked by me waving the busted iPod in my face before throwing it in a nearby trash can. “I think I owe you.”

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“You really don’t have to,” I said and looked over at him. He raised an eyebrow, a smirk on his lips. I don’t think he was used to being challenged. “But, I have a condition too. No talk of any of this.” I raised my arm and made a couple big circles to indicate the clinic. “Why we came. What went on. Nothing. I want a day of normal.”

“Deal. Where do you want to go?”

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We walked in silence for a bit, neither one of us feeling the pressure to talk, before we finally ended up at a café on Exchange Street, just a few blocks away. It wasn’t one of those chain places, more of a hole in the wall. A couple of customers were sitting at a table in the front, and some indie music I didn’t recognize was playing through the speakers. We ordered our coffee. Aaron got a dark roast, black. I got a cappuccino and grabbed a handful of sugar packets to add to it, before we made our way to a table in the back corner.

At some point since the last time I’d been there, they’d tried to do a makeover and put tablecloths on the still rickety tables. The walls were exposed brick and beautiful. I had always loved the unfinished, rough look in architecture—not like I really knew much about it to begin with, just what was pleasing to me. The scrape of a chair on the floor brought my mind back to the table. I looked up and saw Aaron staring down at his black coffee mug.

“So...” I tried to say something, but I didn’t know exactly what to say. When we were outside, the silence was almost comforting. Inside, it made me squirm. I opted to fill the air with a cop-out question. “What do you do?”

“I’m a bartender,” Aaron answered, not elaborating anymore. He turned his head to study some piece of art on the wall, but I don’t think he was really seeing it.

“Really? Where? I worked as a line cook in high school and then again in college. The front of the house always made me nervous. Too many people. I was afraid I’d do something stupid, spill something, say something offensive. Scared I’d end up acting like... well, myself. I wasn’t exactly the most graceful teenager.” I was rambling, and my cheeks felt hot.

“You don’t say? That’s something I never would have guessed after seeing you flop down in the middle of the sidewalk,” Aaron deadpanned.

“Hey!” I straightened in my seat, suddenly feeling indignant. “I was in mourning. I’d just lost my beloved iPod. I’ve had it forever. It was the first thing I bought with my first paycheck from my job.”

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“It is, was, an iPod. It was not worth losing your legs over, regardless of how much you loved it.” Aaron looked across the table at me with his eyebrows drawn and his forehead wrinkled. He didn’t get it.

“I’d had a rough day,” was all I could manage. I took a sip of my cappuccino so I wouldn’t have to say anything else.

Aaron’s look softened just a fraction with a hint of understanding, maybe even empathy. “I hear you.”

“So...” It was time to move this conversation in a different direction because the way it was going, we would end up in forbidden territory, and I would quite possibly end up spewing my entire sordid story of what a fool I had been. “Where do you work?”

“At McIntyre’s, down on Commercial Street.” Aaron looked back at the painting on the wall. I followed his gaze. The painting itself was done in bright colors and bold brush strokes. It depicted a fishing boat moored off a rocky coast. He looked almost wistful, his features smooth.

“Do you like the painting?” I asked.

Aaron jerked like he’d forgotten I was even there. He straightened himself up and faced me before saying, “It’s all right, I guess. My father used to have a boat like that. He was a fisherman when I was growing up. Every year on my birthday, he would take me, just the two of us, out on the boat for the day or, if I was lucky, two. It was like camping, only on the boat in the tiny cabin. Usually we’d head up the coast. Downeast, sometimes Boothbay, sometimes Bar Harbor or one of the islands. But always just the two of us. Those are some of my favorite memories. The salt water spraying up in my face, looking through binoculars to see if we could spot any whales. Sometimes, we’d just cast a line and see if anything would bite. Mom would insist I wear a life jacket at all times. It was always bright orange. I loved the thing when I was six. By the time I was thirteen, I was begging for a life vest in a cool color. I wanted blue. I got yellow. Not exactly an improvement. I remember Mom saying there was no way she was going to buy me a blue vest.” Aaron’s voice went a pitch higher in what I assumed was an attempt to imitate his mother, “Now Aaron... I am not going to buy you a blue vest! How in the hell would your father, or God help you, the Coast Guard find you in a life jacket that is the same color as the water?”

He chuckled and light shimmered in his dark eyes. “Yeah. I never complained about the color of my vest again. I was too afraid I’d end up with neon pink!”

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“That sounds really nice.” I gazed over and smiled at him. “My birthdays were always rather traditional. A few kids, a few presents. Cake and ice cream... When *is* your birthday?”

I thought I might have seen a bit of pink in his cheeks, but he ducked his head and took a sip of his coffee before I could be sure.

“So...” He looked at me curving up one corner of his mouth. “Six sugars, huh?”

I didn't quite follow until I my eyes found the six empty packets next to my cup. This time I knew *my* cheeks were the rosy ones. I shrugged my shoulders as I explained, “Um, yeah. I like my coffee sweet. When I was a kid, I'd go visit my Nana every Sunday, and she'd give me the tiniest of coffee cups. She'd put about a tablespoon of coffee in it, fill the rest up with milk, and then put in like a quarter-cup of sugar. I've been drinking it really sweet ever since.”

Aaron let out a slight chuckle while he shook his head. “I started drinking mine black when I was about nineteen. At the time, I was smoking a pack a day. One morning, I made a pot of coffee and grabbed the creamer out of the fridge only to realize it was empty. So, after throwing the empty container across the kitchen, I figured if I could smoke full-strength cigarettes, I could handle drinking black coffee. The cigarettes eventually went away. The black coffee stayed.”

We were quiet for a moment as we sat there sipping our coffees. The man sitting across from me was so different from the people I usually surrounded myself with. There was a silent confidence about him. He owned who he was, and people could take it or leave it. He would just keep going regardless. It made me wonder why he was sitting down with me, drinking coffee, and telling me stories of his childhood birthdays.

“You never answered my question.”

Aaron paused midgulp and peered at me over his coffee mug. His eyes narrowed a bit before he placed his mug back on the table and sneered at me. “What question? I pretty much just spilled my life story to you,” he growled.

“No, you told me where you worked and gave me one anecdote from your childhood.”

“Yeah, well that's more than a lot of people get. Consider yourself lucky,” he spat back at me.

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Despite the harsh tone, his words stirred a warm feeling in my belly. He was stalling, deflecting. I looked him straight in the eyes when I asked, “When is your birthday?”

I crossed my arms over my chest and raised my eyebrow to him. Aaron scoffed and turned away. He leaned back in the chair and ran his hand through his already disheveled hair. Then he sighed. “Listen, Jeremy—”

“Answer the question, Aaron.”

He glared at me and his lips had formed into a tight line. I glared right back, a bit surprised that I had that much gumption, and really not sure where it came from or why I cared so much. Then, it all came together.

“It’s today, isn’t it? Your birthday is today.” I knew I was right when he let out a moan and looked down at the table before raising his eyes to glare at me—again. God, his eyes were gorgeous.

“Yeah. My birthday is today. Happy now?” he returned.

I didn’t know if I was happy or not. Sure, I’d figured it out on my own, but the way Aaron was looking at me, turned the warmth in my stomach to a rattle of nerves. What a way to spend his birthday; drinking coffee with some random guy after spending the morning at an HIV clinic.

“Come on.” I stood up and grabbed my bag from the floor. Aaron just sat there looking up at me, a disbelieving look on his face. I grabbed his sleeve. “Get up. We’re leaving. It’s your birthday, and you are not going to sit around the coffee house all day.”

I was proud of the strength behind my words. Aaron scowled at me, but he took a final gulp of coffee before muttering something I couldn’t quite make out, but I was pretty sure there were some curse words in there and could guess a few were aimed at me. He pushed his chair back from the table, letting it screech along the floor before standing up. He shoved his hands in the pocket of his hoodie, and jerked his head toward the door, all the while glowering at me.

His voice was more than a little indignant when he said, “Lead the way.”

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## Chapter Three

I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I'd gotten Aaron out of the café, and just started walking, trying to buy myself some time to figure out a plan. All I knew was Aaron had yet to walk away from me and if he was still with me, he had no better alternative. The thought made me sad, yet determined. So I made it my job to somehow make Aaron's day a little better.

I never did come up with a plan, the day just kind of happened. We wandered along and stopped when the mood struck. Mostly, Aaron wore a scowl on his face, but occasionally I caught him lingering on a display in a window. I'd drag him inside to investigate, and we'd end up browsing random novelties and rubber lobsters. I watched as he perused a selection of bracelets at the hippie store; and I chuckled, as he huffed and puffed when I bought the black-cord bracelet that had captured his attention and fastened it around his wrist.

Our aimless trek continued. When there were no interesting stores to invade, my seemingly chronic case of diarrhea-of-the-mouth kicked in. I walked along, rambling about the mortification of spilling yellow Gatorade down the front of my white shorts in middle school. I laughed as I told him about the clients I'd had last year, who had tried to deduct the cost of sex toys on their taxes as a medical expense.

Aaron grinned at my story and then at me. He opened a door and waved me into what turned out to be the condom boutique on Fore Street. He marched in like he owned the place and proceeded to pick up various dildos and lubes and ask me what my opinion was on them. Too big? Too small? "I think this lube made my ass feel all sticky, what did you think, Snookums?" he'd actually said to me.

My face got redder with each question causing his laugh to get louder and louder, which of course, made my face even redder until I was absolutely positive I could be mistaken for a mutant lobster. It was a vicious cycle, but it was worth it. To hear him laugh like that. I even suffered through buying a big glass dildo, an economy-sized bottle of lube, and about twenty different flavored condoms, going as far as to ask the clerk if they would gift wrap my purchases just to hear that deep, hearty laugh prolonged. The bastard winked at me when the goth girl behind the counter dropped a handful of flavored lube samples in the bag. I had a hard time putting any weight behind the glare I threw back at him.

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We left the shop, gift-wrapped package in hand, and Aaron's chuckles filling my ears. There was a cadence to his laughter, almost lyrical. Aaron's laughter transformed him. It changed him from a scowling, ornery bastard to a person of real beauty. He was a handsome man when he wore a grimace on his face. When he wore a smile, he was stunning. His cheeks drew up, and his eyes sparkled. A light shone from deep within him. His teeth were perfectly imperfect, one of his eyeteeth sitting slightly crooked in his mouth. I wanted to lick it.

*Whoa!* Where had that thought come from? I hadn't even been able to jerk off since I'd read the letter from Greg. Anything remotely associated with sex made me nauseous, and yet here I was, trotting along next to him—carrying a fucking gift bag with condoms, lube, and a dildo—and the only thought running through my head was, *I want to lick his teeth*—and maybe some other things, too. My dick twitched. *Shit!*

I told my cock to behave itself, though I was still in awe that it remembered how to work. It seemed to listen, thankfully. I made sure to keep stride with Aaron so I would not be tempted to stare at his ass, which was mostly covered by his hoodie anyway. My dick was a bit resentful; my brain was eternally grateful. I did allow myself several peeks at his long legs, his broad shoulders, his mussed-up, brown hair, his navy eyes... I was quick. Never lingering long enough to get caught, but long enough to appreciate what a fine specimen of man Aaron was. I rolled my eyes at myself.

We were wandering down by the water when the street lights flickered on. I hadn't realized how late it had gotten. We'd spent all afternoon and evening ambling through the streets, doing nothing important, and yet, I was not ready for the day to end.

"Do you want to go somewhere for dinner?" I asked, suddenly taking a keen interest in the sidewalk.

Aaron stopped and turned to me. I brought my hopeful eyes up to meet his.

"Actually, I should head in." He gestured his hand over his shoulder. Across the street behind him, I saw an old brick building with green trim. A blue sign with gold-leaf lettering hung above a large, paned window that took up the whole storefront. It simply read, "McIntyre's Pub and Grill".

"Oh shit!" I said, probably a bit too loud. "Do you have to work tonight? Man, I'm so sorry..."

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“Relax, Jeremy,” he said with a smirk. “I don’t have to work tonight. I live here. I have an apartment over the bar.” He turned and pointed up to the third floor. There was a dim light shining through the white curtains of one of the four windows.

“Wait, you work here, and you live here too? Wow, that’s convenient,” I said trying to extend the conversation. “Did you have the job or the apartment first?”

“Kinda both. My family owns the bar,” he said as he shuffled his feet. “We moved into the second floor after my grandparents died, and we took over running it. I moved up to the third floor when I turned eighteen.”

“So, you’re Aaron McIntyre then,” I said.

“Prescott, actually. Aaron Prescott.” He shrugged. “My mom inherited the bar from her parents.”

I stuck out my hand to him and smiled. “Jeremy Allen. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Aaron Prescott. Happy Birthday.”

His mouth turned into a grin, showing off that fucking crooked tooth, as he took my hand in his and shook it. “It was nice to meet you as well, Jeremy Allen. And thank you. Today could have turned out a lot differently, but I... I enjoyed myself. Thanks for dragging me out of the coffeehouse.”

His hand felt so warm in mine as I shook it. I couldn’t figure out where to look, and my eyes kept bouncing between his eyes and his mouth. *Stop!* God, I had to stop looking at this man’s mouth. I looked back up to his eyes and saw a raised eyebrow. I was still shaking his hand. “Uh, sorry,” I mumbled and let it go.

He chuckled again, before saying, “Well, I guess I’ll see you around then.”

“Yeah, oh, don’t forget this.” I thrust the gift bag toward him, and he gaped at me in confusion.

“You seriously did not buy these for me. Jer, that was for fun. You should take them home and have some fun of your own.” He winked at me. So flipping sexy.

I bit back the comment about how my dismal home was about as far away from fun as one could get. Instead, I threw some camp into my voice, *which was so not me*, and replied, “Naw, they’re for you, Snookums. I had them gift wrapped and everything.” His eyes narrowed, but he reached his hand out and

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took hold of the bag. Our hands touched, and I let mine linger there for just a moment longer than necessary, enjoying the feel of his warm, rough hand over mine, before slipping my hand away and readjusting my messenger bag onto my shoulder.

“Happy Birthday,” I said softly. He looked at me again, and I thought he might be about to say something more, but instead, he nodded his head and mumbled, “Thank you,” before turning and jogging across the street. I stood there just watching as he got to the green door next to the bar and fumbled in his pocket, for what I guessed were his keys. I felt cold as I shuffled my feet and focused on the cement. I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to go back to my house, the memories, the reality, that fucking bed—

“Hey, Jer?” Aaron’s voice traveled across the road, and I looked up to see him standing there holding the door open. I must’ve looked pathetic.

“Yeah?”

“You wanna order a pizza?”

I looked both ways before I crossed the street and followed Aaron up the stairs.

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## Chapter Four

*This was a bad idea. This was a really bad idea.* A small part of my brain kept niggling away, trying to convince me to “just say no,” while the buzz tingling through my body didn’t really care what my brain thought.

I sat on the couch in the middle of the loft, trying to look anywhere but at the sexy man ten feet away from me. His apartment was one big room with the bathroom tucked in the back behind the kitchen. The space was divided by the strategic placement of furniture, creating a living room, dining area, and a bedroom—with a big, soft bed, white sheets, fluffy pillows...

From where I sat, I could see everything; the oh-so-forbidden-yet-tempting bed, the four large windows facing the street front, the black-and-white photos hanging sporadically on the wall. None of which I’d had the courage to look at closely. Remnants of the pizza we’d ordered were still sitting on the coffee table in front of me. Beer bottles we’d emptied earlier were arranged neatly by the kitchen sink. I focused on the half-emptied one in my hand and took a long pull.

My right knee bounced. I closed my eyes and listened as Aaron hummed along to whatever song was playing on the stereo. I couldn’t look at him. He’d shed his sweatshirt earlier, and my mouth had been salivating ever since. Pulling it over his head had dragged the T-shirt he wore underneath it up too, and revealed a beautifully carved stomach. Hard, lean, cut. I doubted Aaron ever went to the gym. He had earned that stomach through hard work, bending over—*bending over*—to lift cases of beer and liquor, running around the bar, up and down stairs. I groaned before I took another gulp of beer. *What the fuck was I doing?*

I was sitting on the couch, that’s what I was doing. And I was sitting there because Aaron had told me to sit there. His firm voice had left no room for argument, and I hadn’t given him one. I had complied, just like he knew I would. He was orchestrating something. He had a plan. He was in charge. And I was just sitting with a half-hard dick, which I really hoped my jeans were loose enough to disguise.

I opened my eyes, resigned to the fact that I couldn’t keep them shut forever. I watched Aaron dance around the kitchen, shaking his oh-so-fine ass. Fucking muscular ass. Fucking amazing ass. Just enough of a bubble butt to grab on to. I wanted to bite it. *Damn.*

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Instead, I took another gulp from the bottle in my hand and watched as he gathered items from his kitchen. My stomach was doing flip-flops, then it started pole-vaulting when I saw him overturn the gift bag. The contents spilled out onto the counter, and the bright-red tissue paper drifted down to the floor. I closed my eyes again and took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. I was about to stretch some comfort zones. Hell, Aaron might just shatter them.

“Come here.” His voice was thick, deep, melodic. It was the type of voice that should be narrating masturbation-inspiring romance novels. And it was calling me. I felt my body stand up and move obediently. *Bad idea! Bad idea!* My brain screamed at me. But my feet kept moving across the room and didn't stop until I was face to face with Aaron, looking up and into his navy eyes. Eyes that had turned dark, almost black, in the dim light of the apartment.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes.” *NO!*

“Good!” he said quickly with a mischievous chuckle. He jumped to the side and danced around to the other side of the island. He swept his hand out above the neatly arranged items on the counter. “What do you think?”

My stomach was in knots. I looked down at the counter.

Two cucumbers, one zucchini, four bananas, and a dildo.

I couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled up from my belly or the smile that spread across my face. Aaron's eyes were gleaming. He reminded me of a little kid showing off some magnificent tower he'd just built with his LEGOs. “Well, Jer? What do you think?” he asked again.

I really wasn't sure how to respond. “Um... I like zucchini?”

Aaron harrumphed. “I don't care if you like zucchini. We are not going to eat the zucchini. It's just an instrument for our little experiment.”

“Experiment?” I raised my eyebrows as I looked at him across the island.

“Yeah, experiment. You and I are going to do a taste test,” he said proudly, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Taste test?”

“Yeah, a taste test. Stop repeating what I say and get with the program here.” He looked down at the items on the counter, and then reached over and grabbed a condom packet, wiggling it back and forth. “Now Jer, I don't know

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about you, but I've never had oral sex using a condom—giving or receiving.” He shook his head and held up his hand. “I know, I know. Don't say it. I already got that lecture once today. And we have—” He turned around and looked at the clock on the stove behind him. “—two hours and thirty-four minutes left before we can talk about that place. But, what we can do is figure out which flavored condom tastes the best. For future reference, of course. You with me?”

He was smiling at me again. Who was this guy? And what had he done with the grumpy Aaron I'd met and hung out with most of the day? I looked over at the collection of empties. I never would have guessed that Aaron was a happy drunk.

I smiled back, reached down, and grabbed a banana. “Let's do it.”

Aaron's face lit up, and he began placing a condom in front of each of the *instruments*. “Now we actually got a few duplicate flavors, so I left those out. But there are about twelve different types here. I realized I only had seven phallic food choices so I was a little bummed, but then I remembered the dildo.”

I felt my cheeks redden. I'd been avoiding looking at it. I hadn't looked at it in the store either. Aaron had just picked it out and put it in our basket, and I took everything to the counter and paid for it. Now it laid on the counter, the last in the lineup of phallic fruits and vegetables. It was bright, gleaming cobalt-blue and probably about eight inches long. It was thick with ridges down the side and a ring at the end... *for an easy grip*? It was intimidating, and enticing, all at the same time. At least that's what my cock thought as it gave an approving twitch.

“Okay, should it be a surprise, or do you want to know what flavor it's supposed to be?”

“Um, I think we should know the flavor. I don't really like surprises, especially in my mouth.”

Aaron's cheeks puffed out, and his face turned bright red. A feeling of concern ran through me, until suddenly he bent over and let out a loud laugh that filled the whole room. He sputtered a bit before pulling himself together. Another chuckle escaped. Bastard.

“Ah, yeah. I didn't really mean that,” I muttered. Then, of course, the rambling started. “Well maybe, sort of, I guess. I had this great aunt who was

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the worst cook in the world, and every time we went over to her house, my mom forced me to eat whatever food was put in front of me. I could never tell what I was eating 'cause nothing looked the way it was supposed to. So I'd take a bite of something I thought might be strawberry, and it ended up being jalapeno pepper. It totally exploded in my mouth..." I realized what I was saying. And it was obvious Aaron did too, since he let out a deep belly laugh. I threw my banana at him.

"Will you stop, already?!" I narrowed my eyes at him.

"All right, all right. No surprises for your mouth. I got it," he replied, letting a chortle escape. "As long as you stop brandishing your banana at me."

I rolled my eyes and groaned. He chuckled, but set his shoulders and picked up the condom packet.

"Okay, pick your instrument." He stared at me intently. I pointed to the zucchini. "Nice choice."

"I'm glad you approve," I deadpanned before I grabbed my beer, tipped my head back, and drank every last bit down. I put the empty bottle back on the counter and found a still-as-a-statue Aaron looking straight at me, eyes wide, mouth open. After a moment, he seemed to jerk himself out of whatever trance he'd been in. "Oh, I almost forgot," he said. He turned to grab a sleeve of crackers from the cabinet and put them on the counter.

"To cleanse our palates," he said. "Okay, where was I? Oh right, zucchini, condom. Okay, can you hold that for me?" He indicated the zucchini with his eyes, and I picked it up and held it out over the counter for him. I heard the condom wrapper rip open. A sound I hadn't heard in months, and yet my cock decided it was time to get with the program and chub up. I was like some warped version of Pavlov's dog, and I was more than thankful to be on the other side of the island from Aaron, where I could stand behind the counter and keep my unruly dick out of sight. I needed another beer.

I still had the zucchini extended, and Aaron had the condom out of its wrapper. He brought it up to the vegetable, and pinched the tip before rolling it down the substitute shaft. I giggled. "What?" he asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

"Um, I don't think you need to worry about leaving room for the ejaculate," I said wagging it in his face. "This isn't about to spew cum."

"Hey, no more wielding food items at me. We've been over this. And yeah, I don't need to take precautions so these don't break, I know." He shrugged his shoulder. "Just habit I guess."



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His voice seemed to deflate a bit with that last statement. It made me wonder how he'd come to find himself at the clinic this morning. Had a condom broke? Was his situation parallel to mine? I focused on the task at hand to stop the spiral my brain was about to embark on. "What flavor is this?" I blurted out.

Aaron looked at me with a smirk before saying, "This one is cola. You want to go first?"

Shit. Did I? Did it matter? Not really. I shrugged and brought the thing up to my mouth. I stared at it, long enough for my eyes to start to cross, before I stuck my tongue out and took a tentative lick.

"Eww!" I scrunched up my face and thrust the zucchini at Aaron. "Yuck. Latex-y licorice, with maybe a hint of turpentine. Bleck!" I was suddenly thankful Aaron had thought of the saltines as I grabbed a couple and shoved them whole into my mouth trying to chomp away the taste.

"So, cola does not win an award tonight, I'm guessing," Aaron said with a smile. "I think we might need something else."

Aaron put two shot glasses on the counter, both filled with ice-cold vodka. I poured the one closest to me down my throat, not even feeling a burn. "Next!"

"Shot or condom?" Aaron asked, holding the bottle in one hand and a condom in the other.

"Condom. You first this time," I pouted.

"Okay. Here, you put this on a banana or something. I'll pour shots, 'cause I have a feeling we're gonna need them."

And we did need them. Or rather, I needed them. I didn't even look when I rolled the condom down the banana. All I could see was the man across from me. His tight, black shirt, the way it hugged his torso, the way his nipples were pebbled underneath.

"Here you go," I sighed and held it across to him. He was still busy pouring a shot, but leaned over and took the end of the banana in his mouth then pulled off it with a pop. *Holy fuck.*

"Ah. That one was banana... sort of," he said grimacing, smacking his lips and working his tongue. "You can probably skip that one. It's not gonna make my go-to list." I handed him a cracker, and he mumbled his thanks while chewing.

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“Shots.” He shoved a glass in front of me, raising his own in cheers before throwing it back. I watched his Adam’s apple bob. My dick perked up. I drank the vodka down.

I could feel the warmth in my belly as I watched Aaron rolling a bright-pink condom down a cucumber. “Strawberry.” He smiled and took a long lick with the flat of his tongue. He passed it over the counter and winked at me. I stifled a groan. Bastard. *Well, two could play at this game.*

I let my gaze linger on him for just a second before I let my tongue dart out and take a swipe, then another. I wrapped my lips around the end and bobbed my head slowly up and down over just the tip. I let my tongue peek out from my lips and leisurely dragged my mouth off.

“Oh, not too bad. It’s kinda like a Fruit Roll-Up.” I shrugged a shoulder, acting coy.

Aaron was leaning heavily on the counter, his eyes locked on my mouth, which felt a bit tacky from the lube. I licked around my lips before smacking them together. “What’s next?”

“Uh...” Aaron didn’t move. He just sat there slack-jawed as I grabbed a banana and rolled a purple condom onto it.

I took a teasing lick, and said, “Skittles maybe. Grape Skittles.”

“Skittles?” Aaron asked, shaking himself out of his stupor. I held my arm across the island and offered it up like an ice cream cone. And the man took it, down, way down. I could feel his breath on my fingers, and I felt fucking pole-vaulters going for Olympic gold in my stomach. I couldn’t hold back the whimper that escaped as he slowly pulled his lips back up the banana.

“Yup, definitely Skittles, with a bit of rubber tree,” he said, his eyes boring into mine.

I gulped. “Another shot?”

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## Chapter Five

I'd had three shots and I think about fifty saltines. My mouth tasted like latex and goo, when I finally proclaimed, "Last one!"

"Thank fuck," Aaron muttered back. He was leaning back with his elbows on the counter. My ass had found its way onto a bar stool when I became too lazy to stand anymore. "Seriously, who's fucking bright idea was this?" he asked.

I gave him what I hoped was a pointed look. I could feel my entire face stretch out and then scrunch back up in what I was sure was a less than attractive look. It was also way too much effort, so I stopped. I turned my attention to the last thing left to fellate. The bright-blue dildo. I straightened up and grabbed the thing off the table, showing a kind of confidence I really wasn't feeling. "All right. Where's the condom?" I said in a too loud voice.

Aaron leaned an elbow onto the counter and held his head in one hand while using the other to unceremoniously *and*, not to mention, inaccurately, throw the condom toward me. He let out a long sigh.

I reached over and picked the condom up and then tried unsuccessfully to open it. I cursed under my breath, which caused Aaron to look up at me. I put the corner of the packet in my mouth and pulled, hearing the crinkle and the rustle as it gave way. I wedged the dildo between my legs and rolled the red condom down. With a triumphant, *Whoop!* I threw both fists in the air and exclaimed, "Ladies and gentlemen, I submit our last offering of the evening. For your licking pleasure, or maybe not pleasure *exactly*, I present, cherry!"

I smiled widely at Aaron. His mouth hung agape, and his eyes were focused on—well, somewhere that was not my face. I furrowed my eyebrows, confused, and followed his gaze—directly to my crotch and the dildo standing there at attention, gleaming purple as the colors of the glass and the condom blended together. *Shit.* My cock full-on jerked. So did the dildo. My cheeks went hot, and Aaron's eyes went wide. The dark navy getting even darker. His tongue darted out and licked his upper lip. My heart rate sped up. My breath was coming in pants, while I did my damndest not to come in my pants. The dildo kept twitching. *Fuck!*

"So um..." I picked up the phallus and held it out to him. "Do you want to go first?"

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“No. You.” His voice was husky, wet, and throaty. He tore his eyes away from the dildo in my hand and met my gaze. I didn’t even look down, just at Aaron, when I slowly stuck my tongue out and swirled it around the tip before turning my head and licking down the side. “Mmm. This one isn’t bad either. Cherry Skittle? You should try.” I held it across the counter for him.

“Yeah, I think I should.” But, instead of taking the dildo, Aaron stalked around the island to stand in front of me.

I didn’t know what was happening. My body had a mind of its own. I stood up and took a step closer to him, the dildo still upright between us.

Aaron’s hands came up and cupped my face, and then brought his face in close. My breath caught in my chest, and then disappeared completely as I felt his tongue lap over my upper lip, before moving on to trace the lower one. One swipe, then two. I was certain my knees would give way.

“I like cherries. A lot,” he husked, pulling back an inch. I sucked in a mouthful of air and heard the thump of the dildo as it hit the floor, freeing my hands. I grabbed his shirt and pulled his body flush with mine, and I kissed him. I. Fucking. Kissed. Him.

Rough, chapped lips pressed against my own. I wrapped my arms around him. Feeling the muscles of his back through the soft cotton shirt he wore. He pressed himself closer, and I could feel his pebbled nipples and his hard pecs, and his hard—

I shoved my tongue in his mouth and tasted cherries and vodka, and man. Fucking hell, he tasted so fucking good. My tongue found that crooked tooth and stroked it, lapped it, before finding Aaron’s tongue, twisting and dancing with it. And his danced right back.

It was a kiss I felt in my toes, and my knees, and my cock—which was done twitching and jerking and was now straight-up hard. It was electric. If I’d had a hand to spare, I probably would have tried to feel if my hairs were standing on end from the power of it. But my hands were too busy touching, squeezing, groping. One hand went up to his head, pulling at his hair, while the other made its way down to his ass and squeezed. That ass felt better than I had imagined.

Aaron groaned, and I swallowed the sound. He squeezed my nipples, and I bit his tongue gently to stop the next whimper that was about to escape my throat. Whether it was him, or me, or both of us, I don’t know, but everything slowed down. Soft laps, tentative exploration. The coarse feel of scruff teasing

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along my neck and the tender kisses that followed. The frantic urgency had dissipated, and a quiet need for closeness had replaced it. I rubbed my hands up and down his arms as he rested on the small of my back, teasing at my waistband. I breathed him in. For a moment, I knew nothing else outside those walls and those arms. Just him and me. And then, he gently pushed me away.

“Wow.” His voice was quiet, and his eyes were closed as he brought his forehead down to rest against mine. I kept my eyes open, admiring how beautiful he was, flushed and disheveled, as we both sucked in deep breaths in attempts to cool down.

When I was confident my voice would work again, “Wow is one way to put it,” I said quietly.

He opened his eyes, and I saw so many emotions circling there. He was wistful, and confused, and lustful, and... afraid? I would have given anything to know what was going on in his head. “Well, this is not how I saw the day ending.”

I chuckled and took half a step back and studied the hardwood floor. “Agreed.” I smiled and raised my eyes up to his again. I was positive I could look at this man a long, long time and never tire of it. “Happy Birthday.”

The corners of his mouth turned up the tiniest bit when he replied, “Thank you, Jer.” He turned and looked at the clock. “Twelve-oh-two. It’s not my birthday anymore.”

“No, I guess the day is over,” I said almost mournfully, not relishing going back to face reality, ticking the time away as I drifted through the next two months.

“Why did you go to the clinic today? Why on your birthday?” I asked him, surprising myself a little. I realized I wanted to hear Aaron’s story more than I didn’t want to share my own.

He groaned and fell back onto the stool I’d been sitting in. Running his hand through his hair, he looked up at me and asked, “Do you really want to talk about this?”

“Yes.”

“All right,” he sighed. “I think I might need a beer, you want one?” he said, pushing himself up and walking over to the fridge.

“No thanks, but do you have anything nonalcoholic?”

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He was bent over in the fridge when he turned his head toward me and smirked, eyes gleaming. “I have cola.” He waggled his brows. I narrowed my eyes and growled.

“Cola would be great, thanks,” I said pointedly. “So long as it doesn’t taste like turpentine.”

He stood up, a beer in one hand, a Coke in the other, and laughed before closing the distance between us. He didn’t sit down though, just paused, handed me the Coke and said, “I’m sure it tastes like plain ol’ Coca-Cola. Let’s move to the couch, okay?”

I followed him over and watched him drop his body down and sink into the cushions. His long legs were sprawled in front of him, and his arm stretched out along the back. I sat down at the other end so I wouldn’t be tempted, and curled my legs beneath me, angling my body to face him.

“God,” he said resigned, and took a pull from the bottle. “Why did I go to the clinic? Okay. Here’s the story. I’d been seeing this guy for a few months. It was a very off and on thing cause he lives in Boston, just travels up here for business once or twice a month, sometimes more. We didn’t go out really, or if we did, it was usually early, then we’d come back here and hang out, listen to music, drink... fuck.” He peered up at me through his lashes, his head tilted down. I took a big gulp of my Coke, attempting to hide my reaction to his words and his gaze.

“It was good. You know—comfortable, fun. So, then maybe a month ago, I ran into him at the mall. It was obvious he was caught off guard, and he was not happy to see me. I didn’t know what exactly the deal was. I just knew he was lying. I’d invited him out to a concert that week, and he’d told me he couldn’t come up to Maine because he had meetings all week down in Mass. So, I was nice for about ninety seconds and then told him to go fuck himself because I wasn’t playing whatever game he was spinning.”

Aaron was picking at the label on his beer bottle. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. His voice was flat when he continued, “About three weeks ago, I got a text from him. I was at work, and I remember seeing his picture pop up, and just groaning and rolling my eyes. I shoved the phone back in my pocket and finished up my shift. I got the bar closed down and locked up, then came up here. I’d forgotten all about the text. I figured he was looking to hook up or something. Maybe he was going to grovel and beg to get back with me.”

My hands clenched the soda can, and I felt a tightness in my belly and a prickling sensation on my scalp. I didn’t like where this was heading. I didn’t

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want to hear my instinct was right. I wanted to take Aaron in my arms and hold him and tell him everything was going to be okay. And then I wanted to go find the asshole and punch him. But I couldn't do any of that. Aaron held his body stiff and clenched his jaw. He wasn't open for comfort. And right then I hated myself for asking him to tell me this story.

“But, I'm sure you can probably guess, that wasn't what the text said. Nope. I got eight words. I was worth eight words. *‘I tested positive. You should get checked. Sorry.’*”

He was lost in recollection. His eyes were looking straight ahead, away from me. He'd gone back to the day when some fucking coward sent him a text to tell him he'd been exposed to HIV. Whoever the guy was, I was quite sure if I wanted to know what he looked like, I'd just need to look up the word *douche bag*, and his picture would be there illustrating the meaning.

I was shaken from my own thoughts when Aaron continued, “We'd used condoms, but there were definitely a few drunken moments we were not as careful as we should have been. And like I said earlier, I've never used a condom for blow jobs, so I'd swallowed a bunch of cum.” He shrugged a shoulder, a rueful smile on his lips.

“What made you go to the clinic on your birthday?” I was a little bit pissed at myself for asking, but I still wanted to know.

“Ah, that was just shitty luck. I spent a couple of weeks breaking things, and sending some very angry and verbose messages to Mal. When I finally got that out of my system, I called the clinic to make an appointment. They were pretty booked, which surprised me to be honest. I could either go today, or yesterday, whatever. Or, I'd have to wait another week. I just wanted it over with, so... yeah.” He paused and regarded me. “That's my story. What's yours?”

*Oh shit.* I was so busy feeling incensed and outraged for Aaron, I'd forgotten I'd have to reciprocate. I hadn't shared this story with anyone yet. I'd told people at work Greg was at a conference. Told my mom the same thing. As far as life outside my house was concerned, everything was the same, Greg and Jeremy going strong. I needed to find my fucking spine.

“Well,” I began, suddenly wishing I had something other than Coke to drink. “I was a fool, I guess. I haven't really had a lot of relationships, just one in high school, and then a couple short-lived ones in college. I'm not really one for hook-ups or back alley blow jobs. I had a job and had bought a house; life was all right, though lonely. A little less than a year ago, I met Greg through

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some mutual friends. We hit it off and started seeing each other. We became exclusive after about six weeks and dated for seven months before he moved in with me. We went and got tested, and both of us got negative results, so we stopped using condoms. I was content. Except for the clothes he'd leave on the bedroom floor, which annoyed me, we were happy enough." I slumped back against the sofa, sighing as I ran my hand through my hair.

"I thought he loved me, so I could forgive him the little things. Every now and again, I'd come home, and he would have everything clean and sparkling. We'd go for a nice dinner somewhere. It made me feel special." I could feel the humiliation was sneaking in, churning in my stomach, prickling at my neck, but I continued with my story. I owed that much to Aaron.

"I came home exactly three weeks ago and found the house spotless. I was actually excited because we hadn't gone out for a while; I figured he was planning a date night. I went to the fridge for a beer and found an envelope with a 'Dear John' letter and his test results. I haven't heard from him since."

"Damn."

"Yup. That about sums it up," I said, before I took a sip of my Coke.

"Do you want me to beat him up for you?" Aaron asked.

"Maybe, if I knew where he was, but I don't. So thanks, but I'll pass. He's not worth getting assault charges pressed against you anyway." I closed my eyes and leaned back into the cushions. It had been almost cathartic to tell somebody. Once the story was out, my entire body felt drained. I turned and looked at the man at the other end of the couch. It wasn't sympathy I saw in Aaron's navy eyes, it was empathy. I hoped he could see it in mine.

My voice was quiet when I finally found the courage to ask the question I'd wanted to ask since he'd bumped into me on the sidewalk.

"What were—"

"Negative. Yours?"

"Negative. But now—"

"Three months. The window."

"Yeah, the window."

The air was heavy with the silence. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence; it was charged. Something was happening between us. A bridge, a connection. Then I remembered the kiss. I felt a thin layer of sweat form all over my body. I



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couldn't get enough air in my lungs. I needed space. I made a quick excuse and headed to the bathroom.

I closed the door behind me, leaned back against it, and looked up at the ceiling. I didn't know what I was doing. I just told this man the most humiliating story of my life. I'd made out with him in his kitchen after fellating fruits and vegetables and a dildo for Christ's sake. This was not Jeremy Allen. Jeremy Allen played it safe. Jeremy Allen's life was all about order and routine. And for the last twelve hours, Jeremy Allen had, for some unknown, mysterious reason, thrown it all out the window. And now, Jeremy Allen was talking to himself in the third person. It was all I could do not to sink to the floor and press my face against the cool, gray tiles.

*Breathe, just breathe.*

I pulled myself together, pushed off the door, and took care of business. I washed my hands and splashed some water on my face before taking a long look in the mirror. The reflection was the same one I'd been looking at for weeks now.

My brown hair was shaggy, in need of a trim. I had dark circles under my hazel eyes, and they stood out more than they should have against my pale skin. My body was still lean, almost to the point of too skinny, just like it always was. I'd never been able to put on much muscle. Not like I'd ever seriously tried.

But now, I saw a subtle difference in the mirror. I didn't look as fragile or as weak as I had yesterday. A new determination reflected back at me. I pushed away from the counter and headed back to the living room.

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I came to a quick stop when I reached the kitchen. Aaron had moved from the couch and was standing stiffly by the island. The food, condoms, and dildo had all been cleaned away. The only thing there was my messenger bag, which had been on the floor by the couch when I'd gone into the bathroom. My cell phone was sitting on top of it. Something was wrong.

"Aaron?" I heard my voice waver.

"Thank you for yesterday, Jeremy." Unlike mine, Aaron's voice was steady... and cold.

"You're welcome. Thank you for dinner." I didn't know what was going on. What could have happened while I was in the bathroom? I hadn't been in there that long. Not to have caused this quick of a shift in moods.

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“I called you a cab.” *What?*

“Um, okay?” *Not really.*

“It was just your bag, right?”

It was obvious Aaron was done. Ten minutes ago, the man in front of me had been kind, and full of empathy. Forty-five minutes ago, he'd had his tongue down my throat. But now, for some reason, he'd changed. He was finished. With. Me.

My chest hurt, but I set my jaw and reached past him to take my bag. Hefting it onto my shoulder, I stuck out my right hand. “It was nice to meet you, Aaron.”

I noticed the smallest of flickers in his eyes, like some camouflage was failing, but then it was gone. He grabbed my hand and gave a curt shake before letting it go. “Likewise.”

He took two steps and opened the door for me. I stared at him for just a moment before I walked out to the stairwell and heard the door shut and dead bolt behind me.

With every heavy step I took down those two flights of stairs, the confusion and dejection grew. By the time I reached the street, my legs felt like they were made of lead and my cheeks were wet.

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## Chapter Six

I thought the trip to the clinic would bring an end to my pity party. I was wrong. Aaron's cold dismissal sent me spiraling with uncertainty. I went home that night and buried myself under a blanket in the guest room for nearly thirty-six hours. The hours I spent in dreamless sleep, I was beyond grateful for. The waking hours were another thing entirely. Those were hours of self-inflicted torture.

I thought of Greg. How angry I was with him and with myself. What signs had I missed? How long had it been going on? How many men? Did he laugh at me? Did he talk about me with them? How stupid could I get? How pathetic could I be?

I thought of the clinic. The brief moment when I exhaled a sigh of relief. The moment when I felt every worry in my body just float away. The moment I thought somehow I had beat the odds. And finally the moment when all the tension and fear came flooding back, and I realized it was not yet over. How would I tell my mother? My brother? Would I have to tell my boss? Would I be treated like a leper?

And then I thought of Aaron. The beautiful, resigned face I saw at the clinic. The way his voice would rumble from deep in his chest. Then the way a smile would change him into a whole new person. I thought of all the facets to this man I hadn't yet seen. But I wanted to. I really wanted to.

While I had sat in the waiting room a jumble of nerves and tears, he sat there with a silent anger, seething. Pissed off and ready to fight. A man had done him wrong, and *in the middle of the mall*, he'd told him to fuck off. He would have never looked back except he got a fucking text message and he'd been forced to. There was a lot to know about Aaron. I had only seen a glimpse.

My thoughts circled and coiled through my head during those waking hours spent in the guest room. I don't know how long I would have lain there, but it was Sunday afternoon when the cramping in my stomach finally compelled me to emerge. I sat at my breakfast bar and sipped chicken soup, staring out the window into my now overgrown back yard.

It was sunny; spring had come in quickly and just as rapidly, it was becoming summer. Not an unusual occurrence in Maine. It had been twenty-five degrees two weeks ago, and now, I saw the daffodils that had fought their

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way free of the hard soil, lazing in sunlight. They were beautiful. It didn't matter that they would be gone in just a few weeks.

And that was the crux of it all. I could be here another day, or I could be here another seventy-five years. But if I spent whatever time I had lying in bed under the comfort of darkness, nothing would change. Nothing would grow.

I got up, rinsed out my bowl, and headed to take a long overdue shower.

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Numbers never changed. It's what I liked best about them. I liked being an accountant because it was my job to find the right formula to make the numbers the most beneficial to a person as they could be. Sure, I couldn't change a person's previous year's gross income, but I could find a way to make it work best for them. I could make something bleak, into something a little less bleak. It was all how I looked at it. Taking the story the numbers gave me, looking for the variables and the idiosyncrasies, and using those to make it better.

I had to figure out my idiosyncrasies. My variables. My formula.

I dug out a paper calendar the oil company had left for me. I figured out the three month mark and circled it with a bright red marker. *Sixty-five days*.

When I finally dug my phone out of my bag, I found a bunch of missed calls from both my mother and my brother. I called them back and apologized for being MIA for the weekend. I didn't explain the reasons. I'd tackle that when I had a concrete answer. Instead, I told them I'd been feeling under the weather and had spent the weekend in bed. It was, at least, a diluted version of the truth.

I'd also found two missed calls from Greg. He didn't leave a message, and I was thankful. I didn't want the sound of his voice to send me crawling back into bed. I couldn't decide what I wanted from him. I didn't want to hear his reasons or his excuses. I knew I didn't want to hear the names. None of that mattered. I didn't call him back.

I did, however, want to call Aaron, but we had never exchanged numbers. I wanted to know what had made things change. Something about the man had intrigued me, called to me. But after his abrupt dismissal, I was fairly certain he didn't want to hear from me.

Aaron was one of my variables.

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Time had been divided for me. Pre-test and post-test. I wasn't as sullen as I could have been. Instead of moping around and wondering what to do next, I

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took to walking around the Old Port. I let my mind wander where it wanted to. There were still so many things I didn't have answers for, but I still had choices. I was still breathing. I still had my life. I needed to figure out what I wanted from it.

Without noticing, I found myself retracing the path Aaron and I had taken. My feet had a mind of their own. I did a walk-by of McIntyre's. Even for a Wednesday night, the bar was full. People were everywhere, laughing, clapping. I stood at the window staring in, not daring to venture inside. Aaron was behind the bar, his body angled away from the window. He had his arms crossed over his chest and a towel tucked in his back pocket. A patron came up to the bar, and Aaron grabbed a pint glass, and with a flick of his wrist and a finger, he had a draft poured and placed back on the bar. He started to turn toward me, and I ducked my head and hustled along as quickly as I could. It was close.

I ended up at the coffee shop. I sat at our table, studied the painting that had started it all, and sipped my too-sweet cappuccino. In my head, there was a beautiful, grouchy man in a hoodie sitting across from me.

And then, he wasn't in my head. He was there, sprawled in the chair, his eyes shooting daggers.

"Hey," he rumbled.

"Hi, Aaron." My voice sounded meek, and I hated it.

"Wanna tell me what you're doing?" He sounded like a parent who'd just found out his kid had trampled through a tomato patch, and now he was giving them just enough rope to hang themselves with. *He'd seen me. Fuck.*

"I'm drinking a cappuccino."

"Try again, Jer." His arms were crossed over his chest as he tilted the chair back onto two legs.

"What?" I opened my eyes wide and hoped they looked like a puppy dog's. "I'm sitting in a coffee shop, and imbibing the beverage that I purchased. What do you want me to say?"

"How 'bout the truth."

"That is the truth," I said, feigning indignation.

"No, that's part of the truth. Those puppy-dog eyes you are trying to throw at me aren't going to work."

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*Shit, damn, fuck.* I sagged down in the chair.

“You need to stop it, Jer. I don’t want to see you. Don’t come by the bar again.”

“I didn’t come inside. I was just curious.” God, I was back to sounding like a six-year-old. “I don’t understand, Aaron. Help me understand?”

He stood up and put both palms flat down. The ominous tone in his voice made sweat start to drip down my back, as he snarled, “There’s nothing to understand. I. Don’t. Want. You! I don’t want to see you, talk with you, kis—”

His words cut off, and he brought his lips into a tight line. “Stay the fuck away from me, Jer. I mean it. Stay. Away.”

He pushed away and strode out the door, even his ass exuded attitude. My dick twitched.

*He couldn’t say he didn’t want to kiss me.*

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## Chapter Seven

It took a couple of weeks, but eventually, I fell back into the comfort of my routine. Greg still called. I still ignored. I still went on my walks down in the Old Port, but I avoided the coffee shop and the bar, not wanting another run-in.

Every morning I'd get up, shower, drink my coffee while browsing the news, and head to work, where I would lose myself in the security of numbers for the day. When my coworkers asked me how Greg was, I gave them the truth, I didn't know. I told them he'd moved out and avoided giving any more details. Most of them respected my wishes not to talk about it.

With regards to my mother and my brother, I was not so lucky.

When I told my mother Greg was gone, she had wanted to come down and stay with me. I said no. She asked me if I was okay about three hundred times in between snuffles. I said yes... about three hundred times. It was more than I could handle. I ended up feigning plans with friends just to get off the phone.

I talked with my brother, Dustin, on Thursday. He wasn't nearly as emotional as Mom had been. He just asked me a couple of questions, and I'd given him vague answers. He didn't probe. But I could hear the skepticism as he said, "Okay, Bean, if you say so."

Friday evening, I marked another day off on my calendar with a small smile. *Fifty-three days left*. One day closer. I was just about to put my Hungry Man dinner in the microwave when I heard it; the unmistakable rumble of Dustin's Harley followed by a swift knock at the door. Wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans, I got up and answered it. I had the widest grin I could manage plastered across my face.

Dustin was going to see right through it.

He was five years older than me. We'd always been close, and we grew even closer when I was fourteen, and our dad died. He'd become my rock. And, despite giving me the rather unfortunate nickname, *String-Bean*, Dustin was my hero.

He was the first person I came out to. I was this gangly, awkward sixteen year old boy, and I was scared to death. Dustin, just held me as I'd sputtered, *I don't want you to hate me*. He had just squeezed me tighter and said, *Never gonna happen, Bean*. When I'd stopped crying and was able to get out the

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words, *I'm gay*, he'd told me he'd figured that out when I was ten. I was out, and my hero still loved me.

And now, twelve years later, I felt like that sixteen year old kid again. I didn't want to tell him, though not because I thought he would hate me, but because this time it would hurt *him*. History had taught me that Dustin wouldn't let up, though, not until I fessed up. I let out a resigned sigh. "Come on in, D. I think you might want a beer for this one."

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Dustin wasn't having any of it. He dragged me out of the house, saying I needed the fresh air. I tried to protest, but as usual D won out. We wandered around through the side streets until finally making our way to Back Cove and the calming scent of salt water. Dustin was silent, and so was I, as we simply enjoyed each other's presence and walked the trail that edged the bay. *I don't know how to tell him*. A couple of boats were heading out toward the bridge, but beyond that, all was quiet but for the gentle lapping of the waves, the occasional call of a gull.

I looked over at Dustin. We were so different. People would never guess we were brothers. He was muscular; I was scrawny. He was blond; my hair was brown. He hated math; I used it as a coping skill. The only thing we had in common were our hazel eyes.

*God, I loved him*. I had to tell him.

"Greg left because he was positive," I said in a quiet, yet, surprisingly, calm voice.

Dustin turned to me, perplexed. "What? Positive? That you two weren't going to work? Bean, that's—"

"No, D... Greg tested positive."

I could see the meaning of the words hit him. The look of confusion and indignation slowly slid from his face, and then his eyes got wide and wet. He worried his mouth before reaching over and pulling me close, holding me so tightly it was hard to breathe.

His voice was soft, "This isn't supposed to happen."

I steered us to a nearby bench and sat us down. His face was so sad. Even though I knew this wasn't entirely on me, I felt like I'd let him down.

"I'm so sorry, D..." He reached over and pulled me close again.



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“Don’t. You’re my baby brother. I’m supposed to protect you from all the bad shit. I’m supposed to be the one...” His voice trailed off, and I sat there in the safety of my brother’s arms.

“I love you. And you are the best brother anyone could ever have. I am so thankful that you are mine.” I mumbled into his shoulder. I squeezed my hands between us and gently pushed myself away from him. My voice stronger with the bit of distance, I continued, “You have been my strength for so long. But I’m my own man, D. I made my own choices. This—this is something you couldn’t prevent. This, you can’t protect me from.”

“So you’re, you’re...”

“I don’t know. I went to the clinic two weeks ago and took a test. It was negative.” I could see hope shining through him, but I reached over and gripped his arm. “It doesn’t mean anything. It was really early. I have to go back for another one, maybe two.”

“How did this happen, Bean?” Dustin was looking at the ground, sounding so defeated. At that moment I hated Greg. Hated him.

So we sat there on that bench looking at the water, and sometimes each other, as I told him the story. I watched as the gamut of emotions swept over his face. When I told him about the letter, he pushed himself up and off the bench and started pacing back and forth with his fists clenched until I reached up and dragged him back down in a hug. I sat there with my arm around him as I told him all of it. Greg. The Clinic. I even told him about my day with Aaron and how it ended, though I left out the details of the in between.

“Next time I’m going with you.”

“D...”

“Don’t fucking argue with me. I. Am. Going. With. You. You give me the date, the time, I will be there. You are not going to go through this alone. You hear me?” Dustin’s jaw was set, and this was not an argument I would win.

“Okay,” I conceded. “Okay. I’ll let you know when I make the appointment.”

“Good. I love you, Bean.”

“I love you too.” And then I remembered my mother, and I panicked. “You can’t tell Mom! Not yet. Promise me you won’t tell her. I can’t deal with her yet. It will kill her, and I just can’t handle that right now. Please, please promise me!”

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“No worries, there. I don’t think I could handle her either. We’ll wait. ’Til we know for sure.”

*We.* I don’t know what I did to deserve a brother like Dustin. I hadn’t thought I could love him any more, but at that moment I did. I let out all the air I had trapped in my lungs and slumped back onto the bench. “Thanks, D. I mean it. For everything.”

“It’s my job, little brother. Anytime.”

Our stomachs growled in unison. We laughed as Dustin stood up and offered me a hand, which I accepted.

“You want to go find some food?”

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The burger weighed heavily in my stomach after a month of meals that were all prepared in the microwave. This bar had become a tradition for us, starting when I’d bought my house. Good beer, good food, convenient location on Forest Avenue. Only a quick cab ride from home, but definitely walkable when we felt like it. And it had outside seating on the patio, where we and only a couple other tables were currently located.

It was good to have Dustin there. He teased me; I called him an ass. It was *normal*. We’d had just enough beer to give us that warm and fuzzy feeling... and to send me to the bathroom. I put it off as long as possible, not wanting to battle the crowd inside. But eventually, my need won out, and I pushed my way up from the table and made my way in.

The bar was crowded, raucous, and loud. The local college had just let out, and the kids were out celebrating. It was like a giant frat party. And I fucking hated frat parties, but my bladder left me no choice. I weaved through the maze of bodies, squeezing and turning, trying to fit into the tiny spaces. I hadn’t been anywhere this packed in over two months, the last time with *he who shall not be named*. By the time I found my destination, I needed to get away from all the people, all the sweat and the beer-smelling breath. I pushed the door, and it stopped short with a thump halfway from being fully open.

“Oomph! What the fuck? Asshole! Fuck! Son of a bitch!”

Oh shit.

I knew that growl.

There was another thump, and the door suddenly jolted back. Pain radiated from my forehead as I was pushed back a couple steps and abruptly stopped by

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some big man, wearing flannel. “Watch it man,” he said, before he shrugged me off and pushed me back toward the bathroom. Shit. My head started pounding along with my bladder. I felt like I was in a pinball machine.

I took a moment to gather myself. I stared at the door, the wood grain, the molding.

*Crash!*

The sound of glass breaking brought me back, and immediately, though tentatively, I gave the door a small push. When it met no resistance, I slowly opened it the rest of the way and moved inside.

The smell of beer was overwhelming as I looked at the shattered remains of a pint glass in the corner. There was a puddle of what I assumed—hoped—was beer pooled a couple steps away from the door. *Shit*. We’d collided—again. Though this time the casualty was his beer and his shirt, not my iPod.

Aaron stood at the sink, pissed off and fuming. His shirt, dark and wet, had been thrown in the sink. Water trickled down from his wet hair, to his face, and then slithered down to his naked chest. I’d had a glimpse of his abs a week ago, now they were on full display. Defined. Perfect. I saw the dark hair from his armpit as he reached down to splash some more water over his face and his neck, which caused goosebumps to break out all over his creamy skin. *And if I was honest, mine too*. His brown nipples tightened as one small dribble of water slid down between them and snaked its way into his belly button. My eyes followed that tiny drop to its destination and kept on going to the waistband of his low slung jeans and the hint of dark hair that peaked out from beneath.

My breath stuttered and my motherfucking, unruly cock was twitching and jerking like it was banging out Morse code.

*SOS!*

The sounds of my labored breathing must have alerted him I was there. “Jeremy?” he spat. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to open the door into you and spill your drink,” I stammered, hating how I sounded. I gnawed on my lip to stop from saying anything else.

“Huh?” His voice sounded equally of confusion and vitriol. “Of course it was you. Jesus. Can you ever just not be in my path. Every time a door opens, there you are, crashing on the other side.” He threw his hands down by his side, pursed his lips and let out a long breath. Shaking his head, he looked up at me with narrowed eyes.

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“Are you here for a reason, Jer? Or did you just come into the bathroom to get me naked.” His lip curled with that last statement. “Oh... that’s what you want isn’t it?” He stalked toward me, spreading his arms wide. I pushed my back into the door, half-wishing to be on the other side. The other half of me, *which included my dick*, was so fucking grateful I wasn’t.

Aaron turned around in a circle giving me the full view of his body. I couldn’t move my eyes away from his torso, all that skin... He leaned in close to me, putting his cheek next to, but not touching, mine. I closed my eyes, feeling his heat, inhaling the scent of Aaron and beer. I felt his hot breath on my ear. And then, I heard his gritty voice, “Do you like what you see, Jer?”

My teeth clenched down on my lip... I tasted blood. Blood. HIV. Fuck.

I let my lip go, and ducked down and around Aaron, so I could move and breathe freely again. My fists clenched at my sides, I pulled the air in and then slowly exhaled, before I turned around. He stood there leering at me, half-naked and dripping. And beautiful. There was some emotion, something beyond hate or distaste, brewing behind his eyes.

The door moved behind him. “Bean? You in here?”

I didn’t answer for a moment. The door moved again, this time hitting Aaron in the back. “Fuck this,” he scoffed before pulling the door wide open.

“Jeremy? You okay?” Dustin’s eyes bounced from me to Aaron and back again.

“What—”

“Ohhh, he’s with you,” Aaron said with a cutting glare. “Wow Jer, you move quick. I never would have thought you had it in you.”

“No—” I started.

“No need to explain. I’ll let you two get back to whatever it was you were doing.” Aaron turned and clapped Dustin on the back. “Thanks for the loaner, man.”

He threw me a wink and walked out the door, leaving his shirt, still dripping in the sink. My head was throbbing, the confusion of what just went on didn’t help. I leaned against the counter with a groan.

Dustin hadn’t moved. His feet were planted, and his mouth hung open. After a moment, “What the hell just happened? Who was that asshole?”

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“That...” I said as I finally made my way to the urinal, “...was Aaron.” I finished up and moved back to the sink to wash my hands.

There was a hint of disbelief in Dustin's voice. “Seriously?” The disbelief was short-lived, as he met my gaze in the mirror. His features turning tight and red. A near-growl vibrated from his chest.

“What the fuck happened to your face?”

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## Chapter Eight

Sunday afternoon, I found myself standing across the street from McIntyre's watching Aaron through the window. He was slumped over the bar, flipping through a magazine. Only a handful of customers filled the tables in the restaurant. I shifted my weight between my feet. For two days I'd been trying to calm Dustin down... and get the knot on my forehead to shrink. I hadn't been very successful with either.

I was angry. Pissed. Confused. My hand clenched around Aaron's T-shirt. In a moment of weakness, I'd brought it home and washed it. For the past day, it had sat on top of my washing machine taunting me. It made me question everything I'd felt that day before he'd kicked me out. Had I been drunk that night? A little, but the three shots and two beers over four hours did not get me wasted. The kiss. He didn't fake that. And all the laughs we'd shared, the silliness. For an accountant like me, who liked everything in its place, and got annoyed when things stepped out of line, that must have meant something.

I just didn't know what.

And then there was the "bathroom incident". He hadn't been expecting me to walk through that door. I saw the confusion in his eyes when I walked in. It was real. But then, like so many other times, the ornery asshole took over while the real Aaron hid behind his camouflage. I just needed to figure out if the real Aaron was worth wading through all the shit he'd laid in waiting.

Why? That was the biggest question of all. I twisted the shirt in my hands until my knuckles went white. Maybe after all this time, Dustin's hot temper was wearing off on me.

Except, I didn't know if I could do this. Thinking it was one thing, doing it...

I felt like a colony of ants had taken up residence in my epidermis.

*You're being ridiculous, my brain told me. You just told D you were your own man. So fucking act like it. Man up and cross the street. Worst case scenario, he yells and humiliates you. What's new about that?*

My brain and I had to work on motivational pep talks.

"Okay," I said aloud. "I'm doing this."

I steeled my shoulders back and set my jaw. I stared straight across the street. *I'm doing this.*

I stepped off the curb and into the road, focusing only on Aaron through the window. His disheveled hair, the slope of his shoulders—

*HONK!*

I jumped back startled, and watched the car swerve toward the middle of the road to avoid me. *Jesus, I'm an idiot.*

I stared across the street. Dark eyes stared back at me. I scowled right back. This time, I looked both ways before I crossed.

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“How can I help you today?”

I sat, hunched over and fidgeting, on the bar stool, the T-shirt on the bar in front of me. I was rubbing my fingers so hard, I was afraid the skin would come off. In the time it had taken me to cross the street and enter the building, Aaron had done a disappearing act.

A woman in her midfifties, with salt and pepper hair and knowing, navy eyes was staring down at me. I felt like a third grader sitting in the principal's office. She had to be Aaron's mother. I didn't know what to say or how much she knew. Did she know about Mal? Did she know about the clinic? Did she know about me?

“Um, I'd like to leave this for Aaron... please...” With a trembling hand, I pushed the shirt closer to her. “...ma'am.” I gulped down a mouthful of spit.

“Don't call me ma'am, kid,” she scoffed. “I'm Maggie. You a friend of Aaron's?”

“Yes,” I said. “Well, sorta.” My language skills were impressive.

“Sorta? Hmm.” She ran her hands over the T-shirt, smoothing out the wrinkles. She twisted her lips. “What's your name?”

“J-Jeremy.” My mouth was suddenly dry.

“Jeremy, huh? How'd you get that bump on your head?” She gripped the other side of the bar and leaned over just enough to make me squirm even more than I already was.

“Is Aaron here?” I deflected. I didn't know how to answer her question.

“No, he went to the basement to check a keg which I know full well has nothing wrong with it.” She cocked her head, and looked at me as though she was trying to place a crucial puzzle piece. I squirmed some more.

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“Okay, I just wanted to talk to him.” I started to move off the stool.

“You the one I heard leaving his apartment a few weeks back?”

“Um...” I didn’t have any answers for her.

“Thought so. Listen Jeremy. I don’t know what happened between you two, but Aaron’s got a lot going on right now. Give him some time.” She shoved a draft in front of me. “Here kid, maybe this will help you remember how to talk. You look like you could use it.”

“Thanks.”

The beer tasted cold and creamy and finally my mouth started working.

“Did Aaron talk to you?” I asked, sincerely.

“That kid doesn’t talk to anybody.” *He’d talked to me.*

“Aaron’s my son. I know him, whether or not he thinks I do. Not much gets by me. He’s a good kid, despite whatever words are flying from his mouth. Whatever is going on, it’s not meant to hurt you.”

“I don’t know what I did,” I said. “One minute, everything was fine, great even. The next, it wasn’t.”

“Oh hon, you probably didn’t do anything,” she said, placing her hand over mine. “I don’t know why he’s acting like he is, but believe me when I say, he is probably doing all this in some warped effort to protect you. He’s got a lot going on right now. I bet you came as a surprise to him, especially after...” She didn’t finish her sentence, but gave me a warm smile. “Like I said, give him some time, okay?”

“Okay.”

Maggie and I talked for another half hour or so. Not so much about Aaron, instead, she asked about me. I told her about my job, and when she joked about a discount on her taxes, I gave her my card and told her to call if she ever needed any help.

I left there feeling better about things.

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I was still thinking about all of it Wednesday, when I walked through my door and dropped my bag by the coat rack. I took two steps and stopped dead in my tracks.



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Greg was standing in my kitchen fixing a cup of coffee.

I squeezed my hands into fists and stalked toward him.

“Get the fuck out of my house, Greg!” I roared.

“Hi, Jeremy,” he said, when I was an arm’s length away.

My eyebrows were up past my hairline. “Hi, Jeremy. That’s what you have to say to me? *Hi, Jeremy?* You are fucking unbelievable. Get the fuck out.”

“I came to say I’m sorry.” His ice-blue eyes met my narrowed ones.

“Sorry? I think we’ve gone beyond sorry, but if it will get you out of my house, fine, you’ve said it. I’ve heard it. Leave.”

“Did you get—” he started.

“You don’t get to ask that question!” I yelled at him. “You cheated on me! You didn’t even have the balls to face me! I got a fucking letter!”

“I know. I know. I made a mistake.”

“Mistake?” I let out an incredulous chuckle. “Just one?”

“Jeremy, let me explain. Please,” he begged.

“I don’t need an explanation. You cheated. You didn’t use condoms. You got HIV. It’s pretty clear cut. I don’t want you here. Please leave.”

“C’mon J...” He stood there in my kitchen with his hands stretched out. I didn’t want to hear him. I didn’t want anything from him. Why was he still standing there?

“Leave, Greg. Now,” I said resolutely. My feet were planted. I had my phone in my hand, ready to make a call if he didn’t.

“Okay, it’s obvious you aren’t ready to talk. I’ll go now, but this conversation isn’t over.”

I opened the door for him and watched as he walked out the door, shoulders slumped, with his hands shoved in his pockets. I almost had the door shut when he turned back to me and said, “I miss you, Jeremy.”

*What the fuck?* I slammed the door shut and turned the deadbolt and sunk to the floor. I let my arms rest on my knees and my head fell back as I let out a huge breath. Damn.

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Dustin was on my doorstep again. “Fridays are now officially brother-bonding days,” he proclaimed.

Looking down at the tool box and Home Depot bag he carried, I doubted that was the purpose of his visit. “Really?”

“Yup, really. You order some Chinese, pick out a movie, I’m changing your locks.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes, but did as he asked.

Two hours later, I had new keys on my keychain, and a belly full of MSG. I was lounging on one end of my sofa with my brother on the other, ready to surrender to the inevitable food coma, when my phone buzzed. Shit. I didn’t want to talk to anybody.

I slapped around for my phone until I finally found it on the end table. It wasn’t a number I recognized. My stomach was starting to churn as I contemplated whether or not to answer. Fuck it.

“Hello?”

“Jeremy, that you? Did I get the right number?” I’d only heard the voice once before, and it had been standing behind a bar giving me the what-for.

“Maggie? Yes, you got the right number. Is everything okay? Is your quarter ending or something?”

Dustin sat upright on his end of the couch and leaned his elbows on his knees.

“No, it’s not my damn taxes, though right now that might be easier to deal with.”

“Oh shit,” I mumbled. If she was calling me, and it wasn’t about her damn taxes, it was about her...

“Yeah, it’s about my damn son.” *How the hell did she do that?*

Dustin narrowed his eyes. I waved him off. “What’s up, Maggie? Why are you calling me? If it has to do with Aaron, I don’t know what good I can do. He’s made it abundantly clear he doesn’t want to see me.” I figured I’d beat her to the punch. Cut, whatever the request was, off quick. Make her see... but yeah, I forgot. This was Maggie, with her freaking sixth sense about the human psyche.

“That’s just his way of telling you he likes you.”

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I scoffed, "I don't think it's very effective. I'd hate to see how he treats people he doesn't like."

"Well, that goes one of two ways, either he punches them in the face, or he completely ignores them. You, he actually cares enough about to yell at." She said the words like they made sense.

"Um, I'm not following you here, Maggie," I said, honestly confused as to where any of this was leading.

"You got me all sidetracked. I need you to come down here, Jeremy."

"That's not a good idea," I replied, because it really, really wasn't.

"Yeah, it is. I've spent the past two days trying to get through to that kid. He won't talk to anyone. I need reinforcements. I need you."

"Maggie..."

"Quit your yappin' and get your ass down here. Now!" The phone line went dead. *Fuck.*

Dustin was waiting to get filled in. After the bathroom collision, he was still very much in the anti-Aaron camp. I scrubbed my face with my hands before uttering, resignedly, "Feel like going to get a beer?"

My brother groaned as he pushed himself up off the couch. I followed.

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## Chapter Nine

We hadn't even made it to McIntyre's door, and Maggie was outside.

"You." She pointed at Dustin. "Inside. Pick a spot at the bar. I'll be there in a minute."

Dustin did the only thing he could do, he opened the door and went in. I gulped.

"Now, Jeremy. Here are the keys. There's the door. Good luck." She placed a ring with two keys on it in my hand and gave it an extra squeeze.

"B-but..."

"The square one is for the deadbolt, but I'd turn the other one first, it's quieter."

"Mag..." I saw a streak of gray, and she was gone. *Well, shit.* What the hell was I getting myself into?

I trudged up the two flights of stairs. It was quiet but for the thumping of my feet as they landed heavily on each step. Appropriately enough, it reminded me of a dirge. Cue the Chopin...

At the top landing, I paused and stared at the door, still five feet away. My back found the wall, and I pressed my shoulder blades against it. *What was I doing here?*

I shouldn't have come. Regardless of Maggie's request, I shouldn't have come. Aaron didn't want me here. How many times did I need to hear him say it, shout it, snarl it at me, before I got it through my head that he meant it?

I wish I could turn my back on him and leave and find someone easy. *Easy.* What a foreign term! What would *easy* be like after the cheating asshole? You'd think I'd look for someone warm and welcoming. Someone who would laugh when they saw me, give me a hug, or two. Nope, I found Aaron. Aaron, who had tried to push me away at every turn. Who would sooner show me his back or disappear before putting his arms around me. Yet, here I was. Because, deep in my heart—or somewhere—I believed that he needed me. And I couldn't just walk away. Because maybe, if I were being honest with myself, maybe I was the one who needed *him. Shit.*

I pushed off the wall, took three steps to the door, unlocked it, and went inside.

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The black bracelet. I'd forgotten about it. But there it was. Still wrapped around his wrist. I couldn't remember if it had been on his wrist the other times I'd seen him; it didn't matter one way or the other. I could see it now, as he lay sleeping in his bed. He looked innocent. Naked and beautiful, covered only by a thin white sheet. I wanted to crawl in next to him and put my arms around him, feel his body pressed against mine. God, he took my breath away.

So did the apartment, but for an entirely different reason. It looked like H&R Block at 12:01 a.m. on April 16. The coffee table was overturned, a mess of pizza and boxes strewn around it. Trash was piled high in the bin and spilled out all over the kitchen floor. Glasses and picture frames were shattered...

Aaron snored.

Shit. I didn't want to wake him up. He looked so peaceful, and there had obviously been enough upheaval in his life; I wanted him to take the quiet when he could find it. I made a plan.

I went in search of trash bags and started cleaning. I turned the furniture upright, and I moved to the kitchen, gathering the dishes, picking up old wrappers, throwing everything I could into trash bags, before digging around in a closet and finding the broom. I swept up the broken glass and washed the dishes. It took me about a half an hour before I felt the kitchen could pass muster. I moved on to the next section, dragging the broom and trash can with me.

I tossed a boot toward the door where some other shoes were. I bent down and gingerly picked up a framed photo, staying clear of the broken glass that surrounded it—

“What the fuck?”

Releasing a shaky breath, I slowly stood up, and turned to face him. He'd propped himself up on his elbows. The sheet had fallen down to his hips. Surrounded by white, there was nothing peaceful about the man glaring at me. The look he wore now made me cower. *Bracelet. He's still wearing the bracelet.* It had to mean something.

“How the hell did you get in here?” he snarled.

I pulled my shoulders back. “Your mom gave me the keys.”

“Of course she did,” he said as he rolled his eyes. “And what do you think you are doing?”

“Cleaning,” I deadpanned.

“Of course you are.” He narrowed his eyes, and I watched as they drifted from my face to my hand to the trash and back. “You can leave now.”

I placed the frame on the coffee table, before moving to the edge of the bed. Keeping my voice steady, I simply said, “No.”

He flopped back against the pillows. “Please, Jer. I’d like you to leave.” His voice sounded defeated.

“Why, Aaron? Why do you want me to leave? You give me the reason, the real reason, you don’t want me here, and I will walk out that door, wishing you the best of luck, and never come back. If that’s what you want, just tell me.” I crossed my arms over my chest. This act of his, the vitriol and spitefulness, the snarling, growling, and posturing. It was all going to stop, one way or another. Right. Now.

All the color drained from his face. Those navy eyes were filled with longing and... *regret*... pleading with me for something I didn’t understand.

He rolled over and buried his head in the pillows, curling his arms underneath. He was hiding... from me.

“Aaron, help me here. I don’t get it. I want to, though. What have I done to make you this angry? I don’t understand what I’ve done that’s hurt you.”

I heard a muffled, “Nothing. You haven’t done anything,” coming from the bed, and he turned to rest his cheek on a pillow. His stare was empty as he looked away from me into the room. He seemed so lost.

I took a step toward the bed, and another. My knees were level with the edge, and then I crawled up and over him. I kept my body high above his, but dipped my head down so my mouth was next to his ear. “Talk to me,” I whispered.

A sound close to a whimper escaped from between his lips. “Talk to me, Aaron. Let me help you.”

I lowered my lips to kiss the skin right behind his ear. I felt him stiffen, but I continued to drift and kissed into his hairline. He smelled of stale sweat and musk. I thought I heard him groan, but I ignored it. My lips had taken over navigation and found their way to his shoulders, and I kissed my way across the unmarred skin.

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His ass bucked up and nudged my groin. My hips pushed back, and I let out a whimper of my own as I kissed my way down the bulge of his bicep and licked my way back up, tasting the salty skin, the fine hairs tickling along my tongue.

He tried to move and push himself up, but I grabbed hold of his wrists and held him steady. I leaned my whole body over and kissed his left wrist just above the bracelet. I released my hold, pushing myself up, straddling his ass and running my hands down the length of his arms and onto his back. I swirled my hands around between his shoulder blades, pressing deep, feeling those taut muscles.

Aaron groaned. I ignored my cock and refused to think about the fact that there were only two layers of fabric separating my dick from his ass. This moment wasn't about me. It was about Aaron, about his feelings, his anger and his fear. This was about making him feel safe.

“Jeremy,” he said so softly I almost missed it. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You haven’t done anything I can’t forgive,” I said earnestly, letting my hands trace the lines and bends of his shoulder blades, I leaned down and kissed the top of his spine.

“Yes, I have.” I felt him start to twist, and this time I let him. He lay on his back, my legs still straddling his hips, looking up at me. He reached his hand up and brushed my bangs to the side, running his fingertips over my forehead. “I hurt you.”

I couldn’t help the chuckle. “No. You hurt the door. I just had the unfortunate luck of being on the other side.” He gazed up at me and worried his lip. “It was an accident,” I said, and moved my hand to cup his face. It was rough with stubble, and I couldn’t stop my thumb from stroking along his cheekbone.

“It’s more than that. I am so sorry, Jer. So fucking sorry. I said such awful things to you. I hurt you physically. And I... Shit. Jeremy. I don’t know how to tell you.” His trembling hands hovered over my thighs, like he wanted to but was too afraid to actually touch. Just a fraction of an inch away, I could feel the heat coming off them, and I realized I had the answer to a question I’d asked myself days before. Yes, Aaron was worth all the mire I had to wade through. I placed my hands over his and pressed them down onto my thighs. Aaron let out a hiss and tried to move them away, but I just pressed harder and arched up into the touch.

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“I can handle the words, you know. You aren’t the first person to yell at me.” I ran my hands up his arms and over his pecs, letting my fingertips barely graze over his nipples.

His breath caught.

“We can’t do this, Jer,” he said, his navy eyes glossed over. His chest rising and falling in heaves. His erection pressing up against my ass.

“Yes, we can.” I bent down and took his mouth with mine. My tongue darted in and claimed his, stale breath and all. It found my favorite tooth and stroked it, before moving back and tracing his lips. I felt Aaron’s arms wind around me, scratching down my back and squeezing at my ass. My hips started moving of their own volition, and his followed suit. I pushed all other thoughts out of my head. The heat between us was all that mattered.

And then it was gone. Aaron shoved me off of him with a grunt and was suddenly across the room, standing there in all his naked glory, his hair sticking up in every direction, his cock—his glorious cock—jutting straight out, while mine pushed angrily against my zipper.

“We can’t do this. We can’t.” He shook his head.

Confusion came flooding in like the tide during a hurricane. I collapsed back on the bed trying to wrap my head around what was going on. Trying to figure out how two minutes ago, I was thirty seconds away from coming, and now I was lying alone on a bed while a naked, seemingly bipolar man muttered angrily and paced the length of his apartment.

What was wrong with me? I was a bit nerdy, geeky. I was klutzy and awkward. But Aaron knew all that, and he still wanted me; his wide open pupils and the erection of steel that had been pressing against my ass, had sent that message loud and clear. There was nothing obvious, except... except what was so obvious I hadn’t even considered it.

“Is it because of the HIV? Because you’re afraid I have it, or you have it, afraid that we can’t be safe?” I asked dejectedly. My heart was in my throat as my gaze drifted out the window, past the streetlights, to the blinking red signals from boats in the harbor. Boats heading out to the dark water. I wanted to sail away too.

HIV. That was the one thing I couldn’t change. I couldn’t change what my status was. Hell, I didn’t even know what my status was. The test may have read negative a few weeks ago, but in forty-six days I could very well be



looking at two lines instead of one. I turned back to him and sighed, "Is that what's happening here, Aaron?"

"What?" The pacing stopped. "No, Jer. It's not the HIV thing," he groaned, scrubbing his hands across his face. "That would be easier," he muttered.

*Easier?*

I pushed myself up away from the safety of the bed and walked to where he stood by the couch. I stood an arm's-length away and studied him. His body was trembling. Goose bumps covered his skin. That invisible shield he'd been wearing at the clinic was gone. He had nothing protecting him now. I took another step and brought my hands to his arms and caressed up and down the roughened skin, trying to rebuild the connection. "Talk to me," was all I could say.

He brought his forehead down and rested it against mine. I felt his whole body shudder as he took deep breaths and exhaled them. His skin felt cold as I took his hand in mine and pulled at it to bring him close, but his leg bumped the coffee table. I heard a *thunk* and the tinkle of glass. I quickly put my palm against his chest and pushed back gently. Aaron was still naked. Vulnerable. I didn't want him to get cut.

"I'll get this, why don't you go find a pair of pants and some shoes," I said.

I grabbed the broom, and I could hear the sliding of drawers and the rustle of fabric behind me as Aaron got dressed.

I was hunched down and sweeping up the glass when I heard the door click. I groaned, picture frame in hand. *I'm going to kill Dustin and his ever-impeccable timing.* I looked up at Aaron. His eyes were darting from me, to the door, to the glass frantically.

Suddenly, in one precise moment, everything came together, as if a director had cued *Action!*

"Jer..." I could hear quick footsteps as Aaron came toward me. The door kept opening, blocking from sight whoever was on the other side. I looked down at the frame with the broken glass and the black-and-white photo, and I could feel all the blood drain from my face.

I heard Aaron let out an anguished gasp.

And from the doorway I heard a voice, "Well, this is a bit of a surprise. Hello, Aaron, J."

I knew that voice. I'd last heard it two days prior. And my heart cracked a bit as I realized it was the voice that belonged to the man whose photo I held in my hand. A photo of Aaron kissing his cheek.

It was the voice of the man I'd called boyfriend, partner. Greg.

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## Chapter Ten

I couldn't breathe. Greg and Aaron had had an affair. Greg and Aaron had slept together. How long? Was it still going on? Were they laughing at me the whole time? God, I was an idiot.

I closed my eyes and focused on breathing. Air in, air out. I was a fool. The tears I hadn't felt in weeks prickled behind my eyes. I dug my fingernails into my palms, trying to regain control over myself. Over something, anything. Because, at that moment, it seemed like the world was spiraling around me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I couldn't stop it, any more than I could stop the virus which was probably multiplying exponentially in my blood stream, as I sat crushed and devastated on the floor. Pathetic.

A thunderous roar filled the room as voices started shouting in unison.

"You! Don't you think you've caused enough damage?" Maggie's voice thundered.

"You motherfucking son of a bitch! I'm going to fucking kill you, you fucking prick!"

*Fucking* perfect. Another situation I couldn't control. My overprotective brother and an overbearing bartender. I let my consciousness slink further away as I saw Dustin advance on Greg, and Maggie grab his arms to pull him back. I let everything go, until I sat there, on the hardwood floor, empty. Aware of things going on, but not willing, or able, to process them.

I saw Aaron standing three feet away from me, slumped and defeated, his wet eyes focused on me. "I'm sorry." I saw his lips move, but I couldn't hear the words. I couldn't hear anything but the blood pounding in my ears. I shook my head and looked around the room again. I didn't understand how this could happen? How did I get here?

I pushed up off the floor. Aaron took a step toward me, but I held up a hand and stumbled back.

Dustin and Maggie had Greg cornered in the kitchen. Greg had his hands up defensively to counter my brother's clenched fists and Maggie's pointing finger. I watched them gesture, saw their mouths move in angry snarls, and was beyond thankful for the momentary deafness that had settled over me.

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Aaron reached out, but I brushed his hand away. After one final look, I turned and walked out of the apartment, down the stairs, and out onto the street.

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The air tasted like salt water and exhaust fumes.

Déjà vu.

Only this time, instead of Aaron walking into me, I was walking away from him. Away from everything. He didn't need me. I had been so stupid to believe that.

I let my feet carry me away from the bar, down the street and around the corner. It was Friday evening, and the Old Port teemed with activity. Waves of people flowed into bars; laughter and music flowed out from the open doors and into the street. I walked through it all, using it like a camouflage. I wanted to put as much distance as I could between me and McIntyre's.

I walked and walked until the streets were quiet. With the silence and distance came clarity. What was I doing? I'd been asking myself all kinds of questions. Most I didn't have answers to. But as I walked what became most clear was that I was just running away. Things had become difficult, and instead of dealing with them, I'd evaded them, avoided them. *Just like Greg.*

I didn't want to be that person. I didn't want to turn out like that. Floating about, never happy with what was in front of me. Always wanting more. I wasn't sure what I wanted. But, I still had that empty feeling in my chest. Walking away hadn't filled it.

There was only one thing, one person, I could think of who could.

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I took two steps through the doorway and stopped dead in my tracks. Holding his head in his hands, sitting on my couch, was Aaron.

"Hi," I said softly.

"Hi, Jer." He twisted his fingers together as he spoke.

"How'd you get in?" I shut the door and walked over to the couch, curling up on the end.

He let out a sad chuckle. "Dustin actually. He and I had a long, long chat." My eyes widened; the thought of that was a bit frightening. "Yeah, you might want to call him before he bullies a cop into filing a missing person's report on you."

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“Dustin can be a bit much to deal with, I’m sor—”

“Don’t,” Aaron started. “Don’t you dare apologize. You haven’t done anything to apologize for. I should have told you in the beginning when I figured it out. Instead, I got...”

“Pissed?” I offered when his voice trailed off.

The sound of a long sigh filled the otherwise silent room. “Well, pissed is one way to put it.”

I brought my knees up and wrapped my arms around them. “W-when did you figure it out?” It was the one answer I didn’t want to hear. I didn’t think he’d known all along. I didn’t want to believe it. But there was still this piece of me that was so incredibly frightened that he had. I squeezed my knees tighter.

“That night. After the clinic. You’d gone into the bathroom, and I was sitting on the sofa, trying to wrap my head around what was happening. The day with you was so...” He paused, and a shy smile formed on his lips as he continued, “...unexpected. And the night, well, that had just been hot. Jesus. Watching you wrap your plump lips around... well, around a cucumber, put all sorts of crazy thoughts in my head. You were so fucking sexy.”

I sucked in a breath, and then I started coughing. I think I was choking on my own spit. *Fucking sexy?* I’d never heard those words used to describe me. I was just your average beanpole. Too skinny, dull brown hair, nothing special. I pounded on my chest a couple of times.

“You okay? Do you want some water or something?” Aaron looked at me with eyes full of concern.

I shook my head slightly. “N-no, I’m fine,” I sputtered. *Cough*. “R-really.” *Cough*. My eyes started to tear, and I banged on my sternum again, trying to regain control. I needed to get it together. *Fucking sexy?* The thought sent more spit down the wrong pipe, and the coughing intensified.

The couch shifted a bit as Aaron pushed off of it. I watched through my watery eyes as he went into the kitchen and after a couple of tries, found the cupboard with the glasses. He filled one with water from the tap and handed it to me before sitting back down on the couch, a little bit closer than he’d been before. I sipped the water gratefully. I closed my eyes, taking a deep, uninterrupted breath and felt a hand rubbing small circles between my shoulder blades.

“Just breathe, Jer.” Warmth spread from his hand all through my torso and down into my limbs. I melted into his touch, inhaling deeply. Aaron’s musky

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scent filled my nostrils. I took another breath. "There, that's it," he whispered. "You sure you're okay?"

"Mmm..." I hummed. I could feel his breath on my cheek. I opened my eyes and found his face just inches from mine. Emotions I couldn't identify were shining from those navy eyes. I melted a little bit more.

Aaron's Adam's apple bobbed as he cleared his throat and shifted back a couple inches on the cushion. Taking the warmth of his hand with him. "Um, where were we?"

"Fucking sexy," I said. The wistful words came from my mouth. I squeezed my eyes shut. *Shit.*

Aaron chuckled. "Well, you were. You are." I groaned. He sank back into the cushions, leaving his hand just inches from my foot. "Ah-em. Anyway, yeah, so you were in the bathroom, and I was trying to figure it all out. Thinking about everything. The clinic, coffee, the way you got all shy and flustered, turned red, and called me Snookums. All these random thoughts were bouncing around in my head.

"Then that kiss. Jesus, that kiss. I'd felt it in my fucking toes. Then I thought about the asshole that fucked around on you, and how he left you, and I got angry. I wanted to hit something. How could someone do that to you? You were sweet and funny, and you brought a kind of calm, well, maybe not calm, but that night with you in my apartment, there was some kind of balance. I hadn't felt it before, certainly not with Mal."

His whole body stiffened, and his lip turned up at the last word. I reached my hand out and placed it over his. He turned his palm over and intertwined his fingers with mine, giving them a slight squeeze before he continued, "Yeah, Mal. There I was waiting for you, warm and tingly. Feeling a little bit hopeful, a little bit horny and all kinds of confused, and your phone buzzed. Mal's picture lit up on the screen.

"All those emotions focused, and I got fucking pissed. I picked up your phone, and then I saw the name. 'Greg'. The douche bag that had fucked you over was the same asshole that had done it to me. Gregory Fucking Maletta. I don't know why I hadn't put it together sooner. I was pissed at myself. I had been so stupid."

I uncurled my legs and moved a bit closer to him. His body was rigid, and his voice had grown thick. I squeezed his hand a bit tighter and brought it into my lap, clasping it between both of mine.

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“I was so angry. So confused. I felt like such a fool. God. There I was, suddenly the unintended other man in your relationship with your partner. I felt like such an asshole. All these thoughts ran through my head. But, I didn’t know about you. I didn’t. I wouldn’t step in on someone like that.” His voice was laced with desperation.

“I believe you,” I whispered, stroking the back of his hand with my thumb, trying to offer some reassurance.

“Thank you.” He brought our hands up and leaned over to press his lips against my fingers. “But what I did next, what I thought next, I am so incredibly ashamed of. Somehow in that moment with everything twisted around, I was upset, and I still had just enough of a buzz to cloud things. Instead of being pissed at Mal, or Greg, I got...”

“Pissed at me,” I said in a soft, but matter-of-fact voice. Aaron leaned his head back on the couch and tried to pull his hand away, but I pulled it closer, hugging it to my chest.

“Jer.” He looked at me with sorrowful eyes, and heaved a sigh.

“It’s okay, Aaron. I got pissed at me too. Wondering what I’d done. Thinking I hadn’t been man enough to keep my man from straying. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. It’s not okay. You didn’t do anything wrong,” Aaron said. “And it took a bit, but eventually I realized that I hadn’t done anything wrong either. The only person who wasn’t man enough was Gregory Maletta. The only blame to place is on him. A fact I didn’t get my head wrapped around until after I’d so rudely kicked you out.” He pulled at his hand again, but I didn’t let go, instead I followed it, and ended up pressed against his hard, warm chest. I felt the press of his lips on my forehead.

“And then, when I saw you again, I felt so ashamed, especially after the bathroom. My behavior was unforgivable. I couldn’t face you and not feel all the self-loathing amplified a thousand times over. So I lashed out, and behaved like a total ass. For me, it was easier to have you hate me because I was a jerk, than to have you hate me because Mal and I were fucking.” I listened to the breath flow in and out of Aaron’s lungs as he sighed. I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed.

“But Jeremy, what if...” I could feel his breath catch and raised my head up to look at him. His eyes were full of tears, and I raised my hand to his face, stroking the scruff with my thumb. “Jer, what if I was the one to get Mal sick?”

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What if I got him sick, and now you're sick too? How could you not hate me? How could you ever forgive me? How—”

I could only imagine the guilt he must be feeling. The unfounded guilt. I placed my index finger over his lips to stop him. “Don't. Don't go there, Aaron. I don't believe that. Greg already tested positive. You didn't. You might never. I don't know if it works like that. I don't know if someone can test positive before the person who infected them. It sounds highly unlikely, but it doesn't matter. You didn't go out trying to hurt anyone. You were in a non-exclusive relationship with a guy. It's not your fault that he didn't tell you about the terms of a relationship he was in with someone else. You have no fault here. Don't do that to yourself.” I cupped his face in both my hands, and leaned in to kiss away an escaped tear.

I was moving my mouth to his other cheek when suddenly his lips were against mine. It was a chaste kiss, our lips sliding over each other. Our arms wrapped around one another. I ran my hands up and into his hair, all while our lips were pressing into each other over and over until Aaron broke it off and buried his face against my neck. “Thank you,” he whispered.

I let out a breathless laugh. “Aaron, there's nothing to thank me for. I haven't done anything special.”

“Yes, yes there is, Jer. Ever since my birthday, you've *been* so much more than special.”

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## Chapter Eleven

*Scratch. Scratch.* What the fuck was making that sound? A sleepy haze blanketed my brain. I tried to roll over, wanting to bury my head under a pillow, but as I shifted, I felt an arm tighten around my waist. And a rock hard erection press against my ass. *A what?*

I felt hot breath in my hair, and heard a deep sleep-filled groan. *Aaron.* I snuggled back, pushing my ass into his groin, and let out my own groan as he nudged it forward.

We'd fallen asleep talking at some point during the night. I found out that my grumpy Aaron volunteered at the teen center. *My?* Underneath that gruff exterior was a kindhearted soul, putting on the tough face for the world. *I don't know how you did it, Jer,* he'd said. *But you did. You got under my skin, and I like you there.* So yes, *My.* If I had anything to say about it.

And now we were lying on my couch, his body curved in behind me, so very close. I could feel the tight muscles of his thighs as they pressed against mine. The muscles in his forearms as they bunched when he squeezed around my belly. I swear I could even feel the slight poke of his nipples on my back, and I definitely knew I could feel my dick grow thick.

*Scratch. Thump.* Seriously, what was that? I started wondering if my house had a mouse infestation. I grumpily pushed myself up. "What?" Aaron's sleep-filled voice came from behind me.

"Just trying to figure out what that sound is," I said quietly.

*Thump. Thump. Rap.*

"Shit. Someone's at the fucking door. What time is it?" I asked, but didn't wait for an answer before I crossed the room. "It's Saturday. Don't people know to not to bug me until noon?" I muttered.

"Obviously not," Aaron groaned. "Didn't you call Dustin last night?"

"Yeah, I sent him a text, which he answered. I don't think this is him," I replied.

I felt Aaron behind me as I reached out for the door. Opening it, I wish I could say I was surprised by the person on the other side.

"Greg," I said resigned. "Why are you here?"

“You changed the locks?” Greg asked, instead of answering my question.

“I thought we made it clear we don’t want to see you.” I didn’t answer his question either.

Greg raised his eyebrows. “*We?* Isn’t that sweet? So how ’bout a threesome to celebrate?”

“Mal, you son of a bitch.” Aaron’s voice boomed from behind me.

“Jesus Christ, Aaron. You really need to learn how to take a joke. You always were an uptight bastard.”

This had to stop. Now. I stretched my hand behind me just to touch, to reassure him. I had this.

“Greg, you need to let go. Leave us alone. It’s time to move on,” I said evenly. “I’m not going to put up with this. You leave. You don’t come back. It’s easy. I won’t file a restraining order. I have nothing more to say to you.”

The door was halfway shut when I heard, “Wait ’til your window is up, and then tell me how you feel...” I froze, before turning back slowly to look at him, my mouth agape. Greg was standing there with one hand on his hip and his brow furrowed, looking at us like we were the ones who had done him wrong. Where the hell did he get off...?

I didn’t realize what I was doing until I felt a sharp pain in my left hand and saw Greg holding his hand to his eye.

I heard Aaron’s rich bark of a laugh behind me, and Greg’s whine, “What the fuck, Jeremy? I can’t believe you did...”

I shut the door, and Aaron’s arms were around me pulling me back to him even as I reached to turn the deadbolt. I could still hear Greg cursing on the other side, but I didn’t care. If I was honest with myself, there was a tiny part of me that was proud of myself. I couldn’t help the muttered rambling, “Fuck him. Really. Was he serious? Wait ’til my window is up? How could I have ever...”  
*Oh fuck.*

I felt all the blood drain from my face. I flinched away from the body that held me. What if I’d cut Greg? What if I broke skin? His skin? My skin? So stupid to let my temper get the better of me and fucking punch someone. *Shit, shit, shit.*

“Relax.” I felt Aaron’s breath against my ear as he pulled my body flush against his. “You got him in the eye. I didn’t see any blood. Let me look at your

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hand.” He put his hands on my shoulders and gently turned me to face him. I shuddered as my body moved as directed.

Tenderly, Aaron took my left hand in both of his and studied it while placing soothing caresses along my palm. The intensity in his dark-blue eyes was almost too much, my breaths became heavy and audible as I watched.

Aaron brought his gaze to mine and held it as he raised my hand to his mouth and kissed my index finger. “Not even a hangnail,” he said in a rough whisper, before moving on to carefully inspect the next.

He studied each finger, kissed each one, all while pressing his thumbs into my palm, stroking back and forth. I stood there unable to move, unable to turn my gaze from his mouth. He bent his head and licked from the top of my middle finger, down to my wrist and gently teased it with his teeth before ever so lightly pressing his lips against my pale skin.

“I think you’re good, Jer,” he said huskily, before bringing his mouth down on mine. I felt my knees waver, and brought my hands up to grip his shoulders as he wrapped his arms around me. I opened my mouth, and his tongue moved in to claim it as his own. It was wet and desperate. And fucking perfect. His tongue swirled around mine, teasing, curling. A tingle shot from my belly to my spine, shockwaves running down it like a power line. My cock grew harder with each swipe of his tongue, and I knew there was a good chance I might come right there.

I tore my lips from his and moved them across his cheek then continued to his stubbly neck. Aaron threw his head back, letting out a groan that vibrated through his chest. I licked my way down, pausing to suck, just the tiniest bit, on the place where I could feel his pulse beating rapidly beneath my tongue.

Aaron moaned, a sound I echoed. My tongue continued its journey, but clothing was in the way all too soon. I ran my hands down from his shoulders to his pecs and squeezed, digging my nails in.

“I think this needs to go,” I breathed out.

“I think we need a bed,” Aaron countered, his navy eyes glazed over. His chest was heaving under my fingers, which I brought together to squeeze his nipples through his cotton shirt. His nostrils flared, and one of my hands traveled down his torso, tracing a path over the hills and valleys of his hard abs, until my fingers finally reached the throbbing bulge in his pants and squeezed oh, so gently.

“Bed,” Aaron growled. “Now.”

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I reclaimed his mouth and pulled at his shirt, walking us to the guest room. Aaron's hands moved down and gripped my ass, and then I was on my back and feeling his weight pressing me into the mattress. I wrapped my legs around his hips and starting bucking and rooting against him.

“We need to be naked. I wanna be naked,” I begged and pleaded. And then the weight was gone, and I felt bereft. Panting and dazed, I pushed myself up. My breaths stopped all together at the sight of Aaron bending over and pushing off his pants. His ass. Hard muscles bunching. It was something an artist would use for a muse. I reached out and stroked my finger down the curve of his cheek, before pinching the spot where his ass met his thigh.

I didn't even blink, and I was on my back again. Aaron on top of me, tearing at my clothes. He yanked my shirt over my head, and I felt his wet mouth clamp over my nipple. I arched my back, trying to get closer. Sounds of my whimpers and his growls filled the room. Aaron pushed up, and I felt a tug at the bottom of my pants as he yanked them off.

I couldn't breathe. Laying there, looking up at him, I couldn't imagine anything more beautiful. Toned, lean... and fucking hard! His cock, heavy, achingly purple. Standing there at attention. His balls were drawn up tight. I didn't realize what was going on until I felt the wrinkly skin against my lips. The orb within tight, as I gave just a bit of suction, before moving to the other and giving it the same treatment.

I took his cock in hand and gave it a couple of firm pumps, as I licked up the seam of his sac. *Holy God!* I felt pre-cum dribble on my fingers. I swirled my fingers, spreading it around that angry head and pulled down toward my mouth. I wanted to... *oh shit.* I made an anguished sound and stopped my movements. Tears prickled behind my eyelids.

Aaron moved back, and a rough hand cupped my cheek, tilting my chin up. “I know, Jer. I want to taste you too... Luckily, there's a lot of you.” He crushed his mouth down on mine, and pushed his weight on top of me, pinning me to the here and now, as he ground his hips together with mine. My harder-than-diamonds dick slid alongside Aaron's as his tongue fucked into my mouth. Every inch of my skin was on fire. My hands pawed and grabbed at any piece of Aaron they could reach.

“Tell me you have condoms. Please, God. Tell me that,” Aaron rumbled.

Shit. Fuck. Damn. Did I? I hadn't used condoms in months. I hadn't planned on this.

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“Oh! Wait!” I unceremoniously pushed Aaron to the side and sprinted out to my coat rack where I’d left my messenger bag. Grabbing it, and looking through as I ran back. Files, papers, pencils, everything was tossed out as I looked for...

“Ah ha!” I proclaimed, as I held up my lunch bag of condoms and lube from the clinic. I stopped dead. “Holy fuck,” I muttered.

There, leaning back against my pillows, was Aaron in all his naked glory, stroking his hand up and down his shaft. His eyes near black with desire, staring directly at me.

“Now,” he growled.

When I remembered how to breathe, I tossed the bag to him and crawled up onto the bed. Staring up at him from the area near his feet, I saw him reach for the bag, grabbing what he needed out.

I kissed his ankle and then licked my way up his inner thigh, pausing to swirl my tongue around his knee. I lapped against the hairs of his thigh and moved closer and closer until I finally found those tight balls and nipped a bit before teasing the skin right behind them with the tip of my tongue. I heard him snarl and hiss; my dick jumped.

“Jeremy.” His voice was commanding; I heard the crinkle of a wrapper and I stopped my teasing and raised myself up to kiss his plump mouth.

“How do you want me?” I breathed out.

“In me,” he gritted out, as I felt his fingers sliding a condom down my shaft.

*Oh, Jesus, fuck!* My mouth fell open, and I looked down at him. His eyes were desperate and lustful. His legs spread beneath me, and I felt him buck up before his hand slipped in between our bodies and down past my cock.

My mind finally got with the program. I hunched back and knocked his hand away. Grabbing the open lube packet, I smeared some on my fingers, before working one into his tight hole. The greedy thing sucked the digit in, and Aaron arched his back with a moan. I pushed in a second finger, stretching and twisting. Aaron hissed, and his hips reared up, forcing my fingers in deeper. I found his gland, and as I pressed down, Aaron roared, “Fucking. Now. Jeremy. Put your cock in me. Right! Now!”

I pulled my fingers out and lined my dick up with its target and pushed in. I couldn’t hear anything; I could only feel Aaron surrounding me. His legs

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wrapped around my hips, urging me on. I thrust all the way inside him. It was the most incredible thing I'd ever experienced. That moment was filled with passion, lust, and comfort. That moment, it was perfect.

Aaron raised his hips to meet my thrusts. My whole body was reaching out, needing to feel him; I wanted to crawl the rest of the way inside him.

My hips plunged forward, and my mouth sought his out. My tongue darting in and battling with his. I swallowed his whimpers and his growls. My arms wove under his shoulders, giving me leverage. I slammed into him, feeling his cock tightly pressed and rubbing against my belly over and over. I thrust hard, driving for the prize. I wanted that. I needed it.

"I'm gonna, I'm gonna..." I felt the wetness spreading between us. Aaron's eyes rolled back in his head, and his body clenched around me. God, he was beautiful.

And that was all it took. I reared back, and shouted his name. White lights danced behind my eyelids as my cock emptied itself into him.

I pulled out, making sure to hold the condom in place before heading to the bathroom to dispose of it. I brought a damp washcloth back and swirled it around his belly, washing away the cum before tossing it into the hamper. I crawled in next to him, and we lay there staring at one another, petting each other. I caressed his arms, and his hands ran over my chest to rest over my heart. I don't think I had ever felt so content. So safe. It felt like a gift.

"Hold on," I said, as a thought crossed into my consciousness. I twisted around and half hanging off the bed, stretched for my bag. I felt Aaron's hands patting my ass, then his mouth kissing and lapping at my cheek. I let out a groan.

"I want this too," he said softly.

"I've got something for you," I said turning back to him with my hand behind my back.

He raised an eyebrow. "Hmm... I can think of a few things I'd like." He gave my ass a light spank. My cock took notice.

"Well, I'm pretty sure you're gonna love this," I said, turning up the corner of my mouth.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure, I'll love any of it, all of it." There was tenderness in his voice, and he leaned in and brushed his lips to mine.

---

“Wow,” I said dreamily, trying to absorb the meaning behind his words.

Aaron chuckled. “What’s my present?”

I grinned and pulled my arm from behind me and placed the red bag between us.

“Skittles?” he laughed.

“These come without a gooey aftertaste,” I replied, unable to keep the smile from my lips.

“Come here,” he said pulling me on top of him. “I’ve got other things I want to make gooey right now.” He kissed me, and I laughed into his mouth, satisfied and happy.

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## Chapter Twelve

*Forty-five days later*

Twinkle lights. There were still twinkle lights. My knee was bouncing. I felt a firm hand pressing down on it, stopping the motion, and brought my eyes up to meet the eyes that were so similar to mine.

“I’m here for you, Bean. Always.” I smiled up at my big brother. Every step of the way, he’d been there. Dustin refused to wait at my house. I’d tried everything; I’d told him I didn’t need an entourage. I even went so far as to say that people would think three of us were in a ménage relationship. I’d received a pointed glare for that and quickly decided that my boyfriend and my brother needed to spend less time together.

“Thanks, D.” He let my knee go with a squeeze and leaned back in his chair.

I felt smooth, soft lips press against my cheek, as Aaron’s strong arm wrapped around my shoulders. “It doesn’t matter what happens in that office, Jer. We’ll get through it. Together.” I melted into him. Taking his other hand in mine, I brought it to my lips and pressed a small kiss to the back of it, the hairs tickling my lips. Intertwining our fingers, I placed our hands in my lap. Aaron had been tested a week earlier, since he’d stopped sleeping with Greg before I had. At first, he’d wanted us to make an appointment for the same time, but I told him if the results weren’t as we’d hoped, we’d each need our own time to grieve. Seven days ago, I’d sat with him and held his hand as we looked at that white stick and saw one line. *Thank God.*

My stomach jostled with the memory; I didn’t know if I should even hope for the same result. I felt Aaron’s hand in mine, felt the pulse in his wrist, and a warm feeling spread from my chest down through my limbs, soothing the ache in my belly.

“It’ll be okay, Jer. We’ll be okay,” Aaron whispered. I laid my head on his shoulder and took a deep breath.

“Yeah,” I murmured. “Yeah, we will.”

“Jeremy?” Carrie stood by the hallway, her clipboard in her hand. I rose to follow her, two men in tow.



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After borrowing a chair from another office, Carrie got the three of us arranged and seated. She placed herself across from us and asked me the same questions as last time. My answers were different though. I'd been tested sixty-four days ago. My cheeks were red, as I smiled at her and pled the fifth when she asked me when I'd had sex last. I made sure to clarify that *yes*, we had used a condom. And then I opened my mouth and she swiped the white stick and then set her timer. *Twenty minutes.*

She kept talking. Explaining that I'd still need to get tested again. Three percent didn't test positive until six months after infection, though many of those already had issues with their immune system beforehand.

"So, are these your partners, Jeremy?" She asked, and handed me another lunch bag.

I sniggered, and put the bag on Dustin's lap. He blushed as red as any lobster I'd ever seen. Aaron let out a hearty laugh and kissed my cheek.

"Told you," I said to my brother, before introducing Dustin to her, and explaining our fraternal relationship. "This is Aaron," I said, and then clarified our not-fraternal-in-any-way-shape-or-form relationship by placing a full kiss on his ever-so-kissable mouth.

"I remember the last time you were here." She peeked at me over the top of her clipboard. I was certain from the light in her eyes, she was remembering my rambling about lack of need for a lunch bag. "I'm glad for you."

I reached for Aaron's hand and brought it to my mouth for a kiss. I was glad for me too. The past few weeks were enlightening. I'd learned a lot about myself. I realized my strength. My ability to not just let life occur, but to grab it and live it. Aaron inspired me. He wasn't the cause of it, he was my muse for it. We'd started going to the teen center together. He would play the guitar and tell jokes; I would help kids with math homework and try not to create a spectacle by jumping on Aaron. The man was sexy just walking down the street, but sitting playing guitar... *Yum.*

Aaron had changed too. He was right when he'd talked about balance. That's what we brought each other, and with it came a kind of peace and happiness I hadn't known. The grumbly Aaron didn't come out so much anymore—unless I wanted him too. More than once I'd picked a fight with him, with my sole, solitary goal being makeup sex. To feel him hold me down, growling and thrusting...

*Beep. Beep.*

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Had it been twenty minutes? Carrie turned to look at the test. It had.

This was it. *Oh God.*

“Come here, Jeremy, and I’ll explain this to you.”

Aaron hooked a finger under my chin and gently pulled me to face him. He leaned in slowly, his gaze never wavering from my eyes as he kissed the word, *together*, on my lips. I squeezed my eyes shut to prevent the tears from escaping, and I felt his lips kissing my wet eyelashes. “Together,” I whispered.

Dustin took my right hand; Aaron took my left. I gripped both of them, and we all stood up and went to huddle around Carrie. I knew she was talking, but all I could see was the white stick stuck into the contraption behind her. My chest was tight, and I couldn’t breathe. I felt my knees give way and the tears break free. Two sets of arms held me up.

One line. Negative.

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## Epilogue

God, I wanted a beer. We'd closed on the house two weeks ago. Half of our things were still in boxes; I'd tackle those tomorrow... maybe. I'd just finished working on the yard. All I wanted to do was collapse on my leather sofa, suck down a beer, and not move for two days.

It was Saturday, and Aaron had to work late at the bar. McIntyre's closed at two, then he had to clean and lock up, so chances were I wouldn't see him until morning. I hated these weekends.

I kicked off my dirt-caked sneakers by the door and had my shirt off before I'd even made it into the bathroom. I turned the water on hot, stripped off the rest of my clothes, and stepped in. The shower was my favorite part of the new house. Big enough for two, black-tiled, with three different showerheads. I closed my eyes and let the water beat down on my shoulders, soothing away the ache and washing away the grime.

The bathroom door clicked. *Fucking Dustin*. "Do you mind, D? I'll be out in a minute."

Suddenly, I felt cold air and strong arms wrapped around me.

"Aaron."

"Hmm," he hummed against my shoulder, as one hand held me still and the other hand migrated south and stroked my dick.

"Ungh," I groaned. I leaned my head back against his shoulder, and his tongue snaked out and licked up my neck. "I—I thought—I thought you were working late." His hand moved down to cup and squeeze my balls.

"Nope."

The steam rose around us as his hand moved back to grip my shaft, then stroke up and down, I pushed my ass into his hard cock. Wanting more. Turning my head up to his, he crushed his mouth on mine. I opened for him, and his tongue claimed mine, caressing, exploring my mouth, swallowing my whimpers. I thrust into his hand. And then it was gone.

His hands gripped my shoulders and pushed me against the wall. Our tongues found each other again, tangling and dancing together. His body wet and glistening, my hands stroked over his pecs and circled in to his nipples. I

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took each in hand and twisted ever so slightly. Aaron ripped his mouth from mine, growling from deep in his chest.

Two years later, and he still turned me on like nothing else. No model, movie star, porn star, or human being could ever be as sexy as Aaron was right then. Navy eyes turned black with want and need, staring at me like I was a fucking feast. He dropped to his knees, and my cock was engulfed in wet heat. *Jesus.*

I looked down and watched the water pour over his dark hair and into his face. He bobbed his head sucking on my shaft, caressing it with his talented tongue. His hands rubbed up and down my thighs squeezing and scratching. Even in the heat of the shower, goose bumps erupted over my whole body and I started trembling. I looked down to see his eyes burning up at me as one of his hands slid between my legs. He growled around my cock and brought his head up, kissing the tip of my cock before shoving his tongue in the slit. The tingle in my spine told me the end was near, but I didn't want it to be over.

His tongue swirled, and my whimpers grew louder. My hand grasped at his hair as he thrust his mouth forward. I was in his throat, and his finger was in my ass. I screamed, my vision blurred, and I spasmed as he drank down everything my dick shot out.

His lips were back on mine; I could taste myself mixed with the salty musk of Aaron. I reached down to stroke his cock, to find it soft. "Aaron?"

"You are so fucking sexy, Jer," he whispered, as he nibbled at my earlobe. "I came when you did."

It was a good thing I was leaning against the wall, because I probably would have fallen over.

He reached over and turned the water off, then grabbed my hand and led me out and towed me off. I pulled him in for a soft, chaste kiss. "I love you."

"I know." Cheeky bastard. Some things would never change. *Thank God.* "Come on," he said, tugging at my hand.

I followed him to the bedroom, and he gently pushed me so I was sitting on the edge of the bed. "I have something for you." I sat there as he went to the nightstand and pulled out a small, rectangular box, wrapped in red paper. "Here, this is for you." He stayed hunched down in front of me as I held the box. It rattled when I shook it. I narrowed my eyes at him; he winked up at me. "Open it."

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I tore off the paper and barked out a laugh. “Skittles?”

“Open them.” Aaron’s eyes held a bit of mischief, and... something else I wasn’t quite sure of. I paused to look at him, balancing on the balls of his feet. I guess I took too long, because he grabbed the box and opened it for me.

“Eager? You need a Skittles fix or something?” I chuckled as I said it, but gazing down at him, I realized he’d gotten serious. My smile faded. “Aaron?”

His voice was husky when he said, “Hold out your hand, Jer.”

I did as he asked, and he opened the box, and the tiny candies rattled out into my right hand. I looked down at the little rainbow, red, purple, yellow, gold... *Gold?* I felt my stomach jump and my breath caught in my throat as Aaron picked through the candies. My hand was shaking, and Skittles fell to the floor. I looked at Aaron with tears in my eyes. He was on one knee and pinched between his fingers was a gleaming gold band.

I had to hold back a sob, and his voice was choked when he spoke. “Two years ago, I was sitting in a clinic, miserable and pissed off at the world. That day was the best day of my life. It was terrifying, scary, humiliating, but I wouldn’t change it for anything. That day brought me you.”

I sucked in a breath. And as I gazed at him, his eyes overflowed. I reached my hand out and cupped his cheek, wiping the tears away with my thumb, and he pressed his face into my palm. “I love you, Jeremy Allen. I’ve had two years with you. We have a house. But I want more. I want it all. I want a family. I want to be your husband. Will you please, please marry me?”

I let the rest of the Skittles fall and moved to kneel in front of him. I brought my hands to his face and kissed his eyes, his cheeks, his nose, and finally placed a long, lingering kiss on his mouth. I felt his breath stutter, his hand shaking as I covered it with my own. I couldn’t find the words. My heart was beating too fast. There was so much to say; so much I wanted to say. In the end, only one word passed my lips.

“Yes.”

**The End**

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*Author's Note*

The CDC estimates that in the US, fifty thousand people are infected with HIV each year. The clinic Aaron and Jeremy visit is based on the Frannie Peabody Center, located at One Spring Street in Portland, Maine. The Peabody Center, like many others around the country, offers free HIV testing, as well as other services to those testing positive... and yes, they have twinkle lights in the window.

For more information or to find a local testing center, these are some of the websites that I found helpful:

World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int/hiv/en/>

AIDS.gov: <http://www.aids.gov/>

AIDS Healthcare Foundation: <http://www.aidshealth.org/>

Frannie Peabody Center: <http://peabodycenter.org/>

amfAR: <http://www.amfar.org/>

The Body: <http://www.thebody.com/index.html>

Terrence Higgins Trust: <http://www.tht.org.uk/>

National Organization of People Living with HIV Australia:  
<http://napwa.org.au/>

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## Author Bio

*I live in the northeast corner of the United States in a tiny town just west of Portland, Maine. I'm a nocturnal creature, of the nonvampiric nature, and spend my nights awake, devouring books, scouring the Internet, and dreaming up beautiful men loving on each other.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# WOUNDED BEACON

By Leslie Lee Sanders

## Photo Description

Two silhouetted men embrace in a passionate kiss laced with a bit of sweetness and sadness, inside a dimly lit room near a closed window where the branches of a tree are visible. One man seems to be determined, near desperate, and the other seems to be coming to terms with or accepting a situation.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*It seems to me that there's something both sweet and sad about this embrace, like there's an underlying sense of desperation on the part of the man on the left and acceptance on the part of the man on the right. What's the real story here? Has the man on the right just passed on bad news that his partner can't handle? Are they saying good-bye before leaving for different parts of the country, the world, or maybe the universe? Or is this the reunion after a long time apart, with neither half of this couple quite sure yet how they fit back together?*

*What I'm looking for, author, is an exploration of the emotions in this scene. What brought it about? Where do they go from here? Any genre is acceptable, from contemporary to paranormal to sci-fi, if that's your choice. I'd like an HEA or HFN, but what I'd really like to feel at the end of your story is a sense of hope for these two men.*

*Thank you so much, and I can't wait to read what you come up with.*

Sincerely,

Cari

## Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction

**Tags:** dystopian, post-apocalyptic, sweet/no sex, dark, prison/captivity, debilitating injury, hurt/comfort, fighting

**Word Count:** 16,137

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Many thanks to those who helped polish this story; my beta readers Debbie and Linda, and my editors Rhonda and Anna. I appreciate every second of your time. Thanks to the M/M Romance group for allowing me to participate in such an amazing event, and to all of the volunteers.

# **WOUNDED BEACON**

**By Leslie Lee Sanders**

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## Chapter 1

Instinct warned me not to open my eyes. Musk entered my nostrils, and a low hum of static electricity made the hairs on my arms react. He was there, just on the other side of my opened door. Watching me, sizing me up, debating if and when to strike. I suppressed a shudder and lay motionless on the corn husk cot, reminding myself to breathe normally. Still, adrenaline surged through my veins, preparing my mind and body to fight.

A chill crept down my spine and goose pimples pricked the exposed flesh on my arms as the dampness on my forehead evaporated. My eyes moved rapidly behind the lids and my fingers twitched. Would I be forced to use my blade? A vivid image of my hand swiping underneath my side and gripping the handle of the sharpened steel entered my mind. I could have my weapon in hand before he'd step foot past the threshold and entered my room.

A small scoff emanated from the doorway and my ears perked, attention averted back to him.

A low and husky voice called from the courtyard a short distance away. It was my onlooker's buddy, calling his name. "Santos?" Seconds later, footsteps on gravel faded as Santos retreated.

My eyes snapped open.

In my periphery, I managed to make out no immediate threat. Even though my eyes had been closed, there was no mistaking Santos had been there just seconds ago. Instinct assured me, as well as the evidence he left behind.

Just outside my doorway, in the loose gravel, my dull, steel blade glinted in the moonlight.

My hand snaked under me to be sure it was mine and not a similar knife, and nothing but dried husks were beneath me.

Groans and whimpers came from the center grounds where the prisoners were housed. Their only crime was speaking out or attempting to prevent Santos and his friend from terrorizing the community. Now their nights were spent sleeping on rugged gravel without the warmth of shelter, blankets, or a respectable meal. And for a couple of them, they'd been there for over a week.

The thought of their cruel suffering caused fire to rumble in the pit of my gut. I got up and swiped the blade from the ground, aware of the threat it signified.

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Do I wait for his return or screw it all and leave now?

Minutes passed and I had two choices. I could sleep with one eye open, night after night, or leave the camp now, alive. Pain shot through my jaw, and I realized I was grinding my teeth.

Anger decided for me.

Stepping foot over the threshold, blade at my side, I crept by each darkened room. I inhaled rank air that smelled of body odor and held it in. SnORES echoed throughout some of the cramped open chambers, silence throughout the others. My lungs ached, reminding me to exhale. I did so consciously and as quietly as possible. Moonlight hit the structure in a way that cast shadows which concealed me from view. I slipped behind a wooden column, one that supported the complex I had helped build with my bare hands, and I waited in the shadows to listen.

The whimpering and chattering teeth of men came from the courtyard prison. These tough men had lived through hell, but exposure to freezing temperatures in the camp had them believing they would die, and eventually, when the torment had taken its toll, they wished for death's peace. The prison was in the center of camp mere yards away from the column where I stood. The prison housed three men who were huddled together, arms tucked inside their soiled shirts. Wasn't it enough that they were caged and kept away from their families and their freedom? Leaving them to starve and freeze was beyond cruel.

And yet, their poor handling was partially my fault.

Santos was nowhere in sight, but his burly buddy paced near the bolted lock of the prison gate. The metal blade of his makeshift knife was as long as a thighbone and could intimidate any brave warrior.

Quickly and carefully, I moved to the side of the rounded prison, and rested against the thick eight-foot tall wooden stakes that served as a barricade, keeping the prisoners inside and keeping me out. One of the men inside shifted and our gazes met. A loud gasp fell from his parted lips. Under the moonlit sky, it was hard to make out any detailed features, but a sense of familiarity hit me. I remembered his face, but there was something else about him I couldn't recall. His body language triggered faint memories that ran a bit deeper than the brief acquaintances I had with the other villagers. My forefinger went up to my lips and the man nodded. His sign was slight but clear.

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The countdown in my mind started at five, and when zero hit, I swooped behind the large man guarding the lock and covered his mouth with my hand. I brought my blade up and pressed the sharpened tip to his throat.

“Drop it,” I said through clenched teeth, and his weapon fell to the floor. He mumbled beneath my hand, but I squeezed tighter and pressed the blade firmer against his bearded flesh. “Shut up and open the cage.” With my lips near his earlobe, I kept my voice low. I managed to twist around, turning him to the lock.

He dug in his pants pocket. The jingle of keys caught the prisoners’ attention, and the familiar one stood. Not sure of his intention, I shook my head as a warning. He ignored me and moved forward, glancing over his shoulder a few times as he came.

“Let me help,” he whispered and reached through the thick wooden bars. It took a second for me to comprehend what he was trying to do until he grabbed the keys.

I glanced around the darkened lot as my mind tried to throw a quick plan together. What would I do with this guy once the door was open and I no longer needed him? Let him go? Knock him out? Killing was not on my list, never had been, and, hopefully, never would be.

I looked to the abundant trees that lined the camp. The growth surrounded our home and, at times, acted as an obstacle from whatever lay far beyond, like a prison wall.

The jingling of the keys would arouse the suspicion of Santos and anyone else wanting to stop me.

“You gotta move,” I urged, making eye contact with the prisoner. He nodded, but continued to fumble with the keys.

“Fucking Luke.” The calm voice came from my left, near the room where I had been. My sights set on the silhouette of the man, but there was no mistaking the rasp. “What’d you think you’re doing, man?” Santos’s hands were casually tucked inside his pants pockets and he nudged a pile of loose gravel with his foot. The silvery, jagged scar on his cheek reflected the light of the full moon.

“Don’t,” I warned. “Don’t move, Santos, or I’ll cut him.” Why couldn’t I have been this gritty at the first sign that he and his friend were taking over? If I had, maybe things wouldn’t have resorted to this.

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He took a couple of steps, narrowing the space between us.

“You’re not gonna kill nobody, Luke,” Santos mocked. “You don’t got it in you. If you did, you would’ve killed those fuckers that killed that little lassie.” His sneer sent heated rage rising from my chest and into my throat. I imagined the stocky, wild-haired man in my arms and my blade slicing into his leathery neck.

“I’m leaving, and they’re getting the hell out of this goddamned cage before I go.” I glanced to my helper and his busy hands. The threat to my life and the struggling man in my arms upped my impatience. “Open the goddamned lock.”

He paused and the jingling stopped. He cocked his head as a pained look flashed across his face. Did my irritated tone surprise him? He continued to twist the key in the lock until it popped. As soon as the door swung open, the other two prisoners rushed out. Santos leapt toward me, but my helper stopped him in his tracks by lifting the large blade from the ground and pointing the corroded tip toward Santos.

“We’re leaving.” My helper’s voice was confident and nonthreatening, but the way he handled the hefty blade got the message across.

“Adios,” Santos said, the thick vein in his neck pulsed. “Just don’t let me find you. I’ll chop your feet off the next time I see you.”

My helper looked back and forth as if debating, then took the blade and ran toward the dense forest, following the others. I pushed the man in my arms toward Santos, hard enough that he tumbled at Santos’ feet.

Slowly, I backed away, surprised that they didn’t move. Santos calmly scratched his thick beard while his friend sat near his feet, their eyes on me as I disappeared into the shadows of the forest.

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## Chapter 2

The dense forest acted as cover as I pushed through. It had been a few years since the environmental catastrophe shook up the world. Since then, life seemed to flourish abundantly. The chirps of frogs and crickets filled the damp air, and trees and plants seemed to take on a healthier appearance. There had been a time I believed I'd never live to see the day Earth restored itself.

Rustling in the foliage ahead brought my attention to two prisoners as they stumbled along the uneven path. Only the light of the moon weaving through the tops of the trees helped guide our way through branches and brush.

"Don't come back, Luke!" Santos warned from far behind. His voice shook with anger. "You or your new friends." I gripped the handle of my blade tighter as I glanced over my shoulder to ensure no one was following. "I might not come after you now," he continued, as if reading my mind. "Remember, I hunt. Not chase." Laughter followed. I sped up, wanting nothing more than adequate space between the camp and me.

Up ahead, my helper paused and pivoted, crunching the leaves under his shoes. The heavy, rusty blade drooped from his fingertips. "Hey, let's get out of these woods and head to the coast." His voice hushed. I pushed past him, climbing a short distance over fallen branches. "Luke," he called.

Glancing over my shoulder at the man, it finally dawned on me why he was so familiar. He was a newer member of the community, a month maybe. I often spotted him around camp, kneeling near the trees with a handful of scraps, feeding portions of his scarce rations to the wildlife. I continued, moving ahead. Stopping would defeat the purpose of my escape.

He cleared his throat. "Luke, we can try the coast—"

"Let's just keep moving," I said. We didn't have to stop to talk. And talking was doing the opposite of settling my nerves. Less talking, more doing.

I locked my eyes with his. I could make out the almond shape, but not the color. I remembered them being a sea ocean blue, unlike my ordinary brown. His short dark hair and lightly tanned complexion resembled mine. But it wasn't his physical features that had once drawn me to him. Watching him feed hungry woodland creatures was what first fascinated me. What man, after an ecological disaster, thought about anything other than himself or his loved ones, let alone the survival of a pestering raccoon or pigeon?

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“Luke?” he called. Too bad I couldn’t remember his name. He scratched the stubble under his chin. “Um—well.” Tossing his hand up, he said, “Where are we going?”

Was he serious? “I’m getting the hell out of here. That’s all I know. You can go wherever you want.”

“Wha—I can’t make it out here alone. I’ve tried.” His eyes widened into large round orbs. “You let us out just to leave us to die out here?”

I glared. “I was doing you a favor.”

“Thanks,” he said dryly.

“You could’ve stayed if you thought that was best for you,” I pointed out, pushing my way past thick leafy branches and following the footsteps ahead of me. What was he expecting, a map and a detailed plan for all of them? Hell, I didn’t have a plan for myself. The results of spontaneity. All I knew, if I’d stayed another night, Santos would have had a field day with me and my knife, or his favorite hunting tool, his bow and arrow. And what was the point in leaving those poor guys caged and freezing all night?

“Well, now I think we would’ve been better off staying,” the man said.

In front of me, one of the three prisoners, the one with a raggedy soiled shirt and a distinct odor, stepped closer. “What’d ya mean, man?”

“Name’s Aiden.” My helper moved forward, closing the gap between us and the shabby man. “I mean, what the hell are we gonna do out here? No food, no place to rest or hide. No nothing.”

“You didn’t have those things locked in that cage,” I reminded him.

“We would’ve,” the man with the soiled shirt said. “They weren’t gonna leave us in there forever. They’d have mercy on us.”

I nodded toward the camp. “You’re welcome to go back.”

We stared at each other as the chirping of crickets sliced through the tension.

The man looked back and forth between Aiden and me. “Too late to go back now,” he said.

I guess he didn’t understand sarcasm.

Aiden leaned back against the trunk of a nearby tree. “Well, you heard him. Come daybreak they’re gonna go hunting... for us. We need to figure out something.”



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“We?” I grunted. Forcing open a lock and setting them free of misery had now made them my responsibility?

“Yeah, *we*.” Aiden nodded, the silhouette of his head bobbed in the shadows. He pointed to the soiled man. “He’s right. We can’t go back now.”

There’s two for the sarcasm.

I held back a snort. “Santos wants me, not you. And I don’t know about you two, or the other guy, wherever he went, but I’m going this way until I clear these woods. Then I’ll figure out what I’m going to do after.” I turned.

“You used to care,” Aiden said to the back of my head. “Things must have gotten real bad with Santos for you to pick up and leave camp. I can see that you still have a caring side, or else I wouldn’t be here now. I’d be back in that hell hole, or worse, dead.”

My feet continued moving, pushing me forward on unsteady terrain. Instead of thinking about Santos, the camp, or anybody else, my sole focus was to ensure I wasn’t going in circles.

After a few minutes of walking, the crunch of footsteps following closely behind, I was hit with thirst. Tucked away in my pants pocket was a small canister of water, not enough to stretch for more than a day and definitely not enough to share, so I kept it hidden. I knelt and searched the ground for a small pebble to suck on instead, a trick I discovered right after the event.

With no control, my mind jumped to images of her. Her flowing, deep brown locks that framed her heart shaped face. The natural smell of hazelnut on her baby-smooth skin—

Rushed footsteps pulled me from my reverie and I swung on my heels to meet the man in the tattered clothes as he rushed toward me, arms outstretched in front of him.

“We have to go back and I’m taking you as a bargain,” he said. He was so bug-eyed the whites of his eyes were visible even in the darkness.

“What the f—?” I pushed and he pressed back, locked at the forearms like the horns of a couple of raging bulls.

Aiden dropped the large blade and was there in no time, pulling the man back by the waist. “Hey, hey! This is ridiculous.”

“No,” the man said as Aiden threw him to the ground. His body hit the scattered branches with a thud, and he tumbled a couple feet down the uneven terrain.

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The regret in Aiden's sorrowful eyes was prominent. "Goddamnit." Towering over the disgruntled man, Aiden put out a hand. "Here, let me help."

"I'm going back." The man sat forward, teetering like a drunk, and ignoring Aiden's gesture. "Only way they'll let me back is if I bring him with me." His narrowed eyes locked on mine. "A bargain."

Aiden shook his head and continued up the gentle hill. I wanted to do the same, but the anger in the man's eyes gave me goose bumps. "There's no way in hell I'm going back there with you."

Aiden called from up ahead. "Why'd you leave anyway, Luke? That was your home and you let them run you off." His voice carried a tinge of something in it. Anger? Frustration? Confusion? A combination of all three?

"Does it matter?" I shrugged, tempted to take a long swig of my concealed water as if it was hard liquor. "Why wouldn't you try to get the hell outta there? You really want to go back? There's no one there for you."

Aiden nodded. "True. There's no one there for me. And I don't want to go back, but that was my home. You know? That was the only place I knew. So, is that why you left? 'Cause there's no longer anyone there depending on you?"

So, he did understand sarcasm.

I sneered at the jab. However, there was someone. A couple special people other than the community. But I refused to go there—not now. I took a step forward, preparing to continue without explanation, when the other man called from the ground where he sat.

"Hey." His whisper made me turn. "Screw you." His hand came forward. The small, crystallized particles of dried sand hit my face. I tasted the dirt as it entered my mouth, coating my taste buds. I groaned in pain as grit scratched my eyes and coughed from the cloud of dust that had entered my lungs.

"What the hell was that?" Aiden yelled. "What'd you do?"

"Screw you both," the man growled. "I'm going back."

With every blink, the grit further irritated my eyes. I couldn't open them long enough to see, but from the sound, the man ran back the way we'd come, leaving me and Aiden alone. Tears trickled down my cheeks but, still, my lids failed me. My first instinct was to irrigate my eyes. I pulled the small canister out of my pocket and forced one eyelid open, allowing a steady stream of water to pour in one eye then the other.

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A pair of hands gripped my forearms and I jerked. “Stay back.”

“Here, let me help you,” Aiden said. His voice was warm, gentle, and filled with concern.

“I got it,” I lied. My eyes burned like hell, and no matter how much fluid I poured into them, the sand wouldn’t budge.

“Why won’t you let me help?”

I couldn’t answer, but I saved what little water was left and tried desperately to blink the dirt from under my lids. My eyes produced moisture but not enough to dislodge the irritants. “Damn it,” I murmured as soft fingers caressed my cheekbone.

“Here, let me take a look,” Aiden whispered. Surprisingly, his voice soothed my nerves. Odd. The urge to refuse his help vanished. Even though I was aware he wouldn’t be able to see without adequate lighting, I allowed him to examine me anyway. Maybe he had the magic touch that would relieve my pain.

His fingers gently pulled my eye open, my blurred vision could only make out different shades of darkness and the wispy figures I assumed were trees and shrubbery.

“Well, I can’t tell much, but—” Aiden moved closer. The heat from his body crept over me, causing me to shudder away the cold chill.

“I got it,” I said, and gently pushed him back. Gentle hands, soothing words, warmth and safety? Not happening. I didn’t deserve those things. Aggravation, at the thought of how my lack of vision would slow me down, replaced all of those thoughts and feelings. I kicked the ground. Rustling of dead twigs and leaves filled the air around us. “Fuck!”

“It’s alright, Luke. I’ll lead. Okay?” Aiden’s fingers brushed my hand. “Let’s keep moving.”

There it was again. The *let’s, us, we*. I guess I was in no place to complain. I inhaled the cool air and let it out with some of my anger. Keeping my eyes closed, I reached out. My fingertips traveled up the swells of muscle over the length of his arm and up toward his shoulder. I rested my palm near the slope of his neck.

“Alright,” I said, listening for directions.

“Alright,” he mimicked. “We’re going to the coast.”

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“You know how to get there in the dark?” Skepticism made me plant my feet on the ground stubbornly.

“Just keep straight for a few hours and we’re bound to get there.”

“You know you’re going straight how?”

“I walk toward the tree in front of me, once there I aim for another in front of that one, then another, mapping out a straight line.” He patted my hand on his shoulder. “I got you. Trust me.” He moved forward.

At that moment, I wished I had a plan *and* a plan B. I took a step.

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## Chapter 3

One foot dragged after the other. Although hours passed, marked by the position of the full moon, time seemed to move at a snail's pace since becoming a liability. Moments like these made me wonder what kind of man I would be if I was the one who took on the responsibility of assisting another. Why was Aiden helping me? The thought nagged at me, but I never questioned it aloud, afraid that if I mentioned it, he'd come to his senses and move on without me. Not that I wouldn't crawl the forest floor alone to claw my way out, but there was something about his company I didn't want to part with. Not yet.

"Thank you." My voice was just above the sound of Aiden's large blade chopping at low twisted branches in our path.

"Thank *you*." Aiden patted my hand on his shoulder with his fingertips. "I was prepared to make my bed in that cage and lie in it. You know?" His voice dragged and caught. A hint of sadness?

"Why? You guys didn't deserve that." It was true. "Santos and his lap dog are just power hungry, locking you up because nobody's got the—the balls to stop them." That had been my job, to prevent unnecessary cruel treatment of people, to watch over the innocent young men and women and their mothers, to provide food, shelter, and hope to those who'd come in search of it. Still, that wasn't the first time I had failed.

I've done many things throughout my life that ended in disaster. I pulled from every fiber of my existence to stop vivid visions of my first camp from replaying in my mind. The camp, similar to the one Santos had now overtaken, was home to the only people I'd ever cared about. Sure, some were strangers, but all were family.

Incomplete structures, little food, cold nights—never a worry when there was Christie and Samuel. Because of them, my confidence soared and no matter the obstacle, I had faith we'd overcome it. Christie and the contagious giggle she possessed entered my thoughts. The thought of Samuel, too, made me mimic his grin despite the surrounding devastation.

My breath caught on the lump in my throat, and I pressed my knuckles against my aching chest.

"You hear that? Smell the salt?" A trace of enthusiasm blended in Aiden's hushed tone. "It's the ocean. We're close."

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“Being on the coast doesn’t mean we’re out of danger,” I pointed out, thankful for the distraction away from my crippling thoughts.

“It does.”

The sureness in his tone perked my curiosity. “How so?”

“It means we’re farther from camp. Farther from Santos. That’s our goal, right?”

I attempted to open my eyes again, and decided against it when tiny bits of debris scratched under the lids. “We need to rest soon.”

“Now’s good as ever.” Aiden paused. “There’s a big rock to your left you can sit on.”

I kneeled, arm outstretched, until I found the smooth surface beside me. Exhaustion seized me as soon as I sat. Lack of food, water, and sleep was starting to take its toll.

“You didn’t have to let us go, you know,” Aiden started.

“What, you wanted me to leave you in that hell hole?” I scoffed. “For Santos to do god knows what to you?”

“No, I’m glad you did, but...” The scratching, dragging sound of his shoe scraping the dirt gave away his unease. “Why did you?”

“Is it strange to hate human suffering?” I asked. “Do we need a legitimate reason to keep people from unnecessary pain?” Was that kind of thinking a sign of the times?

“Yes. Nowadays people are fucking cruel just because. One day they’re your saviors, the next they’re—” His fidgeting stopped. “I wasn’t suffering.”

“Oh, yeah?” I shrugged. “Well, what do you call it then?”

“Adapting.” There was that self-assurance again.

“Adapting, right.” I held back my chuckle as he went on.

“Suffering is what my sister went through,” he said. “If you only saw what people put her through then you’d understand that freezing and starving was the least horrible thing to go through. What those assholes did—” His voice cracked as he spoke and I visualized the sadness in his eyes. What strength it took to relive a devastating moment by retelling it, keeping it alive and fresh. “No, what I experienced being caged wasn’t suffering. But I thank you anyway.” He cleared his throat.

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I swallowed, gulping. "Sorry."

Minutes passed and the only noise was the chirping of crickets and other insects.

"You lost your family, didn't you?" Aiden asked, finally breaking the silence.

There was once a time when the standard questions were, *where's your family? Do you have anyone you care about? Are you in love?* Now, asking if you've lost someone wasn't weird at all.

"No." That was all I could manage.

"Good." A gentle, soothing pat touched my shoulder. "You were spared from being forced to watch their deaths. You're lucky."

Lucky? Far from it.

My tongue slid across my dry lips. The salt in the air, the long trek, the fact I hadn't had a drink in hours, caused a strong craving for hydration. I fetched the canister of water from my pocket and took a drink, then handed the rest to Aiden. It disappeared from my hand, and a loud gulp followed.

The thought of Santos aiming his accurate bow and arrow at the back of my head came to mind. "You know, Santos is gonna come looking for me," I warned. "Every morning at daybreak, he and his buddy go hunting for food in these woods. I'm sure I'm now on his list of game."

"You mean *us*." The water swished in the nearly empty canister. "He'll be looking for us."

"No, me," I corrected. "He'll be looking for *me*."

"What does he want with you so bad, anyway?"

"He wants to take my place as leader. He's been giving off hints and threats for a while."

"But you left." The cold canister grazed my fingertips. "He's got what he wants. Makes no sense to hunt you down now."

I shooed away the offer of water with a swipe of my hand. "He'll feel threatened until he kills me or locks me up. But the only way he would be able to lay a hand on me is if I'm dead." I waited for Aiden's response. He was silent. "Once we get to the coast, we'll split up. You go your own way from there. You might have a better chance."

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“Yeah? And you will have a better chance if I’m with you.”

This man has done so much already. Putting his life in further danger wasn’t an option. I didn’t have the strength to carry it on my conscience if he got hurt. “I can’t ask you to help me.” My voice cracked as I forced the words out.

“You don’t have to ask. I already offered.”

“Don’t feel obligated—”

“You expect me to sit back and watch a man suffer and not do what I can to stop it?” An unexpected nudge on my shoulder took me off guard and I braced myself. “Just like you, Luke, I’m not that kind of man.”

“Being that kind of man is what got you locked up in the first place,” I reminded him. “Don’t risk your life for me.”

“You could’ve left when I couldn’t get that door open in the cage.” He raised his voice. “You could’ve dropped everything right there and ran, but you didn’t. And now I’m faced with the same decision you had, and I made the same choice.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” The thought of an innocent person dying for *my* sake? Unforgivable.

“I’ve already decided,” he said with that familiar sureness.

“Suit yourself.” I stood. There was no convincing him. “We have to get out of these woods by first light.”

He stirred, the heat of his nearby presence apparent. Gentle, narrow fingers touched mine, lifting my hand to his broad shoulder. “We’ll make it.”

I took a step, allowing him to lead, but rustling came from far behind. I stopped and pulled my blade from my pocket, holding it at my side. “Someone’s here.”

We paused. After a few seconds of immobility and silence, Aiden concluded, “It’s just an animal. Probably a squirrel, raccoon, or something.”

He was more familiar with the animals of the forest; however, the crunch of twigs suggested that whatever it was had to be much larger than an average woodland creature. “Let’s keep moving,” I whispered. Keeping my ears honed in to any other sound than our footsteps, I increasingly became more cautious and paranoid.

A chill crept down my spine as I realized my only warning against impending threats were my hearing skills and Aiden acting as my eyes. He was



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right. Getting out of the forest would have been next to impossible without his help. Still, the stirring in the foliage was only animals?

Not so. The stench of an unfamiliar body odor permeated the air.

“Hey,” I said in a hushed voice. “Someone’s following.”

Before the last word left my mouth, quickened footsteps in the brush startled me. Aiden jumped and gasped. Blade before me, preparing for a confrontation, I staggered backward.

“Come on, asshole,” I called out. “I’m ready for you.”

Aiden palmed my shoulder. “Sshh,” he whispered. His footsteps crept past me and toward the crackling of twigs snapping on the ground from the pressure of weight. My imagination soared and I envisioned him—tall, slim-framed and wide-eyed—huffing as he hoisted the corroded blade up near his shoulder, ready to swing like a batter on the home plate.

Another snap and I stepped back, anticipating Aiden’s swing and strike. All of a sudden, a panicked yowl emerged from the brush ahead of me, growing louder and more urgent as it neared me. Heavy stomps threw off my concentration as I tried to gauge my threat and proper defense. Before I knew it, rough fingers gripped my wrists, pushing me down.

A ridged rock the size of my fist lodged into my ribs as the man straddled me, forcing my back into the ground while struggling to take the blade from my hand. His guttural growl rumbled my eardrum as his beard and lips grazed my chin.

“Get off!” Aiden’s voice was close above me and powerful, deeper than my attacker’s growl and sterner than a bull. “Not gonna say it again. You want this big edge lodged into your skull, asshole?”

With all my strength, I pushed my handheld blade forward, aiming it toward the man on top of me. Which part would I pierce? I didn’t know, his neck, his back, his side? It didn’t matter, as long as it got him off of me.

A metallic clanking on the ground beside me took me out of my thoughts. Aiden’s grunt followed the weight of my attacker lifting. With the man no longer crushing my diaphragm, my breathing became less labored.

“I need him,” the man said through shallow breaths. “My fucking family’s back there. I can’t go back without him.”

“Who are you?” I asked, getting up on my feet. I opened my eyes but the pain wouldn’t allow me to keep them open for long. Moisture pooled around

my lids, and I suppressed the urge to rub them, not wanting to cause further damage.

“What the hell are you talking about?” The impatience in his voice was evident, so was the desperation.

The sweat from my palm soaked the twined handle of my blade, but I gripped it tighter, readying myself for another attack. “You with that other guy?” Although he didn’t sound like the man whose vision I’d love to take, he had to be the third prisoner that had escaped the cage and had the same idea as the other escapee.

“If we give you to Santos, then maybe he’ll have mercy on us,” he said, confirming my suspicions.

“If you didn’t want to leave then why did you?” Aiden asked, stealing the words right out of my mouth.

The man huffed as if the answer was obvious. “I’m cold and hungry and—”

“And you weren’t cold and hungry at the camp?” I pointed out. The craving to look the man in the face, to judge my threat, nagged me. I opened my eyes, but the sting worsened.

“If I go back—” the man started. “If—if I go back—”

“He’ll kill you,” I finished. “That guy is hopped up on power. He wants to run things his way, he wants fear. Screw respect, he wants to terrorize you, and he will force it on you and everyone there without a second thought.”

The people at camp kept their distance from Santos and his friend after hearing of the sadistic and inhumane way he enjoyed preparing his half-dead game for feasting. He’d then offer the meat to the camp, which was enough to psychologically traumatize anyone. Knowing their hunger prevented them from refusing a meal was similar to forcing their hand in the cruel treatment of the animal they were eating. With every bite, they were reminded of the torture the animal had suffered. Just one of many signs of Santos’ insane psychological manipulation. Memories of the community’s somber, scared, diverted eyes came to mind. Thankfully, Santos’ murderous threats had been on me only and not on those innocent folk.

“Of course he feeds off our fear,” Aiden said.

“I don’t know, maybe he needs something consistent, control. Maybe that’s what makes him feel alive, other people’s fear.” I shrugged. A man without a

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family to love and return love was a man without a purpose to live, a selfish, undetermined, waste of space. Nothing more than a beast with its conscience eaten away and living off the misery of others to feel important.

“You know all this and still you won’t help?” the man asked.

“I’ve done all I could do. I let you guys go. That’s all I have in me.” The truth put a sour taste in my mouth that was hard to swallow but necessary to state.

“You used to do more than that,” the man said. “You welcomed us in, now you’re gonna turn your back on us.” It wasn’t a question, but came out more as a sickening observation.

“Look, I may hold some responsibility for opening that cage—”

“Damn right,” the man said through clenched teeth.

“But I didn’t force you to leave,” I said. “And I’m not going back.”

“All those people you left back there, my family too, depended on you. ‘Luke will save the day. Luke will turn everything around. Luke will put things back the way they used to be.’ And all you did was run away. Well, fuck you, Luke.” His anger was obvious. But so was his pain, the way he gulped, swallowing his agony, told it all.

“I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do.” I lowered my blade, relaxed my grip, and sighed at my misfortune. As much as I wanted to distance myself from the situation, I had no way of identifying the right way to go. Dread crept upon me at the thought of having to trust a stranger, especially when two of them had tried to kill me soon after freeing them.

So much for rewarding the kind people and punishing the cruel. Where was karma and justice when needed?

Maybe Aiden sensed my need. The sound of metal scratching against the gravel and sand made me think of his blade dragging as he retrieved it from the ground. Aiden cleared his throat. “I suggest you figure out another way to get Santos’ mercy.” The crunch of his footsteps approached. I calculated each step to gauge his distance. Soon his palm slid down my spine to rest on my lower back. “Let’s keep moving.” His voice was a mere millimeter from my ear, just above a whisper, and comforting.

His shoulder radiated heat onto my palm and with his assistance, I took a few steps.

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“You know what?” the man said from behind. “Just—just walk away. Just keep walking.”

And we did.

However, the realization of possibly being led right back to the very place I was running from just about paralyzed me. I had placed a lot of trust in Aiden, and no matter how good a person was they still had to have a reason for risking it all for another, especially in times like these.

As we walked, I tried to piece together what pushed Aiden to take another step, and beside me nonetheless.

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## Chapter 4

The crash of the waves against the shore, the tinge of bitter salt in the air, and the crunch of broken seashells in the sand under foot brought an instant sense of relief. It was faint, but the warm sun on my skin excited me as well. We made it. What thrilled me the most was that Aiden was true to his word. He simply could've done like the others wanted to do and led me back to camp with me none the wiser, unaware until too late.

But he didn't.

I dropped to my knees and raked my fingers through the warm, soft grains. Again, I attempted to open my eyes. The brightness from the rising sun alone blurred my vision, but my sight was sharper as I made out a flock of birds soaring beneath the clear blue sky ahead. I learned if I didn't blink so much or move my eyeball around under the lid, the pain was bearable. It took intense concentration to use my other senses to perceive my surrounding, walk a jagged terrain, and remember not to blink or move my eyes, but I enjoyed the diversion.

"Look," Aiden said. "There's an old lighthouse way up there. We can make it in, I don't know, thirty or forty minutes if we keep the pace." His voice had risen an octave, and his words came out rushed and nearly slurred. He sure was excited about an old lighthouse. "It's beautiful," Aiden went on as I stood to grab his shoulder. "The tower's tall, off-white color like a pearl or something. Have you seen this lighthouse before?" Something in his gentle voice made the corners of my mouth twitch until I smiled. There was a childlike awe and wonder in his tone. It transferred to me. The sense of strolling the beach on a great summer day, reminiscing good times with loved ones, came over me.

"No," I said. I'd never been to this beach. But some of the people from the camp had because they used to bring back what shellfish and fish they could catch, which wasn't much. Blaming Mother Nature and her disaster and seeing it as a sign of the water's health, they eventually stopped trying.

At camp, everyone had jobs; some were responsible for hunting, like Santos and his friend. They were naturals. Others gathered vegetation for consumption and medicinal purposes. Then there were those responsible for washing clothes, helping look after and teach the children, or making things that would come to use like dishes, clothes, and my blade.

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I always felt safer near camp, keeping an eye out, setting guidelines, organizing and the like. People respected me. They trusted me. They had no reason not to. I saw it in the way they came to me with questions, suggestions, and concerns. They rarely questioned my motives, always sure that whatever I did was for the betterment of the camp. But now? Now I just gave them a reason to never rely on me again. My throat ached.

“Damn, it’s fucking beautiful,” Aiden went on, yanking me from my guilt. “It’s tube-shaped but like an upside down cone. The balcony’s small compared to the rest because the tower’s huge!”

My imagination took me there. The inverted cone tower perched high on the tallest rock cliff, like a guard protecting the shores with its presence. The lens filthy and unkempt but intact. Without the presence of a bright beacon of light, it screamed abandoned, used and wounded in my mind.

“I really wish you could see this.” Aiden’s paced slowed with each step until we finally stopped.

I stood, listening, assessing, and waiting for something to happen. The sun’s light behind my lids was eclipsed and the light touch of his palm on my chest brought my attention back to him.

“Wha—what’s going on?” I asked.

“I’m just gonna take a look at your eyes.” His voice was low, soft, and close. Then gentle fingertips grazed my cheekbone, his palm rested against the side of my face, and my breath hitched. “I’ll be gentle,” he whispered.

The heat in the pit of my stomach rose to nestle in my ribcage. Feelings stirred that I had believed I would never experience, ones that I had wanted too bad for so long that in time I had learned to forget.

Standing still, eyes closed, my breathing became erratic, so I forced myself to take breaths as I normally would, becoming more conscious of my exhales and inhaled. The pad of his thumb swept over my bottom lid, and I flinched, less from pain and more from the warmth it sent to my chest.

“Sorry,” he whispered, the light wind from his breath brushed my ear. Beyond his voice, my heartbeat throbbed hard enough for me to hear the thump, thump, thump. What part of him would touch me next? Would I be able to suppress the electric shudder his touch sent through me?

“Open,” he ordered, and I blinked. “You can do it.” He chuckled.

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I snorted, suppressing a smile. He shouldn't know how much he amused me, or how his touch made my stomach ache from want. How good it felt to be on the receiving end of a caring hand. Especially since my walls had been up for so long.

I opened one eye, fighting the urge to snap it shut again. Looking past the excessive moisture and to the hazy image of my helper, I made out his intense stare as he examined my eye.

“This one seems to have a jagged little scratch on the clear part above the iris.”

“My cornea?”

“Yeah.” His hand pressed against the other side of my face, and he gently opened my lid. “This one doesn't look that bad, but I see some gunk in it.”

“Maybe a good flushing will clear it,” I said, dropping my head from his cradling hands. “Or eventually it'll clean itself.”

“So the scratch, it's not permanent, right?”

“It should heal in due time,” I said. Hopefully, the healing would be sooner than later. “Let's keep moving.” I reached out, and his fingertips held mine while he guided my hand on his shoulder.

We continued walking but closer to the shore. I knew because the crashing water roared louder as we approached and the moist sand kicked up in clumps from wetness. Clomps of wet sand stuck to my shoes, requiring more effort to walk.

“We're leaving a trail,” Aiden said, as if reading my mind. “We walk near the waterline so it erases our footprints.”

“If anyone wanted to track us, the first place they'll look is the lighthouse,” I pointed out.

“Well, let's not just lay down for them or anything.”

The roar of the crashing waves against the rocks hypnotized me. There was so much splendor left in the world, so much to celebrate still. I let my thoughts gather images of the rushing white waves colliding with the large black rocks, creating a mesmerizing contrast of colorless beauty. The reflection of the sky shimmered off the surface of the water. In the distance, where the sky met the fiery horizon, I appreciated how they created an ideal existence.

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“Things sure did turn to hell after, huh?” Aiden said, breaking the silence.

“It sure did, but—”

“Things are looking up,” he went on, stealing my words. “The sun’s still shining, ocean is clearer, people aren’t as sick, plants and animals are thriving. Not much to complain about anymore.”

“Hmm. You’re a glass half-full kind of man.”

“You’re not?” he asked, a hint of surprise and curiosity in his tone.

I sighed. “I used to be.”

“I know.”

“How so?”

“Instead of giving up, you started a camp, invited in others, built a community. You helped bring some hope to many.”

“Giving up?” I snorted. “I left both of the camps I started, that’s pretty much the definition of giving up.”

“You’re smart enough to know when to move on. Don’t beat yourself up for that. It’s not a good look.”

I sneered, but allowed a smile when his laughter filled the air. He definitely knew how to work that glass half-full angle. My life had been threatened many times in the last few hours, and probably wasn’t the last, and here I was laughing. Who would’ve thought?

“Worrying gives you wrinkles,” he went on. “If you have ever worried in your life I see no sign on that baby face of yours.”

Baby face? Days old stubble, a rugged scar on my chin, dirt-caked skin and probably plenty of bruises to turn me completely black and blue. But he sees a baby face?

“It’s a compliment. Lighten up,” he said and patted the back of my hand.

“You do know that we have no food or water, and a handful of crazed men want me dead? Now you want me to lighten up?” Maybe it was the casual stroll on the beach that had us temporarily mixed up and upbeat.

“You’re alive, aren’t you?” Aiden said. “If it wasn’t for all the really fucked up shit happening to you, you wouldn’t appreciate the really good shit. And you



escaping that asshole, walking down the beach with the sun on your face, and a handsome man at your side is really good shit. Might as well smile.”

I couldn't help it. I did.

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## Chapter 5

When entering the keeper's house next to the tower, I opened one eye and took in the scene. It occurred to me that the lighthouse was an old historic landmark, because the keeper's house held the resemblance of an old nineteenth century system. However, most of the furnishings had been vandalized, or naturally damaged. Even some of the woodwork had been removed. Fixtures and flooring were missing or misplaced.

If someone had been living in the house, they did a poor job of keeping it up. I assumed the tower was in no better condition. Maybe the lens to the light wasn't intact like I had imagined after all. Most of the glass in the windows of the living area was broken, cracked, or absent.

The light and shadow play crept across the sandy wooden floors as sunlight shone through the uncovered windows. A decent-sized kitchen to the right and the bunkroom to the left across the large living area accommodated one or two people comfortably.

At a fast but careful pace, I made my way to the kitchen sink alone. A pathetic stream of cold clear water drizzled out of the faucet. I collected it in my cupped palms and rinsed my face and eyes as well as I could, feeling instant relief. I allowed water to coat my tongue. Indeed, it was fresh. The longer the water ran, the water pressure became worse, until it was just a drizzle. Still, it would do.

"Where's the canister?" I asked.

In no time, Aiden was beside me, placing the empty container in my hand, then he was gone. The wooden cabinets squeaked on their hinges as he searched each one, probably for food. He huffed. No such luck.

Aiden let out a long sigh. "Now we rest and figure out what to do from here."

Rest sounded good. But he was still talking that *we* business.

"Thanks and all, but you've done enough for me." When he didn't respond, I made my way around the small house, blinking open one eye long enough to scan my surroundings. Each room held some sign of destruction. But the last room resembled an old laundry room, with a deep washbasin and shelves. I turned the faucet on to the same pathetic drizzle of water as the kitchen sink. In

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the washroom, a lone comfy-looking chair sat in the corner. Odd. I couldn't make out any other details but that it was thick and plush, probably dusty, torn and stained too. I sat in it anyway, letting out a long, "Ahhh." The arms rested high as if they were welcoming me into the chair's calm embrace.

Directly across from me, near the wall heater stood a single window. On the other side were trees with thick twisted branches and deep green leaves that obscured most of the view. The window was undamaged, a good sign.

The sound of Aiden's tattered shoes sliding against the planks gave away his approach at the doorway. I turned my head to take in the image of his svelte figure as he rested at a slight angle against the doorjamb.

"How are your fishing skills?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Lousy."

"I can't fish or hunt for shit, but we need food. And wood for a fire tonight."

"Just rest for now. We'll fish in a few hours." I sighed as my body sank deeper into the cushion.

"You know, Santos has been out to get me for some time now." It was true. "Ever since I confronted him for harassing some of the people at camp. His threats about getting rid of me and sending me to my final resting place were taken seriously. I may not be high on his to-kill list, but he will take any chance to get at me. Your life is in danger too."

"My life was in danger as soon as I entered that prison," he said. "My life was at risk as soon as hell crawled all over our globe. Since I was born. Nothing's changed. My life will be in danger until the day I die. I realize that." He moved closer. "And the last time I checked I was a big boy, so stop worrying about me and why I'm still here."

"Why are you here?" I had left behind everyone and everything that I once cared about and yet he refused to leave. "You feel sorry for me? My eyes will heal. I can see better already."

"You—you don't remember." Aiden lengthened his spine.

"What are you talking about?" I dipped my eyebrows, my ears perked as well as my attention.

"When I first came to camp, all worn and withered, you welcomed me." He cocked his head. "Remember?"

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I thought back, seeing the frail man carried into our camp by some of the hunters. I remembered looking into his sea-blue eyes, placing my hand on his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze, and receiving him into the home I had built. No one was ever turned away. Ever. No matter what condition they were in.

“Then the one day when I was feeding pigeons the last of my corn biscuit.” Aiden went on. “Remember what you told me?”

I nodded. Never again would I forget. In all the years after the event, I had never seen a person feed a wild animal when they themselves had so little. At first, I thought he was trying to lure the animal in to capture, but the gentle way he worked and the soothing words he spoke changed my mind. This man felt something for these wounded creatures. I made up my mind that day. “I said you were a good man.”

“So if you ask me why I won’t leave you, why I would risk my life for you, or why I didn’t betray you, you’ve already got your answer.” He squeezed my shoulder—reminiscent of the day I had first greeted him—and turned to leave the room.

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I had to convince Aiden that building a fire was a bad idea. In the dark of night, the light could be detected a mile away and the smell of burning wood could be traced. Overall, it would give away our position if someone was out looking for us.

We sat in the small washroom, and I listened. As much as I anticipated footsteps or whispers, only the sound of waves crashing against the rocks and wind rattling the glass were heard.

Keeping my eyes closed, I found relief. As the hours ticked by, my vision became better. My eye naturally flushed the gook out. The damaged cornea might take much longer to heal, but I prepared for that by leaving it be and keeping it closed. I visualized the shadows that hid in the corners and the darkened rooms. The image brought with it a somber mood. The silence cloaked me like a wool blanket, but the dropping temperature cooled my skin. The stillness, the increase in nature’s noise, all contributed to my gloom.

One thing continually played through my head at the thought of my misfortune.

At least I was alive.

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I never would have appreciated being alive if it wasn't for the more difficult things I have lived through. Aiden was right about that.

Another sound took my attention. Clacking of teeth as Aiden shivered followed by his shallow breaths as the cold licked away any heat his body tried to contain. He was huddled in the corner of the room, sitting on a pile of leaves from the nearby trees he had gathered for cushioning.

I pushed myself up from the chair and carefully made my way through the darkness to his side. Sliding my back down the wall, I lowered myself to sit beside him on the loose pile. Although I trembled too, maybe what little body heat I generated would transfer and give him some relief. The thought of him violently quivering in the prison cage played through my mind. I slid closer.

“You know, I don't even know why I was thrown in that cage,” he said, probably remembering nearly freezing to death too. “I had asked, but eventually stopped when it wasn't getting me anywhere. I think it had something to do with me not being afraid of Santos. He had tried to intimidate me earlier that day, and I never let it bother me. Then hours later I was locked in there.”

“Sorry,” I offered.

He hugged his knees closer to his chest and his outer thigh brushed mine. A warmth grew between us. Or was that my imagination? He moved closer. It didn't catch me off guard as it might have in any other situation. Still, be it for warmth or affection, I found myself wishing for more of his touch. Something stirred inside me, longing for more than his thigh on mine, or the heat that transferred from my body to his and from his to mine. In the back of my mind, I hoped he would have the courage to snake his arm around me or lay his head on my shoulder and guarantee a comfortable night. Thoughts of his hands on my most sensitive areas, his hot breath in the crook of my neck, his lips caressing the stubble on my chin sent a deep shudder along the length of my spine, and I trembled.

“A fire would be nice, huh?” he said, misinterpreting my quiver. I peeked at his black silhouette and his head turned to mine. “But, safety first,” he added.

It still surprised me, his ability to amuse me at a time like this. A way of distracting me, or us?

“Things shouldn't have to be this way,” Aiden went on. “Trying to survive like this. We'll figure something out in the morning. I'm sure of it.”

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I nodded, not certain of a better plan, but thankful that, to him, there was a future. Even if it was only a few hours ahead.

The future wasn't promised. That was evident. The future held no significance without the events of one's past to give it its value. It's so easy to fall into the depths of despair in the days like these. Even easier to allow it to swallow you up unless you had a purpose, something or someone somewhere along time's linear line to keep you going, to motivate and push you.

I shifted, plunging my hand into my pants pocket and pulling out a folded three by five picture. I cradled it in my palm, running the pad of my thumb along the center fold and its tattered edges. The darkness obscured my vision, but I didn't need my eyes to see the image. I never looked at it anyway, only using the feel of the creased paper to trigger the inspiring memory.

I could make out the golden dress she wore with layer after layer of white ruffles along the bottom. The white dress shoes with the flat heels reflected the flash of the camera. Behind her stood the most handsome man ever created. The tall, dark, and handsome man of every romantic's dream. He possessed strong broad shoulders, an infectious smile, and exuded confidence no suit and tie could fake.

"You got something there?" Aiden's knee nudged mine.

"No," I said. "Nothing but paper."

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## Chapter 6

I blinked to a sliver of morning sunlight in my eyes. Rising from the pile of leaves, I peered around the small room with one eye. Light weaved its way past the tangled branches and through the window like a divine pillar, bringing on the new day.

Aiden was nowhere in sight, but worry was the last thing on my mind. For all I knew, he was out basking in the warm sunshine, appreciating every golden ray. Better yet, feeding the fish we should have captured for a meal. I smiled to myself and made my way to the window, surprised how at ease I felt despite being parched and near starving. My stomach was used to not having meals for long periods of time, but the thought of being hunted like a wild animal was what took me out of my brief sense of peace.

If it wasn't for a threat on my life lingering in the air and the downward spiral Earth had plummeted into, the morning would have been like bliss.

I would wake up next to Samuel who would have little Christie snug in his arms. She would get frightened of the dark and come into our room, and we would never complain. Her long chestnut colored locks would veil his handsome face, preventing the morning sunshine from waking him.

Samuel would comment on our baby's hazelnut scent and her beaming smile. Even though her baby teeth were missing to make room for her adult teeth, her smile would bring a grin to my lips.

Then chaos and destruction, and her cries pierced my heart like a hot iron. Whenever it entered my mind, that thought always had a way of stinging. An innocent whimpering from being frightened of the unknown that hid in the darkened corners of rooms, or the howling sobs from the agony of starvation and dehydration. Her pains hurt me ten times worse than my own. But it worked for me every time. Allowing myself to travel to that dark, sorrowful place encouraged me beyond reason.

I cleared my throat and swatted away the tickle on my cheek just as Aiden's footsteps grew closer.

"Rise and shine," he said. Enthusiasm rang in his voice. "You're gonna thank me for this."

I glanced over my shoulder, peeking with my good eye at the smirk on his face and both palms filled with small dark berries.

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Saliva moistened my mouth. "Food?"

He nodded. "Huckleberries. My sister taught me how to make muffins with these, but since we only have one ingredient, we're just gonna have to make do." He stood beside me and lifted his palms, offering up the petite fruit. I took a few and popped them into my mouth. The tiny, dark purple orbs gave off a tart and sweet tang on my tongue.

I nodded, approving the flavor, and grabbed some more.

"These took forever to pick," he said, tossing his head back and dropping a few of the berries into his mouth. "Not all of them were ripe, so..."

I wouldn't know where to look for berries, and couldn't determine the edible ones at that. So showing my appreciation for his skill was second nature. "Thank you, Aiden." I nodded, lifting my handful.

"You said my name." He paused. Our eyes locked and he narrowed his.

I shrugged. "Yeah?"

He mimicked me and shrugged too, dropping his gaze. "How's the eye?"

"Better." I turned toward the window as an awkward vibe flowed between us. I watched him pick at the berries in his palm in my periphery. Was concern the reason behind his fidgeting?

"I must've done something wrong," he said, breaking the ice.

"No, you've done plenty to help." It was the truth, but no matter what, I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye.

"Berries aren't my favorite either," he said. "They give me gas. Maybe next time I'll go ahead and hunt the pigeons instead of feeding them. You like chicken?"

His chuckle followed my snort.

"Okay," I said. "I know I'm being a bit—"

"Solemn?" he finished for me. "It's understandable." His palm ran over my lower back. A sign of comfort? "What I used to do was give myself a certain amount of time to wallow in whatever was bothering me. Then once time's up, I had to let it go. No more."

"Hmm." I never wanted to wallow in sadness. Contrary to what most believed, instead of sucking the motivation out of me, it did the opposite. It kept me alive, it allowed me to care for more than myself, and it made me who



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I am. No matter the goal, dragging along heartache and pain always seemed to give me purpose. It reminded me of how far I'd come and what to look forward to in the future.

“Go ahead,” Aiden offered. His warm hand caressed my shoulder blade. “I'll be your ear for five minutes. Only five minutes.”

I huffed. It had always been so difficult to voice my thoughts. I gulped and let it out. “I shouldn't have run.”

“From Santos?”

“From everything.” Before Samuel and Christie, there was Paul and Sarah, survivors at the first camp. Paul had left Sarah alone at camp while he went to gather food. He returned and she was gone. He had no explanation on when or where she'd gone; she left no clues as to why. His worries were triggered when he'd found the tattered white dress she'd been wearing and later how odd the fellow villagers acted. In the heat of the moment, Paul accused them, fearing for his daughter's life. Although suspicious, I did as Paul had done and left the camp. There had been far too many incidences, signs telling me I should get the hell away from there. I should've bashed the heads in of those who seemed to know the truth but were hiding it. Instead, I ran. Every second felt like running from Death.

Aiden dipped his head, trying to make eye contact. “You shouldn't have run from everything, like what?”

I shouldn't have run from Santos either. I had tried again, built a new community I could trust, with people who had each other's backs, and didn't do sickening things to little kids. But in time Santos appeared, and yet again, I let him run me off, leaving behind more people who depended on me, trusted me, and believed in me.

“I let a lot of people down,” I managed to get past the lump in my throat. “I keep running away.” I looked out the window, through the twisted branches, and toward the tall tower of the lighthouse. “And worse, if I don't live in my pain it'll take me, it'll be the end of me one way or another. I'll either give up fighting to live or turn into the exact thing I'm running from—a selfish, sadistic, empty shell like Santos.”

Aiden's gentle fingers slid up and down my spine, and then toward my shoulder. His gaze fixed on my target too as it stood high on the rock base cliff. “You've placed a huge burden on your shoulders for the benefit of those around

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you. I can see that. But that burden is tearing you down. Like a fire or a light set high in a prominent position to warn and guide others.” He pointed toward the lighthouse tower. “But now you’re broken, wounded, and until you’re fixed and healed you can’t perform your job.”

“I’ll never be fixed,” I said, eyes on the lighthouse. “Don’t want to be fixed.”

“People like you don’t have time to feel sorry for themselves.”

“I don’t feel sorry for myself.” I flashed a glare at him, at his insult.

“You do,” he said. “You’re beating yourself up, you’re punishing yourself, but there’s a way to fix it. To fix *you*.”

His palm gently gripped the back of my neck, urging me closer, to search his eyes. I cleared my throat. “I’ll never be—”

“Build again,” he said. “There will always be people crawling into a camp for help. All you have to do is make sure that it’s a good camp, your camp, they crawl into. You have what it takes to give people hope, to show them a future, and to look at surviving as regular old living. That’s what you’ve done for me.” His hand slid forward to cradle the side of my face, and his thumb swept over my cheekbone. “Welcome in more wounded and we can heal together.”

Heal? That’s what I needed? “But—”

“Time’s up,” he whispered and pulled me forward. Our lips met, gliding over one another’s.

Berries plummeted from his palm, bouncing off my shoes.

He brought that hand to my face, cupping it, gently cradling. His mouth cracked open and the sweet smell of huckleberries filled my nostrils.

Suppressing a shudder, I brought my arms around his narrow waist and pulled him into me. Relief rushed me like the waves of the roaring sea, and I stumbled back, pulling him with me until my rear met the wall. The tips of our tongues glided together, and I sank, allowing myself to act as anchor.

His smooth palms caressed my neck, inching over the slope near my shoulders and back up again. I mimicked the desperate moan that escaped his lips, and in no time, the small room was humming with our erotic tune.

Then there it was, the bulge at the front of his pants met mine. Our stiffness poked and prodded one another until we mingled into a comfortable rhythm, an

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instinctual grind. Warmth tingled from my loins to my extremities, my tongue dove deeper, our moans grew louder, and my fingers tangled into the tail of his shirt, pulling, snagging, and clutching at the fabric with every phenomenal sensation that surged throughout my body.

My worries, fears, and cares no longer existed. Our chests pressed together like the paddles of a defibrillator, and for a second I thought the heat we were generating would stop my heart. And as we kissed like there was no tomorrow, it occurred to me. This was what I needed, what I'd been longing for. A man like Aiden to revive my motivation and serve as a purpose for continuing.

I needed to feel it, form it, and make it real. "Aiden," I whispered against his moist lips. And then it was.

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## Chapter 7

That night resembled the previous night, filled with deafening sounds of waves, speeding winds, and the urge to start a fire to keep warm. This time, we got creative. With my blade, we cut the dingy material from the plush chair to use for warmth. The material combined with our body heat was enough to get us through most of the night.

“Well, I think we should continue down the coast until we run into others willing to help us rebuild,” Aiden said. His thigh relaxed against mine as we sat huddled in the corner of our favorite room.

“What if they already have an established camp?” I asked, allowing his shoulder to tuck beneath mine.

“Even better,” he said, giving my elbow a gentle squeeze. “We can help improve it. You’re a great leader and organizer, and I’m known for finding some serious berry bushes.” He laughed.

I grinned. “We’ll find something to carry water and berries in, and we’ll head out at daybreak.”

He nodded, causing our huddled bodies to rock a bit. “Decent plan, considering—”

“Considering you’ve come up with it on your own.” My attempt at a joke.

As bad as it was, he nudged my arm with his elbow and snickered. At least we were trying to liven the mood and take our minds off the cold. Still, it didn’t take long for the shivers to come on.

Aiden stood. “We should go and explore the tower,” he said, looking toward the window.

“Right now?” I tried to make out the sincerity on his face but the lack of light didn’t allow it. “It’s too dark to see anything.”

“It’s exercise. It’ll keep us warm.” He put out a hand and I took it, allowing him to pull me to my feet. “And we don’t have to go all the way up or anything, but there might be something useful in there. You know?”

Convinced, I nodded and followed him out of the room.

The floorboards creaked as we carefully made our way through the keeper’s house and out toward the massive tower. I imagined what it must’ve looked like when it functioned. The light must’ve been big and bright and seen for miles.

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The closer we got to it, the taller it seemed. It towered over us by fifty feet or more. And being perched on the rock base helped it illuminate the coast and be seen by ships far away in the saltwater sea. A spray of the ocean water misted against my thirsty skin, and the tang of salt hit my tongue. Underfoot, the damp sand mushed as we neared the tower door.

A broken padlock hung from the handle of the arched door. Aiden kicked it open, and we entered into a dark room. Moonlight lit up sections of the steps that coiled up into a spiral staircase. Although difficult to make out in the dark, at least two hundred stairs ascended toward the balcony, and a few more beyond that to the lens room.

My imagination played out a scene of a beautiful handcrafted wooden handrail with some kind of intricate design, and smooth and polished concrete steps with a ceramic finish. Moonlight illuminated through one of the arched windows above, showcasing its astonishing beauty.

I followed Aiden as he climbed each step toward the nearest window. An ice-cold breeze blew in through the opening, filling the space with the briny scent of the sea. He peered out; the expression on his handsome face was that of contentment.

“Can’t help but think about how this place was before.” He turned to me. “You know?”

I nodded and looked out the window toward the lively shore. No matter the situation, people had a way of believing everything before must’ve been better, nicer, happier, more beautiful. And the people—more righteous.

In many cases, they were wrong, except when it came to Aiden. He was the exception. I took note of the way his jaw tightened and relaxed, and how his tongue moistened his lips when he looked at me. How he stared unblinking, while his fingers subconsciously glided along the windowsill as a way to keep them busy. Was he worried about touching me? Was he keeping himself from doing so?

“What’s the matter?” I asked, breaking the silence.

He sighed. “There’s not a lot of people who I like to be around. I’d rather surround myself with animals than people these days.”

“I see.” Feeding the animals instead of capturing them for food now made perfect sense.

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“You,” he started. “I really like being around you.” He came forward, closing the space between us. In a low, aroused voice, he murmured, “There’s another way we can get warm.”

This time I made the first move by pulling his body to mine by the rim of his pants. The past, the present, and the future meant nothing; it no longer existed. Now it was all about me and him. He dipped his head to nibble the flesh beneath my chin, and I let my head drop back, allowing him access. My palm skimmed over the hardened bulge in the front of his pants, and we moaned in unison.

“I needed you,” I whispered.

“I need you too,” he said against my Adam’s apple.

What a relief. Still, he didn’t quite understand. I lifted his head and he looked at me. “You were what I needed the whole time.”

He nodded, breathing heavily as he thrust his hips forward. “I know.”

“You know?” I couldn’t help but grind back against him.

“The picture.” He ducked his head to the crook of my neck, his hot breath against my sensitive skin. “You’re hurting. I can help you.”

He was right. I was hurting. “I needed a purpose.”

That picture—he had no idea.

A loud crash came from the keeper’s house, and Aiden gasped. We paused, frozen in an embrace. “That didn’t sound like a random accident,” he said.

We separated and looked to each other, debating our next move.

Without another thought, I descended the stairs, half blinded by the darkness and my injured eye. I emerged from the lighthouse, and with Aiden on my heels, we approached the keeper’s house. We crept near one of the broken windows and paused to peek through. My worst fear was realized when a blackened humanoid silhouette crept from one room to another, and from the other side of the living area another figure appeared.

“I left the hacker inside.” Aiden’s voice was hushed near my ear.

The hacker? He must’ve been referring to the large rusted blade. Damn. The intruders now had a weapon, or an extra one if they came with their own. Would I soon be staring at the end of a blade, or a bow and arrow?

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“I’ll go in first,” Aiden said, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “You catch them off guard. Take one and I’ll take the other. Okay?”

I nodded. It wasn’t like we could run and hide. Where would we go? Besides, look how far running and hiding had gotten me.

Aiden tiptoed toward the door, the moist sand crunching beneath his feet.

I continued to peer through the window as a throaty voice echoed throughout the room. “Someone was definitely here. I stepped on some kind of berries on the floor and a fresh pile of leaves back there.”

Seconds later, Aiden entered the room just as the silhouettes of the two men came nearer. “Hey.” Aiden lifted his arms at the opposition. The two men encircled him, and once their full attention was on Aiden I moved near the door, flattening myself against the wall, listening for my cue.

“Where is he?” one of the men asked. I recognized the voice as the man who had attacked me and thrown sand in my eyes. “We just want him, alright? We have no issue with you, man.”

Aiden’s voice showed no signs of nervousness. “He left up the coast. Took off running when he saw you guys.”

“Wha—Fuck!” Quickened footsteps marched toward the door. I waited until he walked out and tackled him like a linebacker, ramming my shoulder into his gut and sending him to the ground.

Aiden’s grunts echoed throughout the house as he struggled with the other man. I looked down at the man who had a steady stream of sand pouring from his enclosed fist. Before he had the chance to throw it, I pounced. Landing on top of him, I threw a blow connecting it with his ribs. He huffed and I drew my fist back again.

Suddenly, a thump on the back of my head blurred my vision. I tumbled to the ground beside my attacker and stared up into the eyes of the second man, the other prison escapee.

“I have a message for Santos,” I said, finally voicing what I had to do if I wanted to live. Running wouldn’t get me anywhere but get innocent people killed because of me. I had to face the problem once and for all. “And I’m gonna deliver the message myself.”

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## Chapter 8

My eyes opened to the sight of an angry snarl and twisted lips on Santos' face. Instinct told me to swing my fist and defend myself, but my wrists were bound together behind my back. Sitting on my aching knees, I jerked against the wooden pole running lengthwise along the center of my spine, keeping me in. The sun beat down on me, pulling me further from unconsciousness. And that's when I felt an ache radiating up the side of my body, and I flinched.

"Welcome back!" Santos' raspy voice rang in my ear as he emerged from behind me. He definitely understood sarcasm as he clapped his hands in faux joy. "Good to see you awake, comrade."

Bearing the pain of my bad eye, I scanned my surroundings, trying to remember how I got into such a predicament. The wooden village that housed two dozen or so folk, the prison, and the loose gravel that dug its way into the flesh of my knees all meant I was back at camp, in the middle of the courtyard. And it hit me. I had willingly returned in a few hours' trek with the two attackers, who I had previously helped escape from their imprisonment, and Aiden.

Upon returning, Santos and his friend had beaten me unconscious.

What had they done to Aiden? Where was Santos's friend now?

"Had a nice little vacation?" Santos grinned, folding his burly arms over his bloodstained shirt.

"Where's Aiden?" I didn't recognize my own voice as my dry tongue and busted lip distorted it. Many familiar faces surrounded me—some frightened with wide eyes and quivering lips—but none of them were Aiden. The dried reddish-brown blood smeared on his shirt sent me to the worst conclusion. "You hurt him?"

"Who? Me?" Santos gasped, taking the sarcasm too far. "I would never." He walked toward the crowd and they backed away, keeping decent space between them and him.

So many questions cluttered my mind. How long had I been tied up and on display with the sun scorching my skin and blood seeping from the wounds I knew were there but couldn't see? What happened to me while I was out? What had the crowd witnessed that frightened them so much? What would Santos do with me now? Where was Aiden, was he okay, would I see him again?



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My neck muscles strained to balance my heavy head, but it fell forward regardless. The muscles in my thighs ached and I squirmed. "I need water."

"He needs some water." The voice was familiar. I looked up to see the guy who had caused my eye injury, had invaded the keeper's house, and escorted me back to camp as a bargain. "Just give him a sip, please." The lines above his brows dug into his forehead. Was he really worried?

"You wanted this," I managed to say.

"My family," the man said. "I couldn't leave my family. They need me." He pointed into the crowd, zeroing in on a frightened woman embracing two young girls.

"Back away, Jack." Santos warned as he puffed his chest out in an attempt to intimidate the man, which seemed to work because he took a few steps backward.

"Gonna torture me?" I growled, not hiding my rage. "In front of them?"

"I'm being the leader you've failed to be," Santos said. His crazy hair swayed atop his head. "Doing this is part of the job. Someone acts out and lets all the prisoners go, well, I have to punish them. They need someone who steps up and takes care of business. They respect me because of how I run things."

"They fear you." I glared, bearing the intense pain in my eye.

"Ah, same difference." Santos moved forward, so close the foul stench of his body odor acted as pungent smelling salt and accelerated my alertness. He kneeled a mere foot away. "You're gonna be the example."

"What's wrong with you?" Images of Samuel and Christie popped into my mind to be erased by images of Aiden.

"I'm a bit cranky that I didn't get to hunt you down like I planned, but hey, Jack here was kind enough to guide your ass back here for me." I sensed the cynicism again, but it became apparent to everyone when he kicked a pile of gravel toward Jack's wife and girls. "Fucking family. Family, family, family." His fists tightened and the muscles in his arms bulged. "Everybody's reason for doing what they do is their fucking family. You know all about that, huh, Luke?"

I shook my head, not wanting to speak the truth about the only thing that kept me going. "You're the way you are because of family too," I said. "Because you don't have anyone to care for or someone to care for you. Now

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you're a monster, and I'll never be like you. I'll go crazy, I'll die before I turn into something like you."

"My family crumbled along with this shit world and here you are, moping around because you have no family either. Family, family, family." He laughed maniacally. "You're already crazy, running around this goddamned place, building camps, inviting people in, all to replace your family that you don't have. You're too sweet, too nice, too fucking friendly." He came close, his nose grazed mine. "I saw that folded paper you carry around with you. The one you stare at when you think no one's watching."

I lunged forward, imagining my teeth burrowing into the flesh of his nose, but the pole at my back prevented me from fulfilling my wish. He laughed, body heaving.

"Where's Aiden?" I yelled, throat raw and nearly hoarse from lack of moisture.

"On my shirt."

The sight of Santos' tarnished crooked smile boiled my blood. But as his words registered, my rage poured out like a wild beast. "Asshole," I growled.

Then before I could blink, his hands were around my neck, squeezing off my airway. Panic rang out in the crowd. Women screamed, the scurry of retreating footsteps crunched and churned the gravel. Soon all sound ceased and a rapid growing black fog that swallowed up my vision eclipsed the sunlight.

There wasn't much I could do in defense, but tightened my neck muscles and hoped he didn't crush my windpipe. Not only was air trapped in my lungs, but my blood was unable to flow. My body set off alarms, and panic made me struggle. I twisted and jerked. Instinct told me to stand, but my feet never gained traction, resulting in me kicking and flailing like Santos' dying prey. Time seemed to decelerate. Sound entered my ears like a slowed down version of a sad song. I was sure all beyond my auditory senses had too, if only I could open my eyes to witness it, but sleep was taking me under.

Out of nowhere, Santos' grip disappeared. I coughed, struggling for air as my vision returned. Someone struggled to keep Santos in an awkward headlock as they thrashed and wrestled over the loose gravel. My vision returned fully, and I made out my helper's features. The strong shoulders, the tall, svelte figure.

Aiden. He was alive.

---

I wanted to yell at Santos and return the favor with my fingers around his Adam's apple, but all I managed to do was cough and dry heave.

"Now!" Aiden's voice rose over the chaos. My world became a blur as Santos' burly friend staggered into the courtyard, blood seeping from a wound near his hairline, only to be caught off-guard by a handful of the camp's men. The men carried boards, bricks, stones, and anything else they could use as weapons against my assailants. Soon the courtyard was immersed in a cloud of dust as the men battled it out. The roaring of voices as they shouted, blows as they landed, scuffling, shoving, gripping, tackling.

A pair of hands on my wrists took my attention. I looked over my shoulder at Jack as he untied me. I fell forward on the loose rocks, putting my hands out just in time to catch my fall. I turned to meet Jack but he had already moved on to help some of the other men with Santos and his friend.

More exhausted than disoriented, the vision of Aiden struggling with Santos was enough to get me to my feet. But when Santos got free of Aiden's hold, and threw a swift punch at the side of Aiden's neck, my adrenaline kicked in. In no time, I was there, punch after punch landing in Santos' ribs until he balled up on the ground. My hands went to his neck, fingers enclosed the muscles, and I squeezed in retaliation. My grip tightened and I bit my bottom lip until I tasted the familiar metallic tang. The sound that spewed from my lips, laced with rage but unfamiliar, was just as surprising as the pathetic noises coming from Santos. Then Aiden's palm on my shoulder and his voice in my ear lessened my anger.

"They look up to you," Aiden said through labored breaths. "Think about it, Luke."

Seeing Santos struggle for air, eyes wide, tongue hanging out of his mouth didn't give me the satisfaction I had thought it would. Besides, if I continued I would be no better than he was. I let him go and allowed Aiden to pull me to my feet.

"Out," I breathed. "Don't come back."

"I'll leave," Santos said through coughs. "I'll leave but—but I promise you, Luke, I will be back." He staggered to his feet and backed away, our eyes locked. I studied his scowl; his angry eyes transmitted his warning. Ignoring every pain in my body, I lifted my head high and lengthened my spine. No longer the broken, the pained, the wounded. I'd be ready for him. Every day, I'd be waiting. My stance and his glare was an unspoken promise between us. Finally, he turned and walked toward the tree line.

His friend followed, battered with cuts, scrapes, and bruises. As soon as they disappeared in the trees, I turned to see Jack embrace his wife and girls, proud and relieved smiles on their faces.

“Let me get you cleaned up.” Aiden wrapped an arm around my lower back and led me to one of the small rooms, my former hole in the wall. I lay back on the corn husk cot and allowed Aiden to pour a steady stream of fresh water into my mouth. “Where were you?” I asked, looking up at the bruised and battered man whose wonderful sea-blue eyes caught the light and my attention.

“Old Brutus had me in one of the rooms,” he said, and wiped a cool cloth over my forehead. “I smashed him on the head with a rock and got away. Then convinced some of the guys to help me help you.”

Stirring at the door snagged my attention, and I turned my head to see a few of the camp members peeking in on me from the entrance. “They forgive me for leaving?” I looked to Aiden for the answer.

“If they didn’t before they sure do now.” He swept his thumb over my chin below my busted lip. “Get some rest. I’ll get you something warm to eat.”

“What about you?” I asked.

“I’m fine.” He nodded, assuring. “I’ll be just fine.”

“Thank you, Aiden.” I closed my eyes.

“You said it again.” His smile was apparent in his tone. His hand rubbed my chest and I sighed, instant relief. “You’ll be okay, Luke.”

I nodded. “You know they’ll be back.”

“I know, but we’ll be ready. We’ll all be ready and waiting.”

Fingertips on my chin again and then they were gone. His footsteps receded as he left the room, urging the people who gathered around to let me rest in privacy. As soon as I was alone, I reached into my pants pocket and pulled out the small picture I had held so close to my heart for so long. I swiped my finger down the familiar crease and over the worn edges, remembering the traumatizing heartache the picture had caused and how that heartache, deep pain, and sorrow got me through some of the most dreadful times in my life. Without the picture I would have given up, or worse, become a monster. The folded paper was the cause of everything that was broken inside, what I suffered to become the very person I became.

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Now that Aiden was at my side, I no longer needed a reminder, a trigger, a defense mechanism of sorts. I gripped the picture at its corners and ripped it down the middle, overlapped the pieces and tore it again.

“What’s wrong?” Aiden appeared in the doorway with a cob of steaming corn from the camp’s pitiful crop. “You need rest. You need to get better.”

I nodded and dropped the papers to the floor beside me. “Everything’s better now.”

Aiden was at my side almost instantly, picking up the pieces as he had done throughout our time together. “What is this?” he asked, examining the bits of paper.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“Yeah?” He flipped each piece over, scrutinizing them one at a time. “There’s nothing on these. They’re blank. So why are you ripping them up like its incriminating evidence or something?”

“Because I don’t need it anymore,” I said, staring at his infectious grin. It reminded me of the smile I always longed for in a tall, handsome man like Aiden. Or my figment, Samuel. How likely was it to someday have a daughter who’d be afraid of the dark and wake up tangled in Aiden’s arms as we lay in bed?

Samuel and Christie had given me a purpose, helped me understand what others were going through, their commitment to family. They gave me my motivation, the hope that there was something to look forward to. Now Aiden was all I needed.

I never thought I would go full circle and return to the place I had foolishly abandoned. Thankfully, the people of the camp welcomed me back. And the way they greeted me was better than any greeting I had ever given. With everything in me, I’d show them they made the right choice.

Aiden’s method of dealing with wallowing urged me to start a countdown. Thirty seconds. That was all I’d need to put the past behind me and work on our future, Aiden and I, us and the camp.

I never thought I would learn to trust and appreciate someone as much as I had grown to trust Aiden. There was still a lot to learn about my helper, and I looked forward to it. I owed him more than any man could give. More than my life. And I was glad for our adventure while it lasted. Aiden was wounded too, and that made him a good man. That made us perfect.

From now on, no more looking back. No more regrets, self-pitying or excuses. No more—

Time's up.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*The author of several books of fiction with spice, Leslie Lee Sanders resides in Queen Creek, Arizona, with her husband, three daughters, and a wild beast she calls her imagination. She's known for writing erotic romance, mostly in the MM and MMF categories, and recently plunged into writing deep, dark romantic sci-fi with her post-apocalyptic and dystopian series, Refuge Inc. She's published with Breathless Press and Xcite Books.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# WOVEN

By Lor Rose

## Photo Descriptions

Two photos of three men displaying affection.

Photo 1: Three men sitting against a wall, arms around each other.

Photo 2: A darkened picture of three men, two of them kissing, the third nibbling an ear.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*Life just doesn't get any better than it is now.*

*We are exactly where we need to be, it wasn't easy, it wasn't fun (but it sure is now) but we made it.*

*One of them fought it for all he was worth, thinking, wrongly, that they couldn't love him like, like they love each other.*

*They've wanted him for years, but something has held him back... HUGE brownie points if he is a brother to one of them? Or maybe a (now ex-) rentboy?*

*Something paranormal? Or is it something else entirely?*

*How did these three finally get together? The longing, loving and wanting and then they made it happen and are so in love they don't even think of how it was before.*

*Please no D/s, BDSM or historical.*

Sincerely,

Mandy

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** dark, established couple, hurt/comfort, ménage, nurse, relationship abuse, sex industry

**Content Warnings:** abuse, cliffhanger, rape, suicide attempt

**Word Count:** 6,865

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**WOVEN**  
**By Lor Rose**

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## J'Leigh Brass

The couch was cozy, but it might've had something to do with the extra pillow I wedged between myself and the arm. A glass of white wine twirled in my hand from barely contained nerves. "He should be here soon," my partner of nearly ten years, Ty, said and sat next to me.

Nervous flutters flooded my insides. I took a long swig of wine. The bitter flames tastily licked down my throat. "Why do I get so nervous every time we call him?" My knee jiggled up and down, a nervous force of habit.

Ty grunted and threw an arm over my shoulder, hugging me close. He wasn't a skinny man, definitely in shape. I classified him as a semi-muscle-head a few years back. I settled into Ty's side and took another drink. "You know why," Ty said, and he too took a sip of wine, but his was red instead of white.

I sighed. I did know, all too well.

Ty and I met at a rave party ten years ago, and we'd been together ever since. We loved each other, very much, so much sometimes I had to pinch myself to make sure it was real. For years we were enough for each other, but three years ago I brought up having a threesome. To my surprise, Ty was on board, but his only stipulation was we had to find the right guy. It couldn't be some Joe off the street.

I agreed. I didn't just want anyone, either. It took us over a year but eventually we found that someone. His name was Talon, one of the escorts from The Devil's Playground. We went on several dates with other men before we found Talon. We hadn't slept with anyone else except each other, until Talon.

Talon was sweet and kind. The more time we spent with him, the more Ty and I liked him. Ever since that first encounter, we called Talon over to our place once a month. At first, it was just a sexual thing for us; another way to reach satisfaction without cheating. Over time, I noticed my feelings for Talon changing. I didn't want him to leave. Hell, thinking of Talon with anyone else besides either of us hurt.

Ty moved next to me and gave me a soft kiss. "You're thinking about him, aren't you?"

"Yeah... Am I that obvious?"

Ty quirked a dark-blond brow. “Usually no, but with him you’re sort of touchy.”

“Touchy?” I huffed. “What does that mean?”

“When it comes to him you’re...” Ty paused, searching for the right word. “Uh, sensitive isn’t the right word.”

I didn’t like where this was going. “Pick your words carefully, my friend.” This was one of those situations where the wrong answer could earn him a luxurious ticket to the couch.

“Uh,” Ty looked at his wine, “when it comes to Talon, you’re protective of him, sensitive about talking about him. You worry because of what he does. You—”

“Care about him.”

“Exactly,” Ty said and cuddled me closer.

I curled up against Ty, almost hiding my face in his shirt. It smelled like fabric softener and his cologne. “Does it bother you that I care so much about him?”

Ty looked at me with dark-brown eyes. They reminded me of dark and milk chocolate swirled together. He always laughed when I said it was true. They seemed to change color with his mood. “At first, it did.” Ty rubbed my arm. “But then I saw what you see in him. I care about him, too.”

“This might be an overexhausted topic, but what does us caring about him mean?” I was tired of not knowing what all this meant to Ty. Really, I was sort of confused about what it all meant to me, too.

“What does it mean for you?” I blinked in surprise. That was the first time Ty hadn’t fought with me over talking about Talon, and damn the bastard for turning the question around on me.

“Well,” I took another gulp of wine then grimaced, “for me it means that I want him to stay, to be a part of us. I mean...” I broke off, unsure of what to say. How could I say what I felt without hurting Ty? “I love you, but I can’t deny that I feel something for Talon, too.” I couldn’t look at Ty, so I did the next best thing: I downed the rest of my wine.

Ty disentangled himself from me and took my glass into the kitchen to refill it. “How can we feel something for him when we don’t even know his real name? It seems a little weird.”

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“What does caring about him mean to you? Does a name really matter?” I asked, sort of afraid of the answer.

“To me.” Ty uncorked the wine and poured. “I’d like to get to know him more and that includes knowing his real name. But—” Oh, jeez, I hated it when Ty said the word “but” and it had nothing to do with my ass. “I also know that we’re just a job to him.” Ty returned, but this time he sat on the large chair and handed me the half-full glass while tapping his own. “We’re not a life option for him.” If I didn’t know Ty so well, I wouldn’t have heard the slight hitch in his voice. “Besides, I wouldn’t even know how a three-way relationship would work.”

Ty did have a point. I had to admit I had no idea either. “It’d be like we are now, but just with another person, right?” I hated how I trailed off, sounding like an insecure kid in math class, or something.

Ty shrugged. “I guess, but I don’t want us to entertain the idea too much when it probably won’t happen,” Ty said. I cleared my throat and shifted a little bit. Ty just smashed my heart. I knew he didn’t mean it, but it still hurt. “I’m sorry, babe. It just scares me.”

Ty’s admission surprised me. It dislodged the uneasy feeling in the crook of my mind. “I think I’m scared, too. Scared of hurting you, hurting him, hurting me. But you know what jacks with my head the most?”

Ty shook his head no. “What?”

“I’m scared of opening something up and figuring out that I can’t love him like I do you.”

Ty set his wine on the coffee table and moved to sit next to me. He pulled me close and kissed me so tenderly, pleasure zinged down my spine to my dick. Setting my wine down, I sighed.

“That’s the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“You mean ‘fuck me harder’ doesn’t register?” Ty’s eyes took on a sensual edge as I spoke. “Or ‘give it to me, Sir’? What about ‘choke me with it’?”

I squeaked—it was manly, I swear—when Ty shoved me down and leaned over my body. “You. Are. Evil.” Each word was punctuated by Ty’s hips rolling. I sighed and spread my legs for him.

I moaned. “I’m not evil. I just said the sweetest thing ever to you.” I kissed the tip of Ty’s nose.

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I could tell Ty felt chided, or maybe it was indignant? “Touché.”

A knock at the door cut off my snarky retort. “He’s here,” I announced. Usually, I’d be more excited, but our conversation put a little damper on my mood.

“I’ve got it.” Ty got up, leaving me a little cold, and answered the door.

I leaned up on one elbow and watched as Talon entered our apartment with a smile. “Hey!” He kissed Ty’s cheek and hugged him. “How are you guys?”

His blue gaze landed on me and he smirked. “Gotten started without me?” He sauntered over and sat in the open space of the sofa in front of me and leaned down. Our lips met in a sweet kiss. His black hair clashed with his blue eyes. A more cynical person would compare them to fresh bruising, but I liked to think of it as the dark, inky night and the violent lightning of a coming storm.

“Without you? Never.” Happiness lit his face all the way to his eyes. Or it could’ve been my wishful thinking.

“Before anything,” Ty interrupted with an envelope, “here you are.” I had a feeling Ty handed Talon his money at that moment only to remind me Talon was here for a job. Ty glancing at me confirmed my suspicions. I was a little irked at Ty for that. “Wine?”

Talon leaned back, using me as a backrest. “No, thanks. I’ll take some water, though.” He never wanted a drink, always water. That was very good for his kidneys and just his overall health in general. That was my nurse-self coming out, but a little red wine could do a person good, if drunk in moderation.

“How’ve you been?” I asked, as I ran a hand down his back.

Talon smiled, and he starting petting my hair. “I’ve been better.” He must’ve seen my concern because he immediately continued, “But I’m okay. Who wouldn’t be, here with you two?” He kissed me again, but this one was different. He was stiffer than before.

When he pulled away, I could see something in his eyes. He was upset, but he hid it well. If I’d just met him I wouldn’t have noticed at all.

Ty returned with a bottle of water. “Here you are.” He handed Talon the water and sat in the chair he was in before.

“Thank you.” Talon’s voice had the usual sensual edge, but I thought I could hear sadness underneath.

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I didn't have much time to think because Talon jumped me. He climbed on top of me and kissed me like he was starving for affection. I happily returned his kiss. My feelings for him made me want to make whatever was wrong go away.

His hands sneaked under my shirt, both tweaking a nipple. I moaned, arching into his touch. I reached down and unbuttoned his very tight pants. Talon exhaled and helped me remove his pants. He moved away from me for a second, to fish something out of his pocket.

A tinfoil square shined in the light. He smirked and reached for my pants. The fabric dug into my hips, he was pulling so hard. He ripped open the condom then gripped my cock. I hissed as he rolled the condom on. "No," he said, and shoved me back down and straddled my hips.

Talon was never this forward or this needy. I was right. He was very upset about something. "Jesus Christ." I threw my head back as my cock disappeared inside him. He was stretched, but only just. It was so tight, I think my eyes crossed.

He sat up and rode me like a horse; one leg slid off the sofa. I was a slave to his need, and I was happy to oblige. My gaze found Ty, his pants undone and shoved down. His cock was in his hand, stroking and tugging, while he watched us. He liked to watch, and it turned me the hell on.

Talon's cock jutted out, bouncing with his movements. He slammed down, and I was sure there would be bruises later. I wanted them to be there. His other clients would see what we did. He gripped the back of the sofa, using it as an anchor, and braced his other hand on his thigh.

I gripped his hips and pumped into him.

"J, yes. Oh, god." His head fell back and his moaning increased. "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Give it to me."

Give it I certainly did. Talon gripped his cock and pumped. In only a few strokes he came all over my shirt with a cry. His ass constricted around me. The pleasure built on itself until I couldn't hold it back anymore. I came buried in him. He grunted and kissed me again with as much passion as Ty. He had to have feelings for me to kiss me like this. It just wasn't possible; at least, that was my wishful thinking.

Talon lay on top of me with a satisfied sigh. "Sorry I jumped you." He kissed my neck and nibbled my ear.

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“Anytime.” My gaze found Ty, spent, looking at us with a pensive expression. I wanted to ask what he was thinking, but I knew now wasn’t the time.

Talon laughed. “Promise?” He peeked at Ty and winked. “Enjoy the show, Sir?”

Ty’s stomach muscles clenched. He loved it when either of us called him Sir. “I always do.”

Talon sighed and nuzzled into my neck. My hands slid down his back, he was tense, despite our coupling. I massaged him, drawing a low, ragged moan out of Talon. Ty must’ve understood what I was doing, because he got up and righted his pants. He kneeled on the sofa, straddling my legs, and helped me massage Talon.

Together we kneaded Talon’s tense muscles. He made the most content sounds and completely relaxed. I moved to his head and combed through his hair. Ty touched my hand. “I think he’s asleep,” he whispered.

I craned my neck to look at Talon. “I think you’re right. He must be tired.” My chest constricted and I looked away. He was probably tired from his other clients.

Ty got up while I kept petting Talon. He disappeared around the corner to the bedroom, probably going to clean up or something. I lay there with Talon, a little disappointed. We didn’t get to see him very much, or really talk to him, besides our time together, and he was asleep. I supposed I was being a little selfish; he was obviously exhausted.

Ty reappeared with a blanket. He covered Talon and tucked in the edges under me. “You do care about him.” I looked into Ty’s eyes.

He smiled and gestured to Talon. “I never said I didn’t.” Ty winked and sat back in the chair.

I frowned and thought about it. “That’s true.”

We lapsed into silence, and I kept touching Talon. I pretended he was with us, a part of our relationship, and was taking a nap from an awesome fucking. After this, all of us would make dinner together, then maybe watch some TV. We’d fight over what show to watch. I’d like a documentary, whereas Ty would fight for a sci-fi show or some sports thing. Talon would sneak in and find some superhero movie or western while Ty and I were fighting. After some TV, we’d all settle in for bed and get up and then do it all over again.

That was my little fantasy, and as long as he was asleep, I could fool myself.

Our life together played in my head—everything I wanted to do, all the fun the three of us would have, the fights, the making up, the jealousy. All of it I wanted for myself and for Ty, but what Ty said rang in my head. Were we really just a job to Talon? The thought constricted my chest. That was a reality I didn't want to face.

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“Mmmm.” Talon squirmed, jerking me awake. When had I fallen asleep? I blinked to clear my head. I focused on Talon; his face contorted in a frown. He whimpered and jerked in his sleep.

“What's wrong?” Ty still sat in the chair, watching us.

“I don't know.” I pulled the blanket tighter. “Bad dream, maybe?”

“Maybe,” he echoed.

Talon settled down but his body was tense again; I felt it under my hands. I hated how upset he seemed. If there was something I could do to help him, I would, but I had a feeling he wouldn't tell us.

Talon sighed and pushed himself up. He blinked at me, his gaze somewhere far away. His eyes looked scared—at least I thought it was fear. “Talon?”

His blue eyes lit up with recognition. “Did I fall asleep?”

I nodded with a smile.

“I'm so sorry!” He sat back on me. “I must've been tired.”

“You were,” Ty said. “I think you were out almost two hours.”

He was? It didn't seem that long to me. I felt like he had just dozed off, and Ty had put a blanket over him.

“What?!” Talon squeaked and jumped up. He twirled around, half-naked, looking for something. Talon snatched his pants and hopped into them. “I am so sorry, but I have to go.” He looked frantic. “Since I fell asleep, next month will be discounted.” That one statement from him crushed my hopes.

Ty caught my gaze, and I knew what he was thinking but I didn't want to hear it. “We understand,” Ty said and gave Talon a chaste kiss.

Talon turned to me and bent down for a kiss. “I really am sorry.” His eyes told me he didn't want to leave us, but I had a feeling that might be just me.



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“It’s okay, don’t worry about it.” I stood and righted my pants.

Ty and I escorted him to the door, where he gave us each a final kiss. He smiled, and I fought the urge to snatch his wrist. I wanted him to stay with us. I just wanted him.

“Bye, you two.” He winked and left with Ty smiling.

Ty shut the door and sighed. I stood there staring. “I didn’t want him to leave.”

“I didn’t either. Something wasn’t right.” Ty walked back over to the couch and sat with a huff.

“You noticed?” I wasn’t sure if I was surprised or not.

He sighed. “Yeah, he wasn’t his usual self. I mean, he was, but he wasn’t, you know?”

“It was forced.”

Ty nodded and picked up his wineglass. “Forced is a perfect description.” He downed the rest of his wine and just sat there.

I leaned against the door. “I didn’t want him to leave.”

“You said that already.”

“I know...” My head thunked against the door. Talon commenting about next month still echoed in my mind. I hated that he’d said that. I wanted him to take it back. I wanted... I wanted him to want Ty and me.

“Stop thinking about it,” Ty said and stood, coming over to me. “Stop dwelling on what he said.” Ty took my hand and kissed me. He pressed his body into mine. “Just stop.”

“I wish it was that easy.”

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## Cody “Talon” Gray

I pulled into one of the many parking spaces that made up the apartment complex's parking lot and just sat there. My grip on the wheel was so tight my fingers were going numb. The last thing I had wanted to do was leave Ty and J'Leigh. I loved being with them. They were always so kind and generous with me. Sometimes I forgot they were paying me to be around. It wasn't real, but I could imagine it was.

I envied them. I wanted what they had. That loving, easy relationship wasn't an easy thing to find. Would I ever have something like that sort of love? I wanted that before it was too late. I mean, I wasn't old, only twenty-seven, but I felt like I was missing out on life.

I was missing out on them.

Clients came and went over the years, but Ty and J'Leigh consistently hired me. I'd managed to keep a professional distance with all my clients save them. Somehow, those two managed to shatter the protective barrier I put around myself. I found myself falling for both of them. Hell, I loved them. It was stupid, I knew, but I couldn't help how I felt.

In a way, I was torturing myself by seeing them, but I couldn't stay away.

A door slamming from within the complex jarred me out of my thoughts. I sighed and got out of the car, heading for my shared apartment on the second floor. Going up the stairs felt like it took more energy than I had. My feet felt heavy and my legs weak. All I wanted to do was curl back up on the sofa with J'Leigh.

After our fucking, I was so exhausted, and J'Leigh was just comfy. I had no intention of falling asleep, but I guess I couldn't help it. They were so sweet to let me sleep on their dollar. I sighed happily, thinking about J'Leigh lying there for that long, and the warm blanket. They wouldn't have done that if they didn't care for me on some level, right?

The stairs finally ended, and I walked down the apartment hall to my place. My keys rattled in my grasp, but I wouldn't need them. The doorknob twisted and I walked inside.

My boyfriend Greg sat on the couch, flipping through the channels. I shouldn't call Greg my boyfriend, because in my mind he wasn't, not anymore.

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I told him several times to get out, but he never did. He just sat there and looked at me like I was the stupidest person he ever met. If I insisted enough, Greg would laugh and tell me no one else would want my used ass and to shut up. Every time he said something like that it hurt, but I also knew he was right. No one would want a glorified prostitute like me.

Greg held out his hand and waved his fingers. "Money?" I reached into my back pocket for the envelope Ty had given me and handed it over. Greg opened it and counted out the money. "Where's the rest?"

"What do you mean?" I was confused and had no idea what he was talking about.

Greg sighed and got up to face me. "You were over there for three hours. This," he waved the money, "is only enough for two. Where's the rest?" He spoke to me like I was a stupid toddler.

I shrugged and took a step back. "I fell asleep and they didn't wake me up."

Stars flashed across my vision and my cheek exploded in pain. I stumbled back, my hand on my face, and fought to keep my balance. "You fell asleep? You can't fall asleep on the job, *Talon*." He said my escort name like it was an insult.

I nodded and righted myself. "You're right, I'm sorry."

Greg scoffed and went into the kitchen for a bottle of water. "Go in the bedroom."

I didn't say anything and just did what he said. It was easiest for me. Him hitting me was a regular occurrence. Sometimes I had to remind him my livelihood, and his, depended on my body. He'd get mad, but then he'd back off for a while.

The bedroom was just off the living room, and I went inside. My gaze landed on the bed and my stomach dropped. My insides rolled and fought to not throw up. Greg's friend Joe sat on the end of the bed with a lecherous grin on his ugly face.

"You're mine, slut boy." Joe got up and marched to me. He grabbed my chin and turned my face to examine where Greg hit me. "Already been a bad boy." My skin crawled, and I fought not to shove him away.

Joe's grip on my chin left, only to immediately reappear on my upper arm. He used his size and dragged me around to the bed. A hard shove to the chest knocked the wind out of me, and I landed, sprawled out.

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I was dazed and a little disoriented. Joe hadn't hit me, but I was still feeling Greg's sucker punch. A hand on my bare thigh startled me. I crawled up the bed, fear chasing away any remnants of the punch. I was naked from the waist down, and I had no idea how that happened.

Joe settled between my legs. A sloppy kiss made me gag. "Nnnn." He fingered my hole and I squirmed. I didn't want this... I didn't choose Joe.

"Still nice and loose." He lined himself up, and I fought tears. I wasn't a whore like Greg said I was. I was completely different, wasn't I?

I lay there while Joe took me. This wasn't like Ty and J'Leigh. They were gentle with me, took care of me, and never made me feel like I was lesser than them. Above all else, I wanted them. I wanted sex with them and I didn't want this with Joe.

"Nnnn." I flinched away as Joe patted my abused cheek.

"Such a good boy." He left me, allowing the hollow coldness inside to spread throughout my body.

Why did I allow this to happen to me? I could've done something to prevent this. If I had never moved here from Texas and just stayed home, this definitely wouldn't have happened.

Tears slid down my cheeks to land on the pillow. I couldn't go home, not after this, but I wanted out.

I slid from bed to the floor on my hands and knees. My legs wouldn't work right, and I wasn't about to try and walk just to fall. I crawled to the bathroom and shut the door.

The hollow coldness took over my body. Rolling shivers kept me shaking uncontrollably. I crawled to the tub and managed to get inside. My original intention was to take a bath to get warm, but Greg's razor caught my attention.

I reached for it, my hand shaking so bad I missed it at first. The roughness of the handle stood out to me for some reason. It was one of the cheap brands.

An image of Ty and J'Leigh's bathroom flashed. They had razors but they were the expensive kind. Their things were always so organized and they had the best smelling soaps.

Tears dripped from my chin, landing on my thighs. I couldn't live like this anymore... I used to love what I did, I loved bringing others happiness and pleasure, but now I hated it because of Greg. He made me into something I never intended to be.

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The razor broke in my grip, the blade landed between my thighs shining from the bathroom light. Something sounded in the bathroom, almost echoing. I realized it was my own heavy breathing. If I died, no one would miss me.

Ty and J'Leigh would find someone else, and my parents still had my sister. Plus my mom had the stepson I had never met from her new husband.

The blade was in my hand; I had no recollection of picking it up, but there it was. Slicing pain left me refreshed and red droplets peppered the white porcelain of the tub. Another slice deepened the vertical wound. Oddly enough, I didn't feel it. I couldn't feel anything anymore, except the burning agony in my soul.

Blood seeped from the self-inflicted wound. It slithered towards the drain and disappeared into the depths of the pipes. I just couldn't take how Greg treated me like a whore anymore. I wasn't a whore at all, right? I mean, I built relationships with my clients. We spent time together, went on dates, and I learned about their families. For instance, I knew Ty's mom had passed away some years ago and his dad remarried a woman who had the same name as my mom. That was something, wasn't it? It had to be, because I wasn't some useless hooker. There was substance there...

But what was substance? I had no idea what a healthy relationship looked like. Ty and J'Leigh were my first true example. My mom and dad had fought like animals, until they finally divorced when I was nineteen. I was both relieved and sad when it happened. She had married a man named Josiah two years ago. Come to think of it, that was Ty's dad's name. Huh, how weird was that? His dad's name was the same as the man my mom married and his dad married a woman with the same name as my mom. Why hadn't I noticed that before?

My vision swam, and the red serpent slithering down the drain multiplied. I swayed a little and melted into the tub. I thought my head thunked against the porcelain but I wasn't sure.

Everything had a sense of numbness to it. A softness that I couldn't quite understand, it made everything okay. I thought I heard someone shouting, but a gentle ringing drowned other sounds out.

I was floating, but I wasn't sure if it was because I was dying or someone was carrying me. Either way, I was content with what was happening. For the first time, I felt something close to freedom. I wasn't Greg's toy to pass around, at least not right now. Now I was free and I could be with Ty and J'Leigh, even if it was just my imagination.

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They were with me in a park. Ty and J'Leigh were bickering over the parking space. It was silly, since we had already parked. Who cared if one was closer to the entrance of the park? The whole point in going was to get some exercise, wasn't it?

I walked hand in hand with J'Leigh into the park and just shook my head at them. Ty jogged a step ahead and began to walk backwards, all the while still arguing with J'Leigh.

Rolling my eyes, I decided to ignore them and watched the children on the playground instead. A little girl in her pigtails ran across the sandpit, carrying a little plastic pail and shovel. She plopped down and starting playing.

I stopped, J'Leigh's hand tugged mine, and he stopped too. They were still arguing.

"How do you guys feel about kids?" I asked, fully expecting for them to not hear me. Instead, my question was met with silence.

If I were concerned I would've faced them, but first off, I wasn't, and second, I didn't want to stop watching the smiling faces of all the children as they played.

I heard Ty clear his throat. A soft breeze ruffled my hair and I took a deep breath. "Well," Ty began, but paused a little too long before continuing, "I know I haven't really thought about it."

J'Leigh squeezed my hand. "I always wanted them," he confessed.

"So have I." It seemed silly to have been together this long and never talked about kids.

I felt Ty behind me; I knew it was him, because he was wearing a softer jacket than J'Leigh was. "I'm open to the idea." He kissed my neck and the emotion of happiness made me feel all floaty.

A couple stared at us from a few feet away. People always looked at us weird, but I was used to it by now. The only problem I had was the floating wouldn't go away. It pulled me away from them.

Panic took my breath. I clawed at J'Leigh's hand, trying to keep myself grounded, but it wasn't working. They only looked at me with such sweet smiles, while something was taking me away from them. "Please!" My nails dug into J'Leigh's hand, but he didn't bleed. "Help me!" They only smiled, and J'Leigh let go.

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Ty and J'Leigh stood together while I floated away from them. Tears streamed down my face; I didn't want to leave them. I didn't want to go...

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Blinking my eyes open wasn't an easy task. They felt heavy and puffy, like I'd been crying. Harsh light washed everything in a slight hue of white, until my vision focused. I was in a hospital from the looks of it. The bed was inclined slightly up.

I hated hospitals.

What happened, and how did I get here? I wanted to be back in the park with Ty and J'Leigh, even if it wasn't real. How pathetic was that?

My nose itched. I went to scratch it, but something stopped me. "What the...?" Restraints kept me tied to the bed. A bandage, wrapped tight around my wrist under the restraint cuff, was itchy. It was only now the slice I had made started burning. Blood dripped down an IV line and into the back of my hand.

I sighed and let my head fall back. The ceiling wasn't interesting at all, but it was all I had, since the TV was off.

Swallowing, I fought tears. I wasn't going to cry, not now. Pain permeated from my cheek where Greg had hit me. It was a rolling throb that pulsed with my heartbeat.

Why did I put up with him? I could've just left whenever I wanted... There was no way I could go back to him when I got out of here. Things would just go back to the way they were, and I couldn't handle that.

Jesus, I had tried to kill myself. The only thing Greg ever did right for me was bringing me here. At least, I thought it was right. I didn't know what to think anymore...

Heavy footfalls stopped; someone's heavy breathing was loud, but I ignored whoever it was. I wanted my fantasy park date back, but I had no idea how to get there.

"Talon?"

My gaze snapped up to see J'Leigh in the door to my room. He was leaning on the frame, panting and looking at me. Ty skidded to a stop a second later.

They were here, but why? "I..." Both of them had a look on their face, but I wasn't sure what it meant. The two of them couldn't care enough about me to be here.

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My head started hurting and tears streaked my face. Why would they show up like this? How did they know? The restraints pulled at my arms, and the bandage on my wrist tugged at what I assumed to be stitches underneath. It hurt, damn did it hurt. The burning, ripping sensation clawed my arm all the way up to my elbow, but I couldn't stop thrashing. I had to hide, get away, throw a tantrum—something, anything—but be in this bed.

“Hey, we're here.” Ty's voice was soothing, and I hated it. I didn't want to be soothed or coddled, I wanted to lash out, to hurt something, to die...

Another body on my other side pressed me against Ty. I knew it was J'Leigh, but I didn't want them to touch or comfort me. “Don't touch me!” Hands smoothed over me. Bodies pressed into mine. Voices tried to soothe me. “Stop...” I told them to stop, but my fists were clenched at the hems of their shirts.

I was crying so hard I couldn't breathe. They were saying things, but I couldn't process any of it. I hid against one of them, I didn't know which, and just cried. I couldn't do anything else, and I certainly couldn't process what happened tonight or why they were here...

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## Ty Kesity

Talon sobbed against J'Leigh. He shook and his body spasmed, but he never pulled away from us.

My heart broke for him. I wanted to fix it, but I had no idea how. Neither of us understood what exactly had happened.

Luckily, Talon was dropped off at J'Leigh's hospital. The only reason Nurse Spencer called us was because she knew J'Leigh. She said she recognized their John Doe from a photo J'Leigh had shown her of us out to dinner. She wouldn't tell us what was wrong, just that we should come right away. On the way over here, we thought the worst.

The drive was absolute torture. I must've broken every speed limit on the way over, and ran a light or two, but getting to Talon took priority. When we arrived, Nurse Spencer told us where his room was. J'Leigh got there first, and from his expression, I thought the worst, until I saw Talon sitting up in bed for myself.

Going to him when Talon was upset felt like the most natural thing in the world. It bothered me, since I knew he didn't care for or want us like that. We were a job to him, and I had to remember that.

Talon quieted down. His chest was still heaving, but he was calmer than before. He whimpered and snuggled into J'Leigh. "It's just me," I told him and scooted closer. "I'm here." Talon quieted down a little more, and J'Leigh caught my gaze.

Sadness filled his green eyes. His gaze flicked to Talon, and I shook my head. I knew this was bad. The restraints were my first clue.

I started petting Talon like J'Leigh did before on the sofa. He did too, and after only a few minutes Talon took deep, even breaths. He was asleep, but I couldn't stop touching him.

I hated how much I cared about him. We were just clients for him, I knew that, but I couldn't help how I felt. It was exhausting having to remind myself and J'Leigh about him all the time. The look J'Leigh gave me every time I did, hurt me just as much as it did him.

Worse still, I was pulverizing my own feelings as well. I swallowed and hid against Talon's neck, inhaling a scent that was uniquely him. Something was

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off, probably the clinging scent of being in a hospital. I never understood it, but it was fact.

“He doesn’t have anyone here,” J’Leigh said, startling me.

I looked at him. His gaze held such sadness that I couldn’t bring myself to remind him we didn’t mean anything to Talon, not the way we wanted, at least. “I know...”

J’Leigh skimmed his hand across Talon to my arm. “He needs us, Ty.”

“We’re just—”

“A job to him, I know.” J’Leigh looked away toward the door. His jaw clenched and his face tensed. “But that doesn’t matter. Right now, he needs someone; he needs us.” He looked at me with such conviction, I was chastised into silence.

I wasn’t about to argue with him; I couldn’t. J’Leigh was right. Talon needed us. I knew he would just use us, and I would be left picking up the pieces of J’Leigh’s heart, while trying to keep my own together, but I’d cross that bridge when I came to it. I also knew I couldn’t hold Talon responsible for whatever happened to us emotionally. He never gave any indication that we were more than clients to him.

I nodded in resignation. “You’re right, he does.”

It was our own stupid faults we fell in love with him, and we would pay the price.

**TO BE CONTINUED**

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## Author Bio

*Lor is a snarky, over-the-top genderfluid polyamorous demipansexual with dark hair and pink highlights, although sometimes the color varies. She is almost constantly fighting with her muse, Animus, or refereeing the fights between Animus and Epicene, her other muse. Lor started reading very questionable M/M fanfiction at a very young age in the closet. Literally. Though that didn't stop her from getting caught once or twice. This early love of things M/M sparked her writing career. Without a doubt, her Christian high school English teacher Mrs. B didn't expect Lor to fall into the M/M genre. Mrs. B did know Lor would be a writer someday because when the class had a minimum, Lor had a maximum. It truly was unfair.*

*Besides writing, Lor may also be found with one of her two horses, the Chihuahua or her cat. Any un-caught typos are courtesy of the cat, who shoves Lor's things out of the way when it's her time for cuddles or playtime... Which is about every ten minutes.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# WRECKING BALL

By Elin Austen

## Photo Description

Two men lay entwined on a bed in a hotel room, newspapers tossed aside as they nuzzle and hold each other. Both men have dark hair, and one could be Native American. They are bare-chested and covered by blankets from the waist down.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*We've been holed up in this room for days, avoiding the real world. Three days of sex, tears, and laughter; fueled by longing and the hollow need I've felt since he'd walked away the first time. I never thought he'd actually come back to me, choose me over everything else he had waiting for him. Now as I absorb the feel of his heat and weight behind me, I think of the few headlines I'd managed to read before he tossed the papers on the bed and made me forget all about what was waiting for us outside of this hotel room. My breath hitches and I squeeze my eyelids shut, wishing I could go back to sleep. But I know reality will come knocking soon. Was he serious when he said he was choosing me? Choosing us? A shiver of doubt races up my spine. I feel his arms suddenly tighten and his warm body stretches behind me. Time to face the real world...*

*Wish List: HEA/HFN, I do love some angst, drama!*

Sincerely,

~E~

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** Utah, Mormon, farmer, lawyer, in the closet, same-sex marriage, teen shelter

**Word Count:** 21,477

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# **WRECKING BALL**

**By Elin Austen**

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## Chapter One

*April 2010*

“Hang on, Grandpa. Please, just hang on,” whispered Race as he gripped the old man’s hand. A volunteer in a pink smock gently took his arm and led him to the waiting room while the paramedics rushed his grandfather through the ER. Race perched on the end of a hard chair, swallowing frequently to keep his churning gut from erupting. His heart pounding in his ears, he finally bowed his head and silently prayed to Heavenly Father for the life of Grandpa Ace. A long fifteen minutes later, Race was led back to the ER bay where his grandfather lay on a wheeled hospital bed hooked up to tubes and a breathing mask. Race stood close to the bed and looked down at the pale face and closed eyes. *When did Grandpa get so small?*

“He’s had a stroke,” the doctor announced quietly. “We have him scheduled for a CT scan in a few minutes to determine the type of stroke and ascertain the extent of the damage. His heart rate is strong and that is a very good sign that he will survive this episode, but I can’t tell you yet how much his cognitive functions or his mobility will be impaired.” Race blinked back tears as an orderly stepped into the bay and maneuvered the bed out to the hall and pushed it towards the double doors at the end. “Why don’t you get some coffee while you wait? It will be at least an hour, and possibly more if a procedure is needed. Give the nurse your cell phone number and wait in the cafeteria. Someone will call you when we know more,” the doctor told him as he made notes on a chart and moved to the next bay.

Race nursed his second cup of tea as he slouched in the almost-empty cafeteria. It was close to midnight when Grandpa had been brought in, and the hospital had that “settled for the night” feel. A few tired-looking staff in wrinkled scrubs sat at one end, murmuring privately. Race glanced again at the young man sitting by himself next to the glass wall, staring out at the atrium and occasionally sipping from a cup of water or jotting something in a notebook. His faded jeans were torn and dirty, and blood spattered the front of his tee shirt. A stuffed backpack sat on the floor by his tattered sneakers. Race could guess what the kid’s story was. He looked very much as Race had five years ago after being on the street for a month; before Grandpa found him and brought him back to the Blue Turkey Farm to stay for good. Race thought again of the old man somewhere in the hospital and felt a squirt of acid hit his

stomach. He swallowed hard and checked his phone once more to make sure it was on.

Race felt he was being watched. Without raising his head, Race peered at the kid out of the corner of his eye. Sure enough, the kid was staring straight at him. Truth time. Race quickly looked up and into the kid's sapphire blue eyes, pinning him with his gaze. The kid gave a startled jump, but held Race's appraising look long enough for Race to know. Gay. Just like Race. Race tilted his head in a slight nod, and the kid blushed and looked down at his notes.

Race had zero interest in hooking up right now, with Grandpa seriously ill, and his own plans now in question. But he did wonder if he was right about the kid... and if the kid needed help.

He shuddered as he remembered the shame and the fear and the stark loss felt by his fifteen year old self as he faced life without a family or a home. He took a deep breath and walked over to the kid's table.

"Looks like you've had a rough time." Race nodded at the blood on the kid's shirt.

"Uh... yeah."

"Mind if I sit?"

The kid shrugged. Race stood until the kid muttered, "Go ahead." Race sat and stuck out his hand.

"I'm Race Blue."

"Tanner," the kid responded and briefly touched his palm in a quick shake.

Race looked him over. Tanner had tiny sutures in his lip, a slowly blackening eye, and scrapes on his face and arms. He held himself carefully, as though any movement hurt. His nose was red and swollen. "You look like I did a few years ago, after some men tried to make me do something I didn't want to do."

Tanner sucked in a surprised breath and blinked. Race waited patiently for the kid to own up to whatever had happened. Or not.

"I was mugged," he finally mumbled, looking down at his notes.

A universal favorite for closeted gays after an attack, Race mused. He looked down at the notebook and saw names with towns in an ordered list, some crossed out and others with a question mark next to it. Race frowned and



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looked at him closer. Tanner had clean, dark brown hair with a recent trim and smelled like soap under that sharp, antiseptic odor. He had a slight build and was on the thin side, but didn't look like he had been eating out of a dumpster. *So, not on the streets yet but perhaps about to be.*

“Do you have a place to stay?” he asked gently. “I think you're too young to be able to stay in the adult shelter. You need a parent to sign you in at the family shelter, and you probably already noticed there are no youth shelters in this county. There are laws against people harboring runaways, which juveniles are considered even if they got kicked out of their home. Makes it hard for a homeless teen to find a safe place to sleep at night,” Race continued. “There's a camp out in the canyon if you prefer camping to sleeping in an alley or the park at night.”

Tanner's eyes narrowed and he looked at Race, assessing. He cleared his throat. “I don't need a place to stay, thank you.”

Race's phone buzzed. He made a snap decision. “My grandfather took me in after my stepfather threw me out for liking boys. I was... am... safe there. He's taken in more boys since then. They stay long enough to get on their feet and decide what to do next. Let me know if you change your mind. No drugs allowed.” Race scribbled his phone number on the notes and got up, turning his back on Tanner as he opened his phone to hear about Grandpa.

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Race sat next to Grandpa's bed in the ICU, lightly holding the hand not sporting the small blood pressure monitor on a finger. The old man had fresh bandages on his neck, where the surgeon had cut to thread a probe up into a blood vessel and dissolve the clot that was shutting off life-giving oxygen to Grandpa's brain cells. Race had kept up a quiet monologue since he got to the room, talking about the orchards and outlining the plans for the upcoming summer cherry harvest and wondering if he should hire someone to run the stall at the farmer's market. Did Grandpa think Race should make cobbler again this year? It was a solid money-maker and he honored his late grandmother every time he made it from her recipe. Race's mouth was dry from the constant chatter, but it calmed him and the doctor had told him earlier that aural stimulation could aid in brain recovery. That was many hours ago and Grandpa had not opened his eyes, still sedated. Race let his monologue wind to a stop and laid his head on the bed, closing his eyes, thinking he could put off sleeping if he just rested his eyes for a short time.

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“You’re exhausted,” said a voice from the doorway. Race looked up with bleary eyes. “I brought you some hot tea,” Tanner told him, holding out a cup. Race slowly got to his feet and reached for the cup, taking several sips of the steaming liquid.

“Thank you.” Race motioned him into the room. “Still here?” he asked Tanner.

“I have nowhere else I need to be,” Tanner admitted. He cleared his throat. “I heard you mention needing help at the... uh... orchard. I can assist, in trade for room and board. If the offer is still open,” Tanner trailed off with a tentative smile at Race.

Why the hell not? He had already offered the kid a safe place to stay and if he was willing to work for his keep, even better. And Race knew he would be busy doing Grandpa’s work in addition to his own. “Sure.” He smiled tiredly at Tanner.

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## Chapter Two

“Son of a bitch!!” Race scrolled again through yet another spreadsheet of the Blue Turkey Farm finances, trying to figure out how to pay for the extended care and therapy Grandpa needed in time for his release from the rehab center in Provo. After four weeks, he was finally coming home and the house needed to be made wheelchair-accessible, so Race and Tanner had rearranged the first-floor rooms, turning the spacious office into Grandpa’s new bedroom. Race and his friend Samuel had spent a day opening a wall into the hall bathroom to make an en-suite. They had ripped up the worn carpet in the common areas of the house and uncovered original hardwood floors. He sat behind the handmade desk that was now in the living room, with piles of file folders hastily stacked after the move. The kitchen door slammed and Race looked up in time to see Tanner edge his way through the cluttered living room with a large laundry basket. Tanner wore a tee shirt and jeans. His clothes had grown tighter in the weeks he had been at the farm. Working every day in the orchard had put some muscle on his arms and shoulders, and eating Race’s fine meals had filled out the rest of him. Lustrous, chestnut hair curled around his ears.

“Hey.” Tanner grinned, flipping hair out of his eyes. He had an easy smile once his split lip healed.

Despite his current frustration, Race’s mouth lifted in an unconscious smile. He leaned back and stretched, slightly more cheerful. From the first day, Tanner had quickly found ways to be useful. He didn’t say much about his previous life, and Race respected that. Everyone had their own way of dealing with a familial kick in the teeth. He and Grandpa always ran the risk that one of the boys they helped would rob them or worse, but Grandpa insisted that treating them as a welcome family member in their home would do much to counteract the horrible stigma etched onto their souls by families who had discarded their children simply for being gay.

“Laundry’s done and the pickers are under contract,” Tanner announced with a cool indifference, as though one task was as simple as the other.

“How...”

“Easy. I told them we had another harvester bidding on the work, one who maintained his own insurance and included transport to the shipping center.” Tanner pulled folded papers from his back pocket and dropped them on the

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desk. "He reduced his original bid and struck through some of the more risky clauses. I don't understand why your grandfather kept doing business with that group. It was costing him money and exposing him to some serious liability."

Race squinted, puzzled at Tanner's adept answer and wondering how he came by such confident knowledge. "I dunno. Family friend, maybe. My mother probably set up the original contract and Grandpa never renegotiated it. She's still the farm's bookkeeper, even though she doesn't come out here much anymore." Race gestured at the computer screen in front of him, irritated. "I don't know if we have enough money for Grandpa or not. The banking is done electronically, but I can't follow these accounts and I really don't want to call my mother." He let out a defeated sigh and then looked at Tanner again. "Hungry?"

"Starving," replied Tanner, absently brushing his hand over his abdomen. Race watched and suddenly felt hotter as he imagined that hand being his own, resting against skin-warmed cotton stretched over Tanner's smooth muscles. He stood abruptly and headed for the kitchen. "I'll set dinner out. Fifteen minutes alright?"

"Sounds good. I just need a quick shower," Tanner answered as he grabbed the laundry basket and started towards his room.

Thoughts of steamy water dripping down that trim back and running between those taut butt cheeks invaded Race's mind. Other thoughts of a similar nature had lately become more frequent. "Stop it," Race chided himself, appalled at his misbehaving libido. He would never touch an underage boy and he couldn't understand where these wrong feelings were coming from. "Not a pervert," he scolded himself again as he now did several times a day. Race's fleeting good mood evaporated as he realized that putting some distance between himself and Tanner had become a necessity. He closed his eyes, unhappily resigning himself to spending more time away from him, and was unsettled at the sudden sense of loss.

"I don't know if I can help, but I'd like to try," Tanner offered cheerfully as he buttered another freshly baked yeast roll. "I was president of my school's accounting club, and I helped in my father's office several summers."

"Then you know more than me. Thanks for the help. I'll get the cobbler." Race pulled his eyes away from the sight of Tanner's lips, glistening with melted butter. He hoped Tanner hadn't noticed how his face suddenly flushed red when the thought that butter would make an excellent emergency lube

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flashed through his mind. Jeez. He needed a hookup. Maybe that male nurse he had met while Grandpa was in the hospital was up for some mutual fun. He swallowed the last of his homebrewed peach beer and served their dessert. Race avoided looking at Tanner as they both inhaled the fresh cherry cobbler, taking a moment to savor the sweet vanilla and nectar reduction. "I'm going out for a few hours tonight... to see some friends. You gonna be okay?" he asked cautiously, hoping Tanner wouldn't want to come along.

"Yeah, kinda tired." He yawned. "Have fun tonight."

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Race quietly closed the door as he entered the dark kitchen, making an effort not to wake Tanner at this late, or rather very early, hour. He felt relaxed for the first time in weeks. Race couldn't believe how much stress he had been under until its absence left him almost floating. Steven had taken good care of him, torturously sucking him off with mind-blowing finesse and then fucking him until he came a second time. He appreciated the pleasure Steven could bring him, but he was already a fading memory. Steven's masterful technique could not erase the potent feelings Race felt himself developing for Tanner. Race shuffled past the living room and stopped short. Tanner was at the desk, muttering to himself as he clicked through files on the laptop with impressive speed, his eyes focused on the screen. Race thought he somehow seemed older, and realized it was because Tanner had not shaved recently and his usually smooth face sported the beginnings of a beard. Race coughed lightly and Tanner looked up, surprised.

"You didn't have to do that tonight, Tanner. I thought you were going to bed early."

Tanner stood up and stretched, exposing a dark trail of hair disappearing into the sleep shorts hanging low on his hips. Race unexpectedly felt his cock stir.

"I thought I'd just take a quick look to see how much effort this would be, but I kept looking deeper into all the accounts I could find and I couldn't stop." He picked up a notepad and consulted it before he sighed and looked up at Race. "The farm has adequate funds coming in throughout the year, but some of these expenditures don't make sense. And, uh, the other employees are paid very well for laborers. Also, it looks like your grandfather's tithe is computed on gross income of the farm rather than on net income paid to him. If you change it to ten percent of just his net income and let the other employees pay

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their own tithe, I believe you will have more than enough for his extra care. Would your grandfather consent to that?"

"Tithe?"

"Yes. To the LDS church."

"Grandpa Ace doesn't belong to the church anymore. Why would he pay a tithe?" Race rubbed his face.

"To maintain a temple recommend, for one. That would allow him to participate in sacraments at the temple," Tanner explained, brows furrowed.

"That doesn't make sense. Grandpa didn't even attend my mother's temple wedding to my stepfather." Race grinned. "She was mad for a long time. I was only five, but I remember the fight she and Grandpa had, and she mentioned it many times in the years I lived with her and my stepfather."

"Race, this money is definitely being automatically deposited to a LDS church account. I know, because I helped my father with the ward accounts when he was a bishop."

"I'll ask Grandpa. He seems lucid often enough now." Race yawned. "Also... what employees? Even I don't get a salary. Grandpa gave me access to the household account and I take what I need from it."

Tanner tapped his pencil against the notepad, thinking. He motioned to the sofa and they both sat down. Race's pulse jumped when his hand brushed Tanner's partially bared thigh. He pointed to several names with a dollar total next to it. "Do you recognize these employee names?"

A scented tendril of Tanner's lime shampoo hit Race's nose. Race idly wondered if Tanner could smell the coconut oil he'd had Steven use for lube, and his groin tightened at the thought of Tanner smelling sex on him. Race swallowed and peered at the list. "Sure. That's my mother and my three brothers. Half brothers," he corrected himself. "Why?"

"They've been paid a salary for the past four years. If your mother is the bookkeeper for the farm, then I can see how she would get a salary, but you told me the first week I was here that there are no permanent employees. And her salary is not within industry standards for a part-time bookkeeper."

"Mom won't let my brothers come here since she found out I live here. I have no idea why they're getting paid out of farm income."

"Hmm. Maybe he's putting money towards their missions," Tanner speculated.

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Race closed his eyes. “Yet another question for Grandpa. Anything else?”

“I was curious about some of these items that are being depreciated. If I understood what they are, I could possibly redefine the basis and get your grandfather more of a tax deduction. But that can wait until tomorrow. You look tired.”

Race opened one eye. “So do you. Let’s hit the sack.”

“Uh...” Tanner stuttered. Race smiled to himself.

“Goodnight Tanner,” Race said softly, and left for his own room. He hoped he would sleep soundly for the rest of the night and not dream about Tanner.

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## Chapter Three

“Race? You in there?” Tanner called from outside the dilapidated cannery.

“Fuck!” Race swore creatively when his head hit the side of the fermenter. The blasted thing was just a large cooker with a temperature control, but that was exactly what he needed for his wort.

He got to his feet and headed towards the door, wiping sweat off of his face with his discarded tee shirt. The cannery was hot as blazes in the summer and currently smelled strongly of mash. Race stepped outside and shut his eyes against the bright sunlight. He heard a small gasp and squinted in that direction. Tanner was looking him up and down, and seemed to like what he saw. Race wore boots, faded comfortable jeans that hung low on his hips, and sweat on his chest... where Tanner was now staring. Race couldn't resist. He flexed his abs and pecs, and Race's lips twitched when Tanner groaned. Race had become aware over the past weeks that his attraction to Tanner was not one-sided. Tanner now smiled shyly and seemed to glow when Race looked his way. If the attraction *was* mutual Tanner had not acted on it, thank Heavenly Father. Race didn't think he could resist if the dark-haired, blue-eyed boy came on to him.

Race had watched unseen and noticed how kind Tanner was towards Grandpa when they were working to straighten out the farm's accounts, and Grandpa always managed his half-smile when Tanner was around. Race felt better about leaving Grandpa alone with Tanner, and avoiding the house when Tanner was there, but it didn't seem to lessen the connection he felt with the boy.

“Er... what is this place?” Tanner asked, trying to divert attention from his reaction.

“This glorified shack was the famous Blue Turkey Farm Cannery,” Race answered. “It started life as a barn when the farm was first settled in the last century, but was retrofitted with canning equipment when the fruit trees started producing in huge amounts. The Blue Turkey Farm's own orchard's jams and home-canned peaches and cherries were famous statewide.”

Tanner peered into the dark interior. “What's it used for now?”

“I brew beer. Welcome to the Blue Turkey Farm Microbrewery,” Race said proudly. “Very micro,” he added. “Grandpa stopped the canning operation decades ago when Grandma died. I was able to convert the old cookers to a



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mash tun, copper and fermenter a year ago when home brewing became legal in Utah. There's room to store the recycled wine casks I use for kegs. Adds flavor during aging." Race stood in the quiet morning sunlight and added "As soon as I'm happy with my yield and do the paperwork, I can start to sell my brew, maybe expand if I can navigate my way through all the Utah liquor laws." Race grew pensive. "At least, that was my plan before Grandpa got sick. I'll have to stay close to home now."

Tanner tilted his head. "What other plans did you have? College? Stay here and run the farm?" he asked curiously.

"I was going to stay on the farm as long as Grandpa needed me, and before he got sick I had some freedom, since there wasn't any reason for me to be here every day. The fields are rented quite profitably to an organic startup and to several weekend farmers. The fruit orchards don't require daily attention except around the harvest, and the only animals left on the farm property are the wild blue turkeys, and they live in the woods. I take a few courses at the community college when I have time, but I haven't decided where I want to go with that. I work construction part time and I have my heirloom garden," Race said. "Let me show you something."

Race motioned for Tanner to follow him, resisting the urge to reach for him and walk hand-in-hand. "I love this part of the farm. It's the original land grant. The orchards were acquired later. The old homestead is up this trail." Race led Tanner on a short path to a flat meadow. A one-story stone cottage stood surrounded by summer flowers in every shade of blue. Race's step quickened as he headed for the door and waited for Tanner to follow him into the home. He watched Tanner take in the soft golden glow of the hardwood floors, and the thought of Tanner stretched out naked on a quilt on that floor in front of a fire slid into his mind. Race clenched his fists until his nails dug into his skin.

"The floors were my winter project a year ago. We replaced several of the boards, then sanded and varnished and polished. The boys staying with us that winter helped." He waved his hand at the hearth. "Every season I do more. We've fixed the roof, cleaned the chimney out, updated the wiring, sealed the walls, and replaced windows. The old place is snug and weatherproof now." Race showed him a slate-floored corner that served as the kitchen. "Eventually I'll replace the old appliances and update the plumbing so I can have a modern kitchen. Need to keep my beer cold." He grinned. "The bathroom needs work but at least we don't have to use an outhouse. That sucks in winter," he added. Race took a deep breath. "No one has lived in this place for over sixty years,

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and I had planned to move in here eventually, to give myself some privacy for, ah, dates and stuff, but now I'll need to stay with Grandpa at the main house. I owe him so much." Race smiled sadly. "I don't think we can take in lost gay boys anymore. Grandpa was the guiding force behind that."

"Your grandfather is one of the finest men I know," Tanner declared. "Given his illness, perhaps he'll need to go into a long-term care facility. Will you stay at the farm then?" Tanner's voice became a barely noticeable whisper. "What will you do when the inevitable happens?"

"My mother is his only child, so she'll inherit and probably sell the property and business, and that of course will leave me homeless." Race sighed. "I try not to think about it."

"You need to start thinking about it, Race," Tanner said gently. "He is frail and will only get worse. You should have a plan in place."

"Yeah, I know. By the way, why'd you come looking for me?"

"Your grandfather's lawyer, Seth, is at the house with him now. He wants you there."

"Any idea why?"

"Your mother called. She's on her way out to the farm."

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## Chapter Four

“You haven’t had any problems with the farm budget, have you?” demanded a shrill voice. “The bills are paid on time and the farm still turns a profit, thanks to my money management skills.”

Another voice calmly responded. “The farm turns a profit because the land has been free of a mortgage or any other encumbrance for over thirty years. In addition, your father divested the farm of any activities that required his daily presence after his wife died, and that allowed him to continue teaching high school for many years. His retirement benefits are what pay his daily expenses, not the farm income.”

Race and Tanner stood inside the kitchen and listened to the argument between Race’s mother and the lawyer. “I need to be here in case Seth needs some assistance explaining the details of the new banking structure we put in place. Are you coming in?” Tanner murmured.

“No.”

Tanner gave a sympathetic squeeze to Race’s shoulder and quietly entered the living room. Race began packing supplies for several nights away from the house, not knowing how long his mother planned to visit. He grabbed all the bottles of home brew and a plastic tub of his leftover beef bourguignon and put them into an insulated carry bag. He mentally planned his menu and added items as he thought of them. He checked the laundry room for any clean clothing and lucked out with a dryer full of his clothing. He gathered what he needed. Race knew when his mother noticed Tanner.

“Who are you?” she challenged.

“Good afternoon ma’am. I’m Tanner Boileau. I audited your father’s accounts and provided recommendations for possible courses of action to his attorney,” he stated with quiet authority.

Race felt a shimmer of attraction curl in his belly. Tanner sounded... powerful. Had his voice changed, gotten deeper? Race couldn’t quite pinpoint what was different. And the name Boileau got his attention as well. Wasn’t that the name of the family his stepfather had followed in the news, back when Race still lived with him? Both sides of the Boileau family could trace its roots back to two primary members of Brigham Young’s original settlers, and both Utah

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history and the LDS church hierarchy were full of mentions of the prominent family.

“There was no need for an audit. You could have just asked me whatever you wanted know,” she huffed.

“My fiduciary responsibility is to my client. I am duty bound to be thorough and to act on what I find. Your father instructed me to call Seth.”

“Client? You’re nothing but a high school kid. How old are you, sixteen?” she scoffed.

“I am twenty one and an honors graduate of the BYU Marriott School of Management. I have the necessary professional licenses to allow your father to contract for my services. Seth can provide my vitae to your lawyer if requested.”

Race dropped into a chair, his mouth hanging open in surprise. *Tanner was twenty one? The same age as Race. A BYU graduate of Marriott? What the hell were vitae?* The voices became a background murmur as he processed the astounding news. A swirl of emotions crashed through him; relief that he wasn't a pervert after all, followed quickly by betrayal. Tanner had misled him. What the hell was he, anyway? Certainly not a homeless kid in need of a safe place to sleep. Race felt the burn of anger rising in him. He grabbed his supplies and took off out of the house before his temper detonated.

Race seethed during the drive out to the homestead, and his anger continued unabated while he checked the current batch of mash in the cannery and banged on the fermenter again. He wanted to be alone to process his emotions and the cottage was just what he needed. He usually camped there during his mother's annual visit to her father, or when his grandfather needed more room at the main house for lost boys. He briefly worried about Grandpa, then concluded Tanner could bloody well stay at the house with him tonight, and possibly the next. He spent the remainder of the afternoon first harvesting ripe tomatoes from his garden and then working on the cottage bathroom. His friend Samuel frequently hired him when he needed help with his construction business, but there was never enough steady work to call it a job. It did give him access to greatly reduced building material, and he took advantage of it to refurbish the cottage. The final layout would have two bedrooms with a bathroom between them.

Tonight he wanted to finish the wet area. It had already been plumbed out and framed with cement-based backerboard. It would be a large walk-in

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shower, big enough for two big men to get active in when it was complete. Race had calmed down by now and his thoughts had wandered to what could now happen with the very legal Tanner. He grinned as he bonded tile to the shelf that was at just the right height for...

“What the fuck?” he muttered as a muted rumbling caught his attention. He slapped the lid back onto the glue bucket and stepped to the door of the cottage. Tanner shut the ATV off and looked at him, smiling nervously. Race turned and wordlessly walked back into the cottage before Tanner could see his flushed face. He was washing his trembling hands when Tanner appeared. Race felt his pulse echoing in his ears. He had felt that brief rush of anticipation before whenever he met someone new for a hookup, but this was so much more. Race was scared, and he realized in a flash that it was because Tanner could hurt him. He could wound his heart, step on it, even crush it and Race would still want him like there was no other. This feeling was so new to Race he didn't quite know what to do about it. He carefully relaxed his face before he turned to look at Tanner.

“I expect you have some questions for me. Ask me anything,” Tanner offered, standing tall and sure, waiting for Race to make the next move.

“Is what you told my mother the truth? You're twenty-one and already a college graduate?”

“Yes. I took classes year-round at BYU and avoided going on a mission, much to my family's disapproval. I graduated at the end of April.”

All the feelings Race felt for Tanner boiled to the surface and he couldn't help himself. He stepped close and ran a finger across Tanner's lip. “That's around the time I saw you at the hospital in Provo. You looked like a homeless kid.”

Tanner closed his eyes at Race's gentle touch. “You assumed. I was trying to decide where to go after being in student housing for the last three years. I had no desire to return to my parents' home. There was no way to hide my injuries and my father would have questioned me endlessly. I would have had to admit some things that I... that I'm not willing to tell them yet.”

“They don't know you're gay.” Race realized as he placed his hands lightly on either side of Tanner's head, rubbing his thumbs over his temples.

Tanner breathed deeply, and Race saw the struggle within. “They don't know. They can never know what a sinner I am,” he said unhappily. “It would hurt them so much, and I can't do that to them.”

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Race pulled Tanner into his arms and gently stroked his back. *That was so like Tanner, always thinking of others before his own happiness.* Race wondered how long Tanner could bury a part of himself so that he wouldn't cause distress for his family. Race's own silver gray eyes softly searched Tanner's blue ones, hoping that Tanner could see acceptance in his gaze. He slowly leaned in, Tanner's breath tickling his face; giving Tanner a chance to avoid what was coming. Race's lips closed on Tanner's sweet mouth, and they both moaned. Race deepened the kiss, Tanner following his lead. He opened his mouth over Tanner's, tasting him, pressing his tongue against those lips until they opened hesitantly. Race pressed in with gentle pulses until Tanner's tongue met his own. Tanner pulled his mouth away with a startled hitch.

"You okay?" Race asked as he stroked Tanner's hair.

Another deep breath. "Yes. That surprised me. I didn't think I would feel that much..." Tanner shivered. "Is it always like that?" he asked curiously.

"No. Often times it's better." Race grinned.

"Finally," murmured Tanner.

Realization dawned. "Uh, Tanner?" Race pulled Tanner into his arms and whispered in this ear. "Was that, by any chance, your first kiss?"

"First kiss with a guy," corrected Tanner. "I've kissed girls before, because I'm supposed to. This with you... was so much more."

"So you're..."

"A virgin. Yes, sadly. I did try to change that. It's how I ended up at the hospital."

"What happened?"

Tanner sighed. "I came to terms with my sexuality several years ago, and I thought I would have to stay celibate to avoid sinning. But I kept wondering why it was so bad if Heavenly Father made me this way. I had to know what it was like, sin or not. I had to see if these feelings and urges would go away if I took care of it," he admitted. "I knew about the park. It was the place the gays went to meet each other. I thought I could be brave and find someone to suck my dick, or... maybe let me do the sucking. I don't know if I could have actually gone through with it, but I was determined to try. So I changed clothes and walked through the trees and found a place to wait. Then a group of thugs came by looking for a gay to 'teach a lesson to' and they beat me. Someone blew a whistle and I got away while they were distracted. My nose... there was so much blood. I got treated at the hospital and you know the rest."

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Race knew what it was like to be singled out as *different* and punished for it. Every year there was a group of classmates who objected to his darker skin and long straight black hair, the only hints he had of his natural father's origin. Grandpa thought Race's father was a Ute his mother met that summer she ran away after Grandma died, eventually returning as a pregnant sixteen year old. Race wondered how much harder they would have beaten him if his classmates knew how often he thought about what was under their jeans.

"Remind me to show you other options for finding a willing partner, ways that are less dangerous than a park." *So the kid... no, the man wanted some dick.* Race felt his cock stir.

Race held himself back, determined to get his last question answered. His brow wrinkled. "Even I've heard of the Marriott School of Management. You can work anywhere you choose with a diploma from that school. You didn't need the farm like the other boys that've come here. What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't exactly start a job looking as smashed up as I was. So, when morning came, I looked into what you told me at the hospital, what your grandfather has going on out here."

Race stepped back warily. "Why?"

Tanner reached out and laid a hand on Race's cheek. "The boys in the park warned me of predators and drug pushers that would get boys addicted and trick them out. One boy had heard a rumor of a place to go if they were hurt or cold, a place that wasn't the day center or a UCC church, since those places are watched for anyone breaking the law by giving shelter to runaways. I wanted to know which category your grandfather was in."

"You thought he was one of those perverts that prey on desperate boys?" Race asked incredulously, and angrily pushed past him into the main room. Tanner followed him and watched him pace around the room.

"I learned very quickly that he is not that."

Race's agitation lessened a tiny bit as he glared at Tanner. "And what else did you find?"

"The social worker that runs the day center gave me a phone number to call since she thought I was too injured to be on the streets that night. I called it and got a recording for the Blue Turkey Farm."

"And I had already invited you to the farm," Race finished the thought.

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“Yes, and you were a perfect gentleman the whole time I was here,” Tanner smiled. “And I noticed other things, like the locks and bolts on the *inside* of the bedroom doors.”

“The kids feel safer if they can lock everyone out of their room while they sleep, especially the boys that come to us from the hospital needing to heal from surgery to repair torn rectums and other injuries. There’s a doctor who sometimes calls the farm about a kid needing help,” Race explained.

“I also noticed the extra computers in the farm office when we moved things around so your grandfather could have a bedroom on the first floor. Those are for lessons, aren’t they?”

“Yes. Most of the boys come here when they want to get out of the cold, which also happens to be during the school term. Grandpa helps them with online classes in the Utah virtual school so they don’t fall behind.”

Race still wasn’t happy. “The same church that runs the college you graduated from is also the church that has convinced a lot of families to shun their gay children and throw them out with nothing but the clothes on their backs.” Race turned and stared at him fiercely. “And you still go to that church every Sunday for half the damn day.” He stalked the room. “How can I trust you? Several people in the right places are willing to take a risk and quietly help the kids. They are vulnerable and I don’t want them hurt. I want to know what you plan on doing next.” He stepped closer.

Tanner backed up and found himself against a wall. He held up placating hands. “Relax, relax. I want to help.”

“You still have a family you can go back to. Why would you help us, risk charges?” Race was nervous about how much Tanner had learned. How could he have been so careless?

It was Tanner’s turn to nervously stride across the room and back, then finally stop in front of Race. “Both my parents are from families that have held high positions in the LDS church and still do. They had my life scripted out for me, but I have known since I was fourteen that I would not fit into that script. I prayed and fasted and I gradually came to realize that my family loves me and I love them, and I won’t hurt them or give them a reason to think they have to hurt me. So I didn’t come out. They offered to pay for my college if I attended BYU. I’m supposed to be celibate until marriage anyway, especially while attending BYU.” Tanner’s face turned wistful. “So I went along with most of their plan for me, since I did benefit. When I turned nineteen, they started



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pressing me to go on a mission, but I knew by then I could not do that in good faith. So I opted to help develop an online mission referral website, and that kept me at BYU until they stopped asking me about going on a mission. I just kept registering for the next term and they would pay the tuition, and then I graduated. I have a standing offer, expectation really, to go to work in one of the family businesses.” Tanner looked Race straight in the eye. “I don’t want to do that. I feel like this is my chance to break out of the life they planned for me. I like what you’re doing here at the farm, and I would rather help you out here for now. Will you let me do that?” Tanner pleaded.

Race sighed and rubbed his face. “You’ve already helped with the finances and managed to shut down my mother’s little scam, and Grandpa likes you. I think you’ve earned my trust.” He smiled tiredly. “What does your family think you’re spending your time on?”

“I told them I had committed to a service project out of town, so I bought myself the summer to consider my options.”

Race plastered a rogue’s grin on his face. “We suddenly have more options, don’t we?”

“Yes we do,” Tanner said with a speculative smile.

They both moved and reached for each other in a choreographed dance as old as time. Race framed Tanner’s head with his hands and pulled him into a hard kiss. Tanner’s arms wrapped around Race’s waist and his hands landed with a firm grip on Race’s ass cheeks.

And this time when Race’s tongue pressed against Tanner’s he didn’t pull back. Race finally broke their kiss, but only to feather soft kisses down Tanner’s neck, inhaling the spicy lime that was Tanner’s own scent. Tanner moaned and trembled, then started a slow grind, groin against groin. Race felt Tanner’s thick cock against his own, pleased to find them both hard as rocks.

“Tanner, look at me,” Race ordered.

Tanner blinked, distracted. “Huh?”

“You’re new to this, so you decide how far we go, all right? You say stop and I’ll stop.”

“Uh... okay.” Tanner searched for his lips and pulled Race into another deep wet kiss.

Race reached down and unbuttoned Tanner’s jeans, forcing the zipper open as he reached in and gripped Tanner’s cock. He rubbed his thumb over the

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drops of precum, smearing it around the head, and then started a slow stroking slide down his velvet shaft to his balls. It didn't take long. Tanner's breath was coming in gasps now, and Race knew he was ready.

"Tanner... baby, you're about to come in your pants. Give me some room here so I can take care of you," Race murmured as he deftly pushed Tanner's clothes down his thighs. His cock bobbed free, thick and ruddy and dripping. Race sank to his knees and swallowed Tanner's heavy cock, taking him in well past his usual gag point. He sucked as he pulled off, making sure to rub his tongue over that sensitive spot just under the head. He cupped his balls and Tanner gasped, cum erupting into Race's mouth. He swallowed and sucked some more, determined to give Tanner a reason to keep sinning.

Tanner wilted and slowly collapsed onto his knees. "Oh my Lord, that was... unbelievable."

Race leaned in and lightly kissed him, letting Tanner run his tongue experimentally along Race's lips, tasting himself. Race smiled.

"Next time won't be so fast," he promised Tanner. "I'll take my time with you and make you sing with pleasure."

Tanner rubbed Race's cock through his jeans. "Your turn," he said, breathless with anticipation. He rose and grabbed Race's hand and pulled him up and along to one of the bedrooms. Race had placed a mattress and sleeping bag and a few odd pieces of furniture in the cottage as he worked in it. He laughed joyfully as Tanner pulled hastily at his own jeans and shoes, and then Race's. He finally managed to peel them off, followed by their shirts. They both stood facing each other, naked. Race enjoyed a leisurely visual inspection of Tanner, and his cock thickened further until he was fully erect. Tanner reached for him and took command of their kiss, backing him up until Race's foot touched the mattress.

"Down you go, sweet man. Lay on your back for me," Tanner gently ordered. Race shivered as his body recognized the natural top in Tanner. *Oh, this couldn't get more perfect.* Race loved to bottom. Tanner crawled up Race, planting random kisses along the way until he landed on his mouth again.

"Uh, baby? I don't have supplies here so..."

"Hush," said Tanner. "Just let me suck you. I've thought about this way too long," he whispered hoarsely as he stroked Race's cock.

Race let Tanner explore as he worked his way back down to his dripping shaft. Tanner flicked out his tongue, tasting. Race inhaled sharply, trying his

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damndest to last long enough for Tanner to try everything he'd fantasized about his first blow job. Finally, Tanner took Race into his mouth. "Baby... please... no teeth," gasped Race.

Tanner pulled off with a popping sound. "Sorry." He grinned sheepishly and took Race back into his mouth with much more care. Race closed his eyes as Tanner took more of him, not getting much farther when his gag reflex kicked in. Tanner quickly gripped Race and worked his hand up and down, stroking what he couldn't manage with his mouth.

"Baby... gonna come," Race warned seconds before he shot cum into Tanner's mouth. When Race opened his eyes again, Tanner was leaning over him with streaks of cum on his face and in his hair, grinning like a well-fed cat.

"We are definitely doing that again," Tanner announced.

Race laughed. "You'll be ready to go again soon but let's eat while you recover. Then we'll both have energy to play more, okay?"

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Race heated his beef bourguignon and shared it with Tanner, along with the colorful heirloom tomato salad and too much cherry beer.

"I feel happy," Tanner hiccupped.

"What you're feeling is slightly drunk, Mormon boy," Race corrected. "Go easy. You're new to a lot of things tonight, including alcohol. You've been very brave to misbehave."

"It was so worth sinning for." Tanner giggled. "When can we fuck?"

Race spewed beer. "When we have supplies, and after we have the safe sex talk," Race finally managed to answer. "Besides, someone needs to be at the house tonight with Grandpa. I don't want him to be alone with my mother."

"She's gone, and Seth was playing cards with Grandpa when I left to find you. I had a long chat with him. He's given me some ideas."

"What about?" Race was curious.

"A real youth shelter, for one. Do you know forty-percent of homeless teens identify as LGBT? There needs to be a place they can go to be safe. Stay alive. Be accepted. Need some laws changed to do that." Tanner slurped down more beer.

"In Utah County? Fat chance. Maybe in Salt Lake City. Seth and other allies manage to get most of the boys who leave here to a host family, usually an

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older sibling or other relative or a gay couple with an extra bedroom willing to take the risk. The farm is sort of a way station. Nobody has stayed more than a few months, except for one.” Race smiled to himself as he remembered that one boy.

“It would be a lot better if kids didn’t get disowned to begin with. My church needs to stop ruining families,” Tanner grumbled.

“That’ll happen when pigs fly and it snows in hell and when gays can get married in Utah,” Race added dejectedly.

On that sour note, they returned to the main house.

Tanner was more restrained after that alcohol-fueled discussion. They limited their sex to grinding and sucking each other off, since Tanner decided he wasn’t ready for more after all. Race knew Tanner spent time online methodically researching positions and anatomical restrictions, and several times their night started with watching gay internet porn, leaving Tanner speechless and horny and Race amused. Race found he enjoyed this time with Tanner. They would lay entangled with each other after both of them had climaxed, covered in each other’s scent and talking quietly of things they cared about. Their many nights together over the summer led to the development of a deeper connection between them, and Race knew he was falling in love. It bothered him more than he would admit that Tanner always changed the subject when Race voiced thoughts about a shared future. Race’s happiness was tempered with occasional moodiness whenever Tanner mentioned his eventual move back to the city. Race found himself wishing the summer would never end.

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Race got a phone call one August evening, and he returned the next morning with a bandaged and traumatized kid.

“He’s sleeping. He’s on strong pain medication and retroantiviral meds, so I’ll keep him on a no fiber diet until his ass heals and his stomach calms. He’ll have to wait several more months before he can get the second HIV test,” Race reported to Grandpa Ace. “He’ll need counseling about the event, and possibly treatment for drug addiction. Doc said there was no indication of long-term use but sometimes all it takes is one time. Poor kid. I heard he was an honor student.” He shook his head in sadness.

Grandpa nodded and steered his motorized chair to a window, silently staring out at the green orchards down the hill. Race went to the kitchen to cook

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something that required a lot of chopping with a big knife. He went looking for Tanner when dinner was ready and found him deep in conversation with Seth, with Grandpa listening.

“Staying for dinner?” he asked.

“Nope. I have some paperwork to process before the court clerk’s office closes,” Seth answered as he gathered up his papers and stuffed them into his briefcase. “I’ll call you later, Ace,” he told Grandpa as he touched his shoulder.

Tanner was quiet during dinner, and just wanted to hold Race close when they went to bed that night. “That boy was used as a bottom, wasn’t he? I don’t want to hurt you like that.”

“Baby, we’ll be fine. Go to sleep.” Race knew from Tanner’s demeanor that he was backing away from sex after he learned what happened to the kid. Race wondered what wild scenarios Tanner was imagining, but he was too tired to bring it out in the open and discuss it. He dropped off to sleep.

Race was pleased when Tanner volunteered to take meals to the new kid, and help him get settled in at the farm. Cody seemed at ease with having Tanner visit in his room, so Race left them to it. Race spent most of the morning at the farmer’s market near Provo and sold out early. He was still astounded at how much people were willing to pay for “authentic pioneer seed” vegetables, and today he had added cherry cobbler and a few bunches of fresh cut flowers to the usual offerings of just-picked seasonal fruit from the farm’s orchards and his many varieties of heirloom tomatoes. He was mentally calculating what he could buy next for his brewery as he drove home.

The first signs that something was wrong were the sheriff’s cars in the driveway. His heart almost stopped when he rounded the corner and saw the ambulance. “Grandpa!” he shouted as he ran into the house. He skidded to a halt inside and stared. Grandpa sat in his chair, wrists handcuffed while a deputy stood guard. Cody was strapped onto a stretcher and was being wheeled out to the ambulance.

“What...?”

“Seth,” was all Grandpa could manage to say clearly as the deputy pushed his chair forward towards the door. Race pulled his phone out and hit the button for the lawyer.

“Where are you going with him?” demanded Race.

“County jail,” said the sheriff as he stepped forward. “The charge is harboring a runaway and interfering with a law enforcement officer. The

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prosecutor will determine what additional charges to add. Some serious allegations have been made.”

Race relayed the information to Seth as he followed them out and got back into his truck. He was in Provo by the time he realized he had not seen Tanner at the house. Race texted Tanner a few times from the sheriff's office, then gave up as he concentrated on supporting Grandpa. Later that night, as an exhausted Race fell into bed, he realized Tanner had not answered any of his texts. And Tanner did not come to their bed; in fact he was not at the house at all. Sleep eluded him as his mind buzzed, making up excuses for Tanner's absence. Race curled up with a pillow, his stomach churning as he allowed himself to consider for the first time the awful possibility that Tanner had left.

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## Chapter Five

*Wednesday June 26, 2013 (Three years later)*

“RACE!!!” squealed Morgan, grabbing him and planting a sloppy, wet kiss on his mouth. “Six years and no contact!” He leaned back and pouted. “If I didn’t already know how fabulous I am, I’d think like a teenage girl and obsess about you avoiding me.”

Race laughed and gave his old friend a hug. “Last I heard, you’d arrived safely in Wyoming after leaving the farm and were busy chasing cowboys. How’ve you been?”

“Good. I stayed at my brother’s ranch and finished high school. Make sure you tell Ace that! Then I went to college and came back to Salt Lake City after graduation. Lots of high tech companies to work for here, and I did miss some of my family members. They don’t all hate me.”

“Yeah, this town is pretty gay friendly.” Race looked around at the packed bar. “Lots of celebration tonight,” he commented.

“Yes,” said Morgan, serious for once. “Overturning a major part of the Defense of Marriage Act is a huge milestone. Too bad they stopped short of upholding same-sex marriage nationwide, but at least California gays can get married now. Again.”

“Utah will be last, as usual. Even the liquor laws are ridiculously antiquated, about a hundred years behind the rest of the country.” He sighed. “Which reminds me. I have a delivery to finish...”

Race’s sentence came to a halt as a scantily clad girl came up to Morgan and rubbed up against him, drunkenly shouting, “Boner!” at him.

“I have that effect on clits.” He grinned at Race, and wiggled his way back to the dance floor with the girl in tow. They joined another male and the three of them gyrated away to the pounding beat of the music.

Race smiled to himself. Morgan had been an irrepressible seventeen year old when he’d ended up at the farm, the same age as Race, and he’d had his first real crush on the beautiful boy with black hair, slightly Asiatic black eyes, and a dancer’s lithe build. Together, they had explored each other in relative safety and Race cried when Morgan’s older brother finally consented to let him move in. He’d moped for months. Race sighed and looked for the bar manager. Maybe he’d look for a hook up later.

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“I’ll stock some of the pepper beer, the peach beer and the gluten-free ale behind the bar, and put the rest in your cooler. Anything else?” Race asked the manager as he checked off the ordered items.

“Did you bring any cherry beer? I have one customer who comes in once a week and that’s all he’s ever ordered. Specified Blue Turkey cherry beer, first time he walked in. Sold the last bottle this evening.” The manager searched the crowded room, then nodded towards a darkened corner.

“That’s him.”

Race turned and looked. His heart stopped. It was Tanner. The noise in the bar shrank to a muted buzz and his world snapped into sharp focus, with just the two of them in it. Tanner was quietly watching him, like a spider, leaving it up to Race to make contact. Race tried to work through the tornado of emotions that gripped his mind, trying to find a solid foothold to anchor himself before his heart blew away. Then Tanner’s mouth moved in a tentative smile, and Race was a goner. He slowly made his way through the throng to Tanner’s tiny corner table and sat down, still mute.

Tanner reached out and covered his hand. “Hey,” he murmured.

“Hey,” was all Race could manage.

“I never stopped thinking about you,” Tanner blurted, and opened his fingers so that they entwined with Race’s, holding his hand for all to see.

Race thudded back to reality. “Really? Then why didn’t you show up for Grandpa’s hearing? A solid church goer, BYU graduate, a member of *two* of Utah’s pioneer families would have stopped everything in its tracks if you’d spoken up on his behalf.”

Tanner squirmed. “I told you in the email I sent. I couldn’t risk being associated with Ace given what he was charged with. It could have reflected badly on my family.”

“Those were bogus charges and you know it.”

“Yes, I knew it. Which is why I was confident Seth and his team would get everything thrown out. And he did.”

“Eventually! But not before Grandpa was dragged through the press as some sort of monster, gay-boy trafficker. He hasn’t been the same since, and he can’t risk helping lost boys anymore. And don’t forget he did end up paying a fine for harboring a runaway. He has a record now, and he could have gone to jail for up to six months! At his age!”



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Tanner sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Of all the things that I have done wrong in my life, that is the one consequence that I am most ashamed of."

"You should be," Race snarled, the anger working its way back to the surface even after three years.

"I did what I could to help, working quietly in the background, hidden from scrutiny. Who do you think tracked down the anonymous tipster, and gave the information to the newspapers?" Tanner demanded defensively. "It was your mother who started it. Look to your own family for blame before you fault me," Tanner almost yelled.

Race slumped in his chair. Tanner was right. His mother had been so pissed about the changes to the farm's business structure and subsequent loss of her income and inheritance that she hit back the only way she knew how. The bitch. Sometimes, Race wondered if she was really his mother, but she had the same silver eyes shared by his grandfather and himself.

"You could have come around after everything settled down. You cut off all contact," Race said sadly.

"I can explain that. Would you like to leave? Go someplace quieter? I don't feel like shouting out my feelings in a bar," Tanner suggested hopefully.

Race wasn't completely won over, but he remembered Tanner well enough to give him a chance. "Sure. Let me finish my delivery, then we'll go."

Rainbow flags waved, as gays and lesbians joyfully celebrated a long sought after victory at the US Supreme Court. Race and Tanner walked side by side down the sidewalk in the Marmalade District, enjoying the festive atmosphere. The mood was contagious, and Race was feeling better. He even found himself thinking about grabbing Tanner's hand as they walked. But, no. Tanner was the one to cut things off between them three years ago. Race wouldn't risk his heart again. Tanner had to make the first move towards anything physical. They found a bench and sat down.

Tanner leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, his hands folded loosely together. "I did what was best for us at the time. You didn't know it, but I'd been accepted at BYU law school with my parents agreeing to pay for it. BYU has strict codes of conduct that all students agree to follow while they attend," Tanner explained. "It would have been horribly, frustratingly tempting to touch you if I continued to see you while I was attending law school. And it was unfair to expect you to wait for me."

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Race sat back. Tanner had surprised him again. Not many people were so honorable they would forgo private pleasure for the sake of their scribbled signature on a code of conduct.

“That’s a good law school,” Race finally managed.

“Yes. Top tier nationally. I’d have been a fool to throw that opportunity away, especially considering how competitive it is to get in. I didn’t think I would, since I didn’t go on a mission and that seems to be a prerequisite for advancing in church-centric circles. But I had a very high LSAT score, and had also been accepted into the graduate management program at Marriott. My advisors thought I was a shining star and wanted me in the joint program.”

“Did you?” asked Race, awed. He had only managed to complete a two-year program in biology at a community college, with an eye to being a better brewmaster. He also managed to earn a certified nursing assistant certificate, which helped him take care of Grandpa.

Tanner laughed lightly. “No, just law school. I graduated not too long ago. I’d still be in school for another year if I was in the joint program. And you wouldn’t have seen me in that gay friendly bar we just left.”

“About that... are you out now?” Race asked pointedly, daring to consider they might see each other again.

“No, not really. But I suspect some of my family members have guessed correctly. My mother has stopped asking me when I’m going to bring home a nice Mormon girl, but she’s never asked me directly and I’ve never felt the need to announce it. And I won’t as long as my grandfather is in the Quorum and my father is a stake president.”

“You’re still in the closet then,” Race stated the obvious. “You know, at some point you have to live your own life and just let things happen as they will. Do your family members love you enough to let you be yourself, openly?” Race asked.

Tanner sat back and considered the question. “I know they love me, but faith is an overwhelming influence and I would probably lose in a contest against deeply held religious beliefs, so I won’t force the issue. In the meantime I’m now working and living on my own and I’ve been going out more. I watched *Pride* this year for the first time, met some men I’ve kept in touch with. Even went on a date. So far I’ve not heard anything from my family about it.”

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Race was surprised at the sudden flash of jealousy he felt. "Date?"

Tanner grinned. "Yeah, for coffee. My job keeps me too busy to do much more. First-year lawyers are run ragged, and I still need to pass the bar exam."

Race felt discouraged again, thinking Tanner was leading up to excuses why they couldn't spend time together after this evening. He resigned himself to saying good-bye and didn't bother to invite Tanner out to visit with Grandpa, although he knew they would both like that.

"Did Ace like the MoTab tickets I sent?" Tanner asked.

"That was you? Yes, he loves the choir and applies for tickets every year. Never successfully, though. Thank you," Race answered, surprised again.

"Having high ranking church members in the family has some advantages," Tanner commented.

"You should let Grandpa thank you personally. I know he'd want to," Race suggested hopefully.

Tanner turned a radiant smile on him. "I'd love to. How about next weekend? I can get away Saturday afternoon."

"Yes. Absolutely!"

Tanner leaned in quickly and brushed a feather light kiss over Race's lips. He grinned and stood up, holding his hand as they walked back to Race's truck.

Race couldn't believe how the day trip into Salt Lake City had turned out. He was usually exhausted after a day of beer sales and deliveries and traffic and smog, but now he felt energized. He smiled the entire drive home to the farm.

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## Chapter Six

“Beef bourguignon,” muttered Race to himself, nervous with anticipation and wanting everything to be perfect. “Cold vegetable salad. Cherry beer.” He mulled over the contents of the refrigerator, determined to make the best burgundy beef stew Tanner had ever tasted. Race also hoped the meal would remind Tanner of what they had been doing when they ate that long ago meal. He used a better grade of beef than chuck and already had it simmering in red wine. The result would melt in your mouth. Later he would add carrots, small potatoes, pearl onions, and mushrooms to the rich wine gravy. He set his bowl of bread dough to rise on a warm window sill, and went out to his garden to harvest something fresh for the vegetable salad.

Tanner was late. Race didn't know what time he planned on being at the farm, but he was pretty sure “afternoon” meant there would still be daylight. He thought of calling him but then decided he didn't want to seem like a needy girl. Evening turned to night and Race had finally given up and put the leftovers away. He had just finished cleaning up the kitchen and went to make sure Grandpa was ready for bed. The only good thing was that Race had not told Grandpa that Tanner was coming. He had wanted it to be a surprise. Now, Race was just relieved that Grandpa had not been cruelly disappointed. Race slowly got ready for bed, but sleep eluded him. He felt like a fool, wondering why he had ever thought that Tanner *fucking* Boileau would be interested in a lowly farmer. Race hadn't been this depressed in a long time.

Grandpa enjoyed reading his morning news online at the breakfast table, so Race was used to seeing the laptop sitting next to his omelet. He was spreading peach pepper jam on his toast when Grandpa touched his hand and slowly turned the laptop around so Race could read whatever had caught Grandpa's attention. He didn't see it at first, then noticed the title near the middle of the page. “*A death in a prominent Provo family. Matteo Boileau killed while serving as an Army Captain in...*” Race scrolled to the next page “*...Afghanistan.*” There was a photo of a metal coffin being off loaded from a plane at Salt Lake City Airport with a hearse waiting nearby. A young man stood to the side, his mouth set in a grim line as Race imagined him trying to maintain his composure with the press close by. Race looked closer. “Oh Lord... it's Tanner,” he whispered, shocked. Grandpa nodded. The photo was dated the day before. Race instantly felt guilty for being angry at Tanner, knew

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that if it had been Grandpa in that coffin he probably wouldn't have thought to call anyone either. Race longed to go to Tanner and hold him, comfort him. But that couldn't happen, and he realized that if Tanner had been the one killed, no one would have known to call Race. He texted a simple, *'I'm so sorry'*, to Tanner.

Race cut a selection of fresh blue flowers from the cottage garden and arranged them in a vase along with some deep green foliage. He and Grandpa signed a small card and Race drove into Provo and dropped the vase off at the funeral home. It was a small offering among many large formal arrangements, and Race doubted Tanner would even see it. He drove home, wishing more than ever that he could sit next to Tanner at the funeral and hold his hand during the service. But he wasn't family so it was not to be.

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## Chapter Seven

The August peach harvest was due to start next month and Race had completed the arrangements. All of the fruit harvests had gone much smoother since Tanner had renegotiated the contracts three years ago. He was trying out a new peach salsa recipe to sell alongside the fresh fruit at the farmer's market when he heard a car drive up. He idly noted it was early for Grandpa's night assistant to show up. He stripped off the gloves he wore whenever he worked with habañero peppers and looked out the window. A Lexus stood in the driveway. *Did Seth get a new car?* The door opened and Tanner stepped out, pulling an overnight bag over his shoulder.

Race felt his heart skip a beat and his breath hitched, simultaneously relieved that Tanner had come back to him and a little saddened that their reunion would probably not be christened with physical activity. Race felt sympathy for Tanner and his recent bereavement. He knew how his own brother's cyber presence in his life gave him even more of a solid link to his family than what Grandpa provided. Race's brother Jacob had been sporadically emailing him for the past three years, starting shortly after Grandpa was arrested. They had exchanged chat and photos, and Race was pleased his younger brother had reached out to him and continued with the connection. Race knew the bond between Tanner and Matt was even closer.

A slow smile crept over Tanner's face as he surveyed the orchards down the hill in the fading afternoon sunlight. He walked up to the door and Race met him there. Without saying a word, Tanner dropped his bag and pulled Race into a plundering, wet, lingering kiss. Race ran his fingers over Tanner's face, noticing the fine lines that radiated from his tired eyes and knew he would do anything Tanner wanted if it could ease his loss.

"It's Saturday, just not the same Saturday I originally planned on," Tanner apologized. "Is Ace here?" he asked.

"Yeah. Let's see if he's up from his nap."

"How's he doing?"

"He's frail and he tires easily. I have a CNA come out to stay at the house when I need to be gone overnight."

"Grandpa, look who's here," Race announced as he led Tanner into the house.

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Tanner stepped forward and bent down to give the old man a hug. He sat and started talking quietly while Grandpa just grinned his half-smile. Race left them alone.

Race pondered the contents of the refrigerator, mentally running menus through his head. He had planned a meatloaf dinner with Grandpa before the CNA showed up for the standing twenty-four hour shift starting Saturday night. Race had started the shift over a year ago to give himself a night away from the farm. He had been able to head into Salt Lake City and even over to Park City to hook up with gay men. He had not gone looking since he ran into Tanner in late June, but he kept the shift scheduled anyway. He enjoyed spending nights at his cottage instead of the main house. Race shut the refrigerator. Tanner could eat meatloaf with them and then he and Tanner would spend the night at the cottage. He'd make him beef bourguignon another time.

Race ushered Tanner into the cottage and watched while he took in all the changes. The cottage was fully furnished now and decorated in colors of the mountains. Tanner was examining a series of small framed oil paintings of blue flowers hung on the wall behind the sofa while Race moved to the modern, well-equipped kitchen and unloaded his insulated carry bag. He pulled out some frosty cherry beers and brought one to Tanner.

"These are lovely," Tanner commented as he waved his beer at the paintings. "Local artist?"

"Sort of. A beekeeper I spent time with here at the cottage when he was in the area. He takes his hives all over the Valley. He says bees are attracted to blue flowers and he really loved the garden here. He has a lot of time to paint while his bees are doing their thing."

Tanner suddenly seemed less animated. "So you and he... you date?"

"We dated. We fucked," Race stated, and sipped his beer.

Tanner set his beer down. "Perhaps I should go. I didn't mean to presume, but I thought... after Salt Lake City... you were available. I would've tried to leave you alone if I knew you had a boyfriend."

Race reached for Tanner's face and ran his finger across his lips. "He was just a hookup. Past tense. We were two rural gays looking for fun. He has a boyfriend now that travels with him. I let them stay at the cottage last spring when they brought their bees for the orchards. He gave me the paintings as a thank you."

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“Uh... okay. So no boyfriend?” Tanner tried to clarify.

Race smiled softly. “No, Tanner. There’s no boyfriend,” Race murmured. “To be clear, I didn’t stay celibate. I’m a healthy, gay man and I have needs, and... the only person I ever felt a real connection with wasn’t here anymore.” Race tapped Tanner’s nose.

“Well that was certainly my doing, and I’d like to make it up to you if you let me.” Tanner looked at him hopefully.

Race smiled and pulled Tanner into his arms. “Let me show you my bedroom,” he whispered in his ear.

They kissed each other and pulled off each other’s clothes, standing naked facing each other.

“You work out,” Race noted as he admired the sculpted muscles. “And you don’t shave.” Race ran a hand down the dark hair that spread over Tanner’s chest and abdomen, and ended in a wiry thatch between his legs. His cock was hardening.

“No. Why should I?” he asked as he ran his hand over Race’s smooth chest.

Race shrugged. “Doesn’t matter,” he muttered and pushed Tanner back onto the bed. Tanner pulled him down for a kiss and flipped them over. *Yep, Tanner was still a top.* Race grinned as he spread his legs and let Tanner lay between them as he kissed him some more. Tanner then moved slowly down his body, swirling his tongue on Race’s nipples and into his bellybutton as Race buried his fingers in Tanner’s thick shiny hair. The feather light touch of his lover warmed him, while his nipples perked to attention. He felt a frisson of heat take hold deep in his core. Tanner finally took him into his mouth. He still had quite a gag reflex but made up for it by working his fist over Race’s cock while easing a finger over his crack. Race’s cock thickened and he lifted his knees so Tanner could press a finger against his entry. Nerves fired and heat tore up his spine as Tanner sucked him and stroked a fingertip over that sensitive flesh. Race fumbled for his bedside table and retrieved a jar of his favorite organic coconut oil, bumping it against Tanner’s arm.

“Lube.”

Tanner opened the jar and took a glob of the fragrant semisolid material onto his finger. He pressed it against Race’s hole and it slid in. Race shivered as Tanner pressed further into his ass, turning his finger and coating him with the now liquid oil, while continuing to suck his cock. Tanner gently rooted around



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in his ass, like he was experimenting. Race gasped when one foray hit his prostate. Tanner stroked his finger over that same spot again and again and Race exploded into his mouth, shooting cum until he was empty.

“Where did you learn that?” demanded Race breathlessly.

“Internet porn and e-books.” Tanner smiled smugly as he added another oil-coated finger to Race’s ass. He soon inserted a third finger and lightly but steadily stretched him.

Race silently thanked Heavenly Father for gay porn as he reached for a condom and showed it to Tanner. “Suit up,” he ordered, and Tanner raised himself to his knees so Race could roll the condom onto him.

“That sort of crinkles. What kind of condom is this?” Tanner asked curiously.

“It’s polyurethane. Shouldn’t use latex with the coconut oil.” Race made a note to himself to pick up the larger size condoms for Tanner next time he went shopping.

Tanner smeared another dollop of coconut oil over his sheathed cock, and lay over Race. He lifted his legs and wrapped them around Tanner’s waist. He felt Tanner’s thick cock head press continuously until Race’s ass relaxed and opened, and he popped in. Tanner stopped and Race smiled at the look of wonder on Tanner’s face. “Feels good, baby?” he asked.

“Oh my Lord! This is sooooo good,” he purred, and pushed in further. Tanner tried a few experimental thrusts, unconsciously adding a twist to each push that had Race’s insides turning to hot jelly. He was soon breathing hard and pumping as best he could, working himself in deeper each time. Race felt like liquid and let himself go boneless when Tanner placed a hand behind Race’s back and pressed him close so they touched skin to skin. Tanner opened his mouth and kissed him thoroughly, then gave one last thrust and came inside Race’s heated body.

Race lightly stroked Tanner’s back as they lay against each other, smeared with sweat and coconut oil. “Hold the lip of the condom tight before you pull out. Trash can is next to the bed.”

Tanner took care of the condom and rolled Race into his arm as they lay on their sides facing each other. “If I had to wait, I’m so glad it was for you.” He kissed Race.

Race was glad, too. “We have all night, baby. What else did you think about trying?” Race asked as he pushed damp hair off of Tanner’s forehead.

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“Rimming.”

“Uh... okay. We should clean up real good before we do that,” Race answered uncertainly. That was sort of... advanced. Gay sex 201.

“Nope. I’m ready now, and you smell good. Is coconut a typical lube flavor?” he asked as he moved back down and pushed Race’s knees up. “Hold these for me,” he ordered as he settled in and inspected Race up close. He wrapped his arms around Race’s hips and flicked an experimental lick over Race’s sensitive hole. Race sucked in a breath and shivered, instantly forgetting about being embarrassed. Tanner peeked up from his position and Race saw him grin. He sank back down and stroked his tongue more firmly around Race’s hole and Race went liquid again. Race’s back shot off the bed when Tanner pushed his tongue inside and swirled it around the highly sensitized inner lining.

“Oh, Lord!” Race panted as heat torpedoed up his back and tiny sparkling lights invaded his vision. Cum shot from his cock and he found himself mildly surprised. He hadn’t even noticed he had hardened a second time. He didn’t even squirm when Tanner crawled back up and landed an open-mouthed kiss on Race’s lips. He smelled and tasted like the high quality coconut oil he used for cooking, and it wasn’t bad.

“Never tasted so good getting a cherry popped,” Tanner commented tiredly before they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

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## Chapter Eight

As Tanner sat in the cottage kitchen drinking coffee, Race was making pecan pancakes with peach sauce for him.

“The AG’s office gives all the new clerks a week off to cram for and take the bar exam. I wasn’t going to be any more ready than I already was, so I took the exam yesterday. I have a week off.” Tanner grinned. He stayed a whole week at the farm, even traveling into Salt Lake City with Race on Wednesday to make his usual beer deliveries in time for the busy bar weekend. The lifting and stocking went very quickly with a second person helping. Race finished in record time and Tanner directed him to his apartment near the capitol.

“You come and stay with me on Wednesday nights from now on, okay? I don’t want you driving when you’re that tired. And you’re welcome to spend your twenty-four hour Saturday night manhunt here with me, as well.” Tanner playfully tweaked his chin and kissed him.

Race agreed. Two nights a week didn’t seem like near enough time for them.

When he wasn’t with Race, Tanner spent the remainder of the week with Grandpa, visiting and playing internet scrabble. The two made plans to keep playing when Tanner returned to the city.

Race was looking forward to the harvest, hoping the work would keep him so busy he wouldn’t miss Tanner too much while they were apart. Tanner packed his bag Sunday afternoon, and left that evening.

Race saw Tanner every Wednesday and Saturday night, and sometimes Tanner made it out to the farm for the weekend. Race was now in the habit of texting Tanner first thing in the morning, exchanging texts all day, and ending his day with a goodnight text. He knew better than to phone Tanner. The man was so busy. He was now a full member of the Utah state bar and had been promoted to a state attorney, still working in the Utah Attorney General’s office.

The time they spent together erased history and soon it seemed as though they had never been apart. Race deleted his Grindr account and answered any texts about hookups with a curt, ‘*No. New BF*’, message. Although they hadn’t discussed exclusivity yet, they both went for HIV testing.

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“I don’t have a good feeling about working in that place, but my family expects it. Matt was supposed to be the family politician this generation, not me,” Tanner complained one night in September. “They’re also reminding me I should have a priesthood, too.”

“Are you going to model your fig apron for me?” Race teased.

“Shut up,” Tanner laughed, then sighed. “I thought I could do this, but they’re pulling me more and more into that world.” Tanner grabbed his phone and brought up his scheduler. “My father sent me this.”

Race saw lunch meetings every day and several meet and greet meetings each evening.

“What are you going to do?”

Tanner shrugged. “I’ll let him drive me around and shake some hands. It’s not like I have to make a speech.” He sat up straighter. “They’re still grieving over Matt, and I don’t want to disappoint them. My mother... I’d like to see her smile again.”

“Some Mormon moms support their gay sons. Did you see that video of the gay couple who got engaged after a flash mob proposal in a home improvement store? Their families were there as part of the flash mob. It was great. Let me show you,” Race said, excited. He brought it up on his iPad.

Tanner smiled when the parents came out bouncing to the music, and the two gay men embraced and kissed in front of a crowd of their family and friends, in a public store. In Utah.

“Look how many hits this video has... over nine million in a week. And look at these comments. If it can be accepted in Utah, it can be accepted anywhere. Those two men just put a very human face on same-sex marriage. Too bad they can’t get married here,” Race said.

Tanner looked pensive. “Not now, but did I tell you there is a lawsuit the AG’s office is defending that would overturn Amendment Three? It was filed before DOMA was overturned, so no one at the office was taking it very seriously. But it uses a very well-reasoned Fourteenth Amendment argument for overturning the ban on same-sex marriage. I think it has a chance.”

“Are you involved in the lawsuit?” Race asked.

“I did some of the preliminary paperwork when I was just a clerk there, before I passed the bar exam,” Tanner explained.

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“Well, you should stop helping the AG’s office!”

Tanner sighed. “It’s my job, Race. Lawyers have clients they can’t stand all the time. My situation is no different. However, if it makes you feel better, they moved me to another case. It’s a messy one about tariffs that requires my business background to analyze properly and formulate an approach for the state. I’m lead counsel.”

“You’re already swamped, and with what your father has added to your plate we’re not going to have much time together,” Race said with concern.

“You’re not wrong. I have something for you.” Tanner pulled a key from his pocket and handed it to Race, then squeezed his shoulder. “So you can let yourself in when I run late, instead of having to sit in a bar until I call you.” He rubbed his eyes. “I may be stuck in an office until 2 a.m., but at least I know you’ll be getting some rest.”

Race was touched, and said the words that had been percolating in his mind and heart for many weeks. “I love you, Tanner Boileau. Just putting it out there,” Race told him, then kissed him hard until Tanner sank into the leather sofa. Race didn’t leave much of a way for Tanner to breathe, let alone respond.

“Tan, baby, I made your favorite,” Race called one evening from the kitchen when he heard the apartment door open. He was wiping his hands when he went to greet his boo, smiling as he relished the term they both used for each other now. Race stopped short at the sight of the older man standing in the middle of the living room, looking around. “Who the fuck are you?” he demanded.

“I could ask you the same, but I really don’t care. I’m Tanner’s father.”

Race stood still, like a prey animal paralyzed with fear when it realizes a predator has just entered the area. “I’m surprised you have a key. Tan likes his privacy and his independence.”

“I used the emergency key he left with his mother. They have a strong bond, those two. Even more since my son died.” He walked over to the window. “I’ll ask first. Please stay away from my son. With Tanner working for the AG, he is making contacts and building a solid resumé for a future in Utah politics. He can be governor, eventually. But not if the voters learn of his little experiment with a sodomizer.”

“Technically, he’s the sodomizer. I like to receive,” Race said evilly.

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The man's face crinkled in distaste. "If you don't, I'll bring Tanner's mother into this and I can guarantee you he won't do anything to hurt her. If she asks him to break off contact with you, he will."

"You sure about that? 'Cause Tan has come back to me before."

"I'll have this same conversation with Tanner and he can decide whether I bring his mother into this. I can't stop you from contacting him, but you should move on, find someone else," he said, not unkindly. He turned and headed for the door. "By the way, Tanner won't be back tonight. His mother is despondent and he went to spend time with her. You should just go." He quietly shut the door behind him. Tanner didn't return that night or answer any of his texts. Race drove back to the farm the next day, hoping fervently that this separation was just temporary and that Tanner would return to him when his mother improved. Race wanted to have faith in their relationship, but Tanner made it hard to do that when he wouldn't even text him back.

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At breakfast one morning, Grandpa tapped his hand and pushed the laptop towards Race. He saw the article right away. It was a feature on Tanner with lots of photos, no doubt arranged by his father in his continuing effort to introduce his son to future voters.

"He's not smiling in any of these," he told Grandpa. "Except for this one where he is looking at his mother. And he looks terrified here where he's escorting some girl to church." Race sent him a text, '*luv u. miss u*'. It went unanswered.

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Race earned extra cash by leading hunting parties in the days leading up to Thanksgiving. Grandpa had realized years ago that the hunt was what made the blue turkeys popular, and hunters would come from all over the valley each year to bow hunt the birds on farm property. Race had made easy money leading hunt teams in his earlier years on the farm. The flocks weren't as big in recent years. Race thought the birds had migrated to national forest land where they were protected most of the year. He had bagged his own bird and it was already cleaned and ready for roasting.

Race was preparing a fruit and grain stuffing when he heard a car arrive. He closed his eyes. Déjà vu left him hoping it was Tanner. He wiped his hands and went to the door.

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Two teens stepped out of an old car, looking around curiously. The driver cautiously raised his hand in a quick wave and Race squinted. The young man came forward and Race recognized his younger half brother.

“Jacob? What are you doing here?”

The kid took a deep breath and stood straighter. “My boyfriend and I would like to spend Thanksgiving with Grandpa, if you don’t mind,” he requested.

Race hid his shock. *A boyfriend?* Jacob had never mentioned that in his emails, but Race supposed he wouldn’t have put that in writing at his age, either. He was never sure how much privacy Jacob had. Race gleefully grinned when he imagined what his mother’s reaction would be to another gay son. *Heh heh*. Race covered the legal stuff first. “You both eighteen yet?” Jacob was family but the boyfriend was not, and Seth had warned Grandpa it was unwise to let nonfamily minors stay at the farm, even for a night.

“Yes. Last summer. We met at the University of Utah where we’re students, and neither one of us wants to go home for the holidays. Also, I wanted to thank Grandpa in person for letting me keep the money Mom stole from him. It’s paying for my college.”

Race’s spirit rose for the first time in weeks. He knew Grandpa wanted to settle the family rift before he died, and Jacob reaching out was just the thing to make this a season to be truly thankful for. Grandpa smiled all during the meal, his eyes on Jacob. The two young men were funny and told tales of raucous misbehavior in Salt Lake City. The talk reminded Race of how much he missed Tanner, and after dinner he sent a simple text, *‘happy Tday. miss u’*. He didn’t bother to wait for a response he knew in his heart would never come.

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## Chapter Nine

*Friday Dec 20, 2013*

Race headed for the day center to drop off donated items for the homeless teens served by the center. Grandpa had pressed a large check for the center into his hand before Race left the farm that day, soon after Jacob and his boyfriend had shown up. The boys planned to spend their entire Christmas break at the farm with Grandpa, which left Race free to travel into Salt Lake City and arrange for warehouse space and other brewery business. He tuned the radio to a Salt Lake City station.

“In the news today, wildlife officials are scrambling to identify the cause of the sickness killing bald eagles in the Utah valley,” said the newscaster. Race had a brief thought about the blue turkey flock and their health, but couldn’t do anything until the cause was identified. He hoped it was soon.

The broadcast continued “In breaking news, the...” Race flicked the radio off as he pulled into the parking lot of the day center. Several kids came out to help him unload boxes of supplies, and he chatted with the director after he handed her a pile of \$30 Walmart gift cards. He hoped it would help the teens have a little more merry in their Christmas, and wished he could do more.

Race was sitting in his truck debating with himself whether to go look at warehouses this late in the afternoon, when his phone buzzed. A text... from Tanner? In disbelief, he pulled up his missed messages. He read, ‘*luv u*’, and another one soon after, ‘*miss u badly*’, and then another one, ‘*meet me plz?*’.

Race almost cried. He sent, ‘*luv u 2*’, and then, ‘*yes! where?*’. Tanner called a minute later, as though he had been glued to his phone waiting for a response.

“Race sweetheart, I’m so sorry. Let me explain?” Tanner blurted.

“Baby, just tell me where you are and I’ll come to you,” Race told him, breathless.

“I’m at the county offices. Where are you?” Tanner quickly answered.

“I’m in the city, at the day center. It’s not far. Give me ten minutes, fifteen maybe? Traffic’s bad,” Race told him.

“Oh Lord yes! I’ll be in the lobby.”

“See you soon, baby,” Race whispered, and pulled into traffic. The county building was easy to find but parking was not. What the hell? Why were people



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running two by two into the building this late on a Friday? Maybe late for a Christmas program in one of the meeting rooms, he guessed. He walked into the crowded lobby, looking for Tanner. Television news crews were all over the place, and a long line of people snaked out of an office on the second floor and curved all the way down the hall. He spotted Tanner, and everything except him blurred out of focus as he walked towards his love. Tanner smiled hugely, and with relief, it seemed to Race.

Race smiled softly as he reached for Tanner's face and stroked his cheek. "Baby," he whispered.

Tanner looked deep into his eyes as he pulled Race in for a lingering open-mouthed kiss. Race vaguely registered hot, bright lights trained on them, and broke from the kiss in confusion. Tanner looked at him lovingly for a few seconds as he held both his hands. Then, to Race's utter amazement, Tanner sank to one knee and looked up at him, still smiling, eyes shining with tears.

"Race Blue, only love of my life, will you marry me?" Tanner asked earnestly.

Race felt tears leak down his cheeks as he speechlessly nodded yes. *I can't believe this is happening!*

Tanner started to cry, too, and Race pulled him to his feet. "Uhm, are we going to California? Or Hawaii!" Race murmured, blinking through his tears. Christmas in Hawaii would be awesome. Tanner shook his head mutely, and nodded his head towards the long line visible on the second floor balcony.

"No sweetheart. We're getting married right here in Utah, before the governor manages to get a stay put in place," Tanner answered as he brushed tears off of Race's face. Race glanced around him, finally taking in the activity going on all around them. There was a minister in a rainbow stole saying words to two women holding each other's hands, and other small groups surrounding couples standing before an officiant. He turned to Tanner, confused.

"Haven't you been following the news? It's been on all the stations this afternoon. A federal judge here in Utah ruled that Amendment Three is unconstitutional, and no one asked for a stay so the judgment was immediately in place. Everyone's rushing to get a license and then get their marriage solemnized before a judge issues a stay. There's the first same-sex couple to be legally married in Utah right over there getting interviewed," Tanner explained as he nodded towards a beaming male couple holding tightly to each other's hands. "C'mon, sweetheart. Let's get in line for our marriage license before the AG's office figures out how to get a stay put in place."

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They held hands as they walked to the line, Race still in a daze. A sheriff's deputy stood at the end of the line, sending people away.

"Sorry fellows. The clerk's office is closing. They will process anyone that was already in line by closing time, but everyone else will have to come back later. These folks have been on their feet all day. They need a rest, too," the deputy told them kindly. Race's heart plummeted. So, there would be no marriage to Tanner. He had no doubt the legal stuff would be in place anytime now and the window would close. His earlier happiness tanked at that thought. Doubt started to stir and he wondered if Tanner would still marry him if they could not do it in Utah.

"If your family didn't know about us before, they sure do now," Race stated, resigned. "Your father is likely to stop us, don't you think?" Race asked, pretty sure Tanner couldn't withstand his father's persuasion.

Tanner thought for a bit, then nodded. "Then we'll make sure he can't reach us. We'll find a nice hotel and hole up there until Monday, when with luck and a sympathetic judge, the clerk's office will be open for all of us again. Let's go." He grabbed Race's hand and pulled him out of the building, while calls of "Tanner! Tanner Boileau!" followed them out the door. Race took over and led Tanner around the corner to his truck. They were already exiting into traffic when the news crews came through the door.

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"We are so lucky his wife went into labor today. This was supposed to be their last chance for a romantic getaway before the baby came. He was happy I could take it off his hands and pay for it. Look at that view!" Tanner chattered as he stood by the picture windows and admired the snow covered mountains in the evening light. "Dad won't look for us anywhere near Park City. He knows how much I hate the holiday crowds at the ski resorts." He turned and looked at Race. "And I don't plan on leaving this room all weekend." He smiled.

"We bought enough supplies to last that long," Race commented as he pulled out eight boxes of polyurethane condoms and four jars of his favorite organic virgin coconut oil. He looked at his lover. "Tanner, as much as I want you inside me right now, we need to talk."

Tanner nodded nervously. "You get the fireplace started and I'll order us room service. Is steak okay with you?"

"Sure." He grinned when Tanner tried to order Blue Turkey cherry beer from the kitchen. "I don't supply it all the way out here. My profit would disappear when I paid for all the gas."

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“It never hurts to spread the word. I’ll show you how to set up a decent distribution system.”

Race enjoyed his excellent steak and baked potato with shallot butter. The vegetable choice was not as good as he was used to. Fresh-picked vegetables from his own garden tasted so much better. Blackberry cheesecake with lemon sauce was a decadent delight, made even more so when Tanner fed it to him, interspersed with kisses. They took their wine and sat in front of the fire.

“Ask me anything,” Tanner told him.

“How is your mother?” Race asked immediately.

Tanner smiled softly at him. “She’s still grieving. It’s hardest on the mothers, isn’t it? But I see her getting stronger every day, learning to live with it. The first grandbaby arrived a few weeks ago, and that seemed to be a turning point for her.” He sipped his wine.

“Your father wants you to be governor some day. Is that what you want?”

“No!” he said emphatically. “The one thing I learned from working in the AG’s office is that I hate politics. The stink of it has gotten pretty pungent lately. The whole office is reeling from the AG’s undignified departure, and others may soon follow. Corrupt, backstabbing incompetents.” Tanner glowered.

“You have to tell your father that. Bring an end to it,” Race told him.

Tanner sighed. “That was supposed to be Matt’s life, not mine. Dad is still grieving as well. It’s easier on Dad if he’s still working on getting a Boileau into the statehouse some day. I thought I would go along with it for a while, until he came to some acceptance of Matt being gone, but it’s been almost six months. I always expected to live my life in the background out of the public eye, given who I love, and I was happy with that.” He lifted his glass in a toast. “I’m pretty sure he knows now that I am not Matt and I will not be the family member to make it to the governor’s office.” He tilted his wine glass and drained it. He set it on the table and reached for Race. “Any more questions, sweetheart?” he asked as he pulled Race half onto his lap.

“Is this...” Race waved his hands between them, “...us, for good this time?” Race held his breath while Tanner looked at him with concern in his eyes. Understanding crept into Tanner’s eyes.

“Yes, my heart.” Tanner grabbed both hands and held them tight against his chest. “I’m yours... and you’re mine; until the end of time.” Tanner lifted Race’s hands to his lips and kissed them reverently.

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“Then you can’t run off and cut contact with me anymore. When we say our vows, you have to promise to stop doing that, okay?” Race blurted, finally voicing his deepest fear. “You can’t keep breaking my heart.” Race felt his eyes fill with tears.

Tanner gently stroked circles on Race’s back. “I’m so sorry I let you down. I’m so ashamed I hurt you again, and I’ve been miserable without you. I don’t deserve you, Race Blue,” he said chagrined. “I’ll do anything you want. From now on I’m choosing you, always,” Tanner promised. “My family might disown me and I’ll for sure get fired from my job, but that doesn’t matter compared to not having you in my life, out in the open. You’re something I need, like oxygen. With you back in my life, I feel like I can breathe again.”

Race kissed his chin, but held back making a similar declaration. Twice Tanner had left him, once for three years and a second time for three months. Doubts plagued Race, and he sadly realized that he didn’t quite believe Tanner’s promise. Race wondered if Tanner would find a reason to leave him again when the euphoria of the day’s unprecedented events faded. He knew Tanner was giving up a career most people would envy, but his biggest sacrifice was the likely loss of his family, a family that Tanner had chosen over Race twice before. Race leaned against Tanner’s chest and listened to his heart beating strong and true. Still, Tanner had outed himself in a spectacularly public way and he must have known what the fallout would be. Tanner couldn’t go back. Race dared to hope and decided that if Tanner was willing to make a commitment to him, then he could do the same. Come Monday morning, Race would hold Tanner’s hand and they would plunge into married life together. Maybe. But right now his body hummed with need, and they had all weekend to enjoy each other undisturbed.

Tanner made love to him with aching tenderness, and cradled him in his arms as he fell asleep.

Race woke up feeling happy, loved, and grateful. He was afraid to open his eyes, certain that the warm man snuggled up behind him was just a dream. The hard length prodding his sore ass urged him fully awake and he turned to kiss Tanner.

“Let me heal a bit, baby. You used a half box of condoms on me last night,” he mumbled in Tanner’s ear.

“Then maybe it’s time you used the condoms,” Tanner said slowly.

Race’s eyes went wide and he sat up. “Tan, are you serious?” He kissed Tanner. “I would be so good to you, so careful,” he promised.

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Tanner leaned back on the pillow. “Yes. You’re *the one* for me, and I’m sorry I took so long to realize that. Let’s eat first. You’ll need the energy.” He smiled mischievously.

Race started coffee and inspected the contents of the kitchenette while Tanner retrieved the complimentary newspaper and muffin basket left outside their door.

“Omelet or French toast?” he asked as Tanner sipped coffee and read the paper.

“You choose, sweetheart,” he murmured distractedly.

Race saw a glimpse of the photo covering the front page, and recognized Tanner kneeling on one knee in the photo. *Yep, Tan was out and there was no going back.* Race smiled as a small hardness inside of him dissolved at that knowledge.

“What are they saying?” he asked nervously.

“Don’t worry about it. They’ll come around. Eventually,” Tanner told him as Race’s spirits sank. It seemed the repercussions had already started.

“Is there a stay?”

“No, the judge told the state to make their request in writing, and he would consider it Monday at nine in the morning. That leaves one hour for marriages to continue after the clerk’s office opens. Want to leave early and get in line?” Tanner asked.

Race smiled warmly at his love. “Yes, baby. I do.” Maybe this would really happen.

Tanner folded the paper and tossed it aside. “Then I know how to spend part of this afternoon. Are you up for some shopping?”

Race grinned. “As a matter of fact, I suddenly have a fiancé I need to get a Christmas gift for.”

They finished a leisurely breakfast, with Race sitting halfway on Tanner’s lap while they fed each other bites of French toast with fresh strawberries.

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Race was nervous when they left the hotel and wandered down a quaint street in the mountain town. Tanner held his hand the whole time, and several people smiled warmly at them. *Hmm. Maybe Utah was ready for them after all?*

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“I don’t want anything ornate. I like the matching white gold bands,” Race told Tanner as they looked at the offerings in a high-end jewelry store. He held a ring next to Tanner’s hand and admired the bright band against warm tan skin, eagerly anticipating placing it on his love and wearing his own ring.

“They’re perfect.” Tanner pulled out his credit card to pay for the rings. “My wedding present to you, sweetheart,” Tanner told him as he waved away the card Race pulled out of his own wallet, and leaned over and kissed him in full view of everyone in the store.

“It’s on the radio that the appeals court denied an emergency stay request an hour ago,” the clerk told them, smiling. “Good luck on Monday, boys,” she told them as she handed Tanner his purchase.

Race had never enjoyed shopping so much. Tanner kept hold of his hand, and laughed easily at Race’s comments as they discussed the selection of gifts for each other’s family members, hoping they would be welcome at the family home. At least Race knew Tanner was welcome at the farm. Race found a cashmere sweater in the same shades of blue as the flowers outside his cottage in spring. He quickly bought it while Tanner was occupied with a salesclerk about what to get his sisters. Burdened with bags of wrapped gifts, they found a tiny vegan restaurant that served fresh organic vegetables in a variety of seasonings and sauces along with homemade bread. Race was astounded when Tanner asked for, and received, a bottle of Blue Turkey cherry beer. He admired the deep red brew with pink foam as it was poured into a chilled glass.

“Dad brings it over from Salt Lake City when he can find it,” the server told them, and left to get their meals.

That evening, they sat in the hot tub. Tanner had Race folded in his arms and held him against his chest as they looked out the floor-to-ceiling window at the snow falling on the trees beyond the hotel. They shared several glasses of wine before they dried off and curled up in the bed. Race started with a body massage, rubbing oil into Tanner’s back and gradually moving down to his thighs and calves. Tanner was boneless from the hot soak and the plentiful wine, and he barely tensed when Race gently pushed his legs apart and knelt between them. He moved his hands up to his ass cheeks and started to alternate rubbing and squeezing. Race worked up to briefly pulling his cheeks apart on each stroke, letting Tanner feel air on his exposed hole. Then Race bent and blew a hot breath and flicked his tongue around the pink pucker. Tanner moaned, and Race could see him swallow. Race watched his own cock harden as he bent low again and pushed his tongue into Tanner. Tanner squirmed on the bed, and lifted his ass towards Race, wanting more.

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“Go deeper, sweetheart... please,” he begged. Race obliged.

When Race had Tanner quivering with need, he reached over for his coconut oil and scooped up a plentiful fingerful. He pressed the slick goo against Tanner, and his hole gradually opened and gently pulled Race's finger in. He worked the oil around Tanner's passage, then he loaded a second finger and pressed that one inside with the first. He worked both fingers in and around, gradually stretching Tanner. He reached under Tanner and grabbed his hardened cock, stroking it while he added a third finger to his hole.

“Are you ready for me, baby?” he asked as he let go of Tanner's cock long enough to roll a condom on. The polyurethane crackled as he smoothed it over himself. Race reminded himself to talk to Tanner about going bare. His test had come out negative and he hadn't been with anyone else. He assumed Tanner could say the same, but he wouldn't go bare unless they both agreed to it.

Tanner was breathing hard, and silently nodded.

Race pulled his fingers out and quickly pressed his cockhead onto Tanner's hole, letting him get familiar with the feeling. Race kissed his neck and whispered in his ear the whole time.

“Push against me, then relax,” Race murmured in his ear.

As expected, Tanner's hole loosened again and gradually pulled Race's cock into him, with Race pressing in each time until he was several inches inside his love. He made a few tentative thrusts, and when Tanner moaned and lifted his ass for more, Race started longer thrusts until he had worked up to a steady gentle rhythm. *So hot, so tight.* He added a few more smears of oil onto his cock as he worked it in and out of Tanner, keeping him well lubricated. Sweat dripped down his face as he strained to hold himself up while he carefully pushed into Tanner. Tanner's hot channel quivered and rippled against his straining cock.

“I can go deeper if you get on your knees, baby,” he whispered. *Why hadn't he topped more often these past years? This was awesome!*

Tanner pulled himself onto his knees and Race grabbed his hips as he thrust forcefully. He reached under and grabbed Tanner's cock, stroking him to hardness until Race felt precum dripping from the tip. He licked sweat off of Tanner's back and nuzzled his neck. Race changed his angle slightly each time, until Tanner yelled on one thrust.

“Ah, found your sweet spot,” Race murmured while he carefully hit that same spot over and over. Tanner came with a roar, spurting cum on Race's fist

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as he bucked and growled his way through his orgasm. Race sped up his own rhythm and felt the shimmer start in his balls. The tingles got stronger and rushed up his spine, and he came soon after, shaking through his own orgasm. Finally spent, Tanner dropped onto the bed and lay there breathing heavily while Race pulled out and dumped the condom. He gently ran a warm cloth over Tanner's ass and thighs, cleaning him and laying kisses on his back. He turned him over and cleaned cum out of his chest hair and off his chin. Race pulled the covers over them both as he snuggled into Tanner's waiting arms.

"I love you," Tanner told him as he drifted off to sleep.

"Love you, too." *Yeah, he would top again.* Race smiled tiredly and soon followed.

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Race made pepper jack omelets with bacon as Tanner perused the newspaper. As he sipped tea, Race spent Sunday morning on his iPad checking the Utah gay websites.

"It says here we should download an application and print it and have it filled out before we go to the clerk's office. Also bring cash for the fee. They're trying to get as many people as possible processed before a stay is issued. Officiants are being asked to come to the lobby so that couples can get married and turn in the completed license that same day." Race looked up, awed. "This is really happening. They processed 300 couples on Friday."

Tanner smiled to himself. "That will make it very hard for a judge to undo the marriages. If it is performed while marriage is legal, and right now it is, then it can't be taken away later. There's precedent in California. And once some couples are married, it will be very hard to deny it to others in the future no matter what the state does. Equal protection." Tanner was smiling in satisfaction. "The door's been opened and it won't stay closed. We'll just keep shoving it open wider and wider until the damn door gets torn off its hinges. And then we'll knock the whole bloody wall down. We're a wrecking ball!" Tanner laughed happily.

"Sometimes it takes a wrecking ball to change things. The walls of ignorance and oppression need to come down," Race agreed with his love.

"Have you checked your messages yet?" Race asked.

"No. Kind of scared to. I don't want my family or coworkers to ruin this time we have together."



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“Want me to look for you? I’ll only read you the nice ones,” Race offered. Tanner tossed him his phone. Race moved through the messages.

“Someone named Samantha says she knew it all along, and wants you to go shopping with her. Why do they all think us gays have a fashion sense? I know I don’t,” Race grumbled.

“She’s a coworker at the AG, and she’s very nice.” Tanner smiled. Race scrolled through more messages.

“Why is your youngest sister sending you all these dog pictures?”

“It’s a hint for me. She wants a puppy for Christmas. I’m not touching that one. It’s up to Mom,” Tanner answered. Race read some more, looking specifically for something... anything... from Tanner’s mother. Finally, Race smiled.

“Your mother sent two messages. One yesterday afternoon says, ‘*I love you,*’ and one this morning says, ‘*don’t get married without me*’. That’s nice.” He looked up just in time to see Tanner wipe a tear from his eye. Race silently pulled him into a hug.

Tanner blinked his eyes a few times. “If we can make it happen, I would like your grandfather there when we get married and my mother as well.”

“Let’s see if we manage to get a license tomorrow. Did you see this story about people already lining up outside the Salt Lake County clerk’s office? They’re determined to get a license and are going to spend the night outside, in freezing winter weather, to get that chance,” Race told him.

Now Tanner was checking something. “It says Summit County will be issuing licenses starting tomorrow when they open at eight in the morning. We can get married right here in Park City. Sure beats spending the night in the cold. What do you say, sweetheart? Still want to marry me?”

Race leaned in and kissed him. “Yes, and we’re going to write our vows before we go to bed tonight.” And they did.

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Race and Tanner stood in line at the clerk’s office Monday and had their marriage license by eight thirty in the morning.

“*Horace?* Why didn’t I know your legal name is Horace?” Tanner exclaimed.

“I’m named for Grandpa. He was already nicknamed Ace, so I got called Race.”

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By nine in the morning Tanner had called his mother, who begged him to wait for her to get there before they had whatever ceremony they had planned. When he told her they didn't plan anything and would probably just go find the mayor, she insisted on knowing where they were staying and told them not to go anywhere. She had things to do.

"Mom's doing something. Do you want to risk waiting? Maybe get Ace up here, too?"

Race warmed at the thought of Grandpa being at his wedding and nodded and called Jacob, who promised to get Grandpa to Park City that afternoon.

At eleven in the morning, his friend in Salt Lake City tweeted him, '*Stay denied! Let freedom continue to ring in Zion!*' Race breathed a little easier, knowing they had some time for Grandpa to get into town. Race tensed up again an hour later when the news reported the state had requested an emergency stay from the tenth circuit court of appeals. Race wondered what shape his nerves would be in by the end of the day, and was doubly glad to have Tanner's hand to hold onto during the rollercoaster of events. Late in the afternoon, the appeals court told the plaintiffs to get their arguments in by five in the afternoon the next day. Race breathed a sigh of relief, knowing they had another whole day to get married. Tanner hugged him and rubbed his back.

"We have at least until five o'clock in the afternoon tomorrow to get married," Tanner told his mother on the phone later that day. He chatted with her a bit more and then hung up. "She says everything is arranged and for us to enjoy our night. They'll be here tomorrow. She won't tell me yet who else is coming." Tanner looked worried. Race grabbed his hand and kissed it.

"We'll face them together. Jacob says the snow is bad and he doesn't want to drive the canyon road until they clear it. They'll try again tomorrow," Race told him.

Tanner called his office a few times, keeping track of what was happening from the inside.

"They are so screwed. All of this took them by surprise and they don't have the right people to work it." Tanner grinned. "Samantha says my name was suggested as the state attorney with the best connections at the tenth circuit, but then somebody waved the front page around and they decided not to call me. Sam said it's a great picture, and you look especially handsome although somewhat confused." Tanner leaned in and kissed him. They walked around

town at twilight and admired the Christmas lights, then went to bed early. They didn't go to sleep until much later.

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Tuesday morning was bright and clear, and after a leisurely breakfast that Tanner insisted they order from room service, "You do not cook on your wedding day, sweetheart," Tanner's family rolled into town. His sister took them up to their room and had them try on identical tuxes. A little man with her did some tucking and measuring on Race's tux and then left with the suits. She then escorted them to a spa and had them shaved and plucked and exfoliated, and their hair trimmed and styled.

"Is your family always this bossy?"

"No, they're usually much worse. You did meet my father, right?"

Race twitched uncomfortably.

When their couple's massage was done, Race and Tanner retired to their room and told everyone not to disturb them for an hour while they had a private lunch. Jacob and Grandpa got there at two in the afternoon and Tanner sat down with him for a quiet chat.

"Did you tell Mom?" Race asked Jacob.

"I left a message. Don't hold your breath." Jacob shrugged. No surprise there.

At three in the afternoon, the tuxes were returned and they both got dressed. Tanner grinned at the blue underwear his sister had bought for them. Their wedding bands would be their 'something new'. Race admired the crisp lines of the elegant black suit and pressed white shirt.

"That's Matt's tux he wore when our sister got married," Tanner told him. "We were groomsmen. I'm glad it fits you," he said quietly as he cleared his throat a few times. "It's like a part of Matt is here with us today. It's perfect for your 'something borrowed'."

They had matching red satin bowties, and matching antique cufflinks tearfully handed to them in elegantly gift-wrapped boxes by Tanner's mother as his father unhappily looked on. Someone had managed to find a nice suit for Jacob, and he was enlisted as Race's best man. Tanner's sister wore a red satin gown and held a bouquet of red and white roses with sprigs of holly. At four thirty in the afternoon on Christmas Eve, Race and Tanner were married in the

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private dining room of their hotel with family and some friends in attendance. They stood in front of the huge windows with a view of the mountains and fresh snow, surrounded by red and white flower arrangements briefly borrowed from all the dining room tables. They cried as they said their vows. Tanner promised to stay forever by Race's side. Race promised the same, and also to keep making him cherry beer. Jacob handed them their rings, and after they slipped them on, the mayor declared them married.

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## Chapter Ten

*June 26, 2015 (one and a half years later)*

“It all started on this day two years ago,” the newscaster announced. “The decision that overturned DOMA led to a cascade of judge’s decisions that one by one overturned most of the marriage bans in the United States, starting with Utah. Same-sex couples took immediate advantage of legal marriage, which through either a quirk of fate or just human error, was legal for seventeen days. Over 1300 couples tied the knot in that brief window that opened because no one thought to ask for a preemptive stay. The Fourteenth Amendment is the reason same-sex marriage is now legal across the land, but the heart of the case is people. These married couples have lived their lives and loved their families and by doing so have shown all of us that their love is the same as ours. The court agreed today.”

Race stopped listening to the broadcast as he noticed the small smile that played on his husband’s lips.

“What are you looking so smug about, baby?”

“It was just one piece of paper,” Tanner answered cryptically.

“What paper?”

“The typical motion request form submitted with an argument, asking for a stay should the decision be adverse. I had one filled out and ready to submit along with the rest of the defense arguments when I did the paperwork while I was a clerk in the AGs office. But the state attorney leading the case didn’t specifically ask for one, and I decided to take a chance. If there was no motion for the judge to rule on, perhaps he wouldn’t stay his decision, and there would be a brief window when marriage would be legal for us. Most courts won’t take away rights once they are granted, so any marriages that occurred would be forever legal,” Tanner explained. “It also sets up a legal precedent if a future case was needed. It’s a violation of the due process and equal protection clauses for some gays to be married in Utah while others cannot be, so a new case could be brought to argue that and ultimately result in marriage equality. It was a long shot, but it kept the door open if the court decided it was a state’s right to define marriage.”

“So you tossed it?” Race asked.

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“I put it straight into the shredder, and no one ever asked about it.”

“Uh... Baby? Can't you get disbarred for that?”

“Technically, no. I wasn't a member of the bar yet and was not subject to their rules at the time. And since our marriage, I don't and won't ever work in state government again... unless my sister becomes governor,” he clarified. “So I doubt anyone from that office will remember the lowly clerk who cracked open a door to see if something good would happen.”

“My very own wrecking ball. I'm impressed. Want another beer?” Race asked as he got up. He returned with a Blue Turkey cherry beer for his husband, and they toasted the decision handed down by the US Supreme Court that day.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Elin Austen writes for fun.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

[Goodreads](#)

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# YARULF'S DUTY

By Vicktor Alexander

## Photo Descriptions

Two drawn images

Photo 1: A man with a naked upper torso. Long wavy red hair, purple eyes, wearing a leather thong necklace with a large red pendant. The background is a grayish sky.

Photo 2: A royal portrait of a man with blue eyes and dark bluish hair. He's wearing a white shirt with frills down from the neck and flared frilly sleeves. Over the shirt is a royal blue coat with gold detailing. His left hand holds the handle of a sword.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*We are a very strict, conservative race. We are deeply formal, and decorum and honor are most important to us. So I'm sure you'll understand my utter dismay upon being married to one of those savages, those long-haired barbarians we had been fighting for centuries. And to a man, no less. I was to broker peace by bringing shame to my family and to my kingdom.*

*That was how I married into this happy, weird clan, this race of freedom and warmth that wouldn't know propriety if it hit them in the face. And I'm terrified. Terrified that that my dark, deviant, twisted desires will be brought to light for all the worlds to see. Not that my new family seem to care. From what I've seen, men holding hands or women kissing in the streets are as common as sunrise in this land.*

*And what am I supposed to do with my gorgeous, warm husband, who looks at me with such kindness in his eyes and a smirk I just want to kiss punch off his face? Or with that red-haired band of lunatics, with absolutely no concept of personal space, they call the royal family?*

*I'm starting to believe I could finally find myself here, and yet it is my duty to betray those that I've come to hold dearest. When I'm made to choose between duty and love, when the hour comes when I must favor a side, how will I do it without losing a part of myself?*



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*Note: Please no D/s, BDSM, ménage or cheating. I'd absolutely love a sweet, funny story, more focused on quiet intimacy rather than scorching hot sex.*

*Sincerely,*

*Filipa*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** historical/fantasy

**Tags:** magic, violence, alternate universe, royalty, warriors/soldiers, first time, enemies to lovers, in the closet, arranged marriage, HFN

**Word Count:** 24,043

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# **YARULF'S DUTY**

**By Viktor Alexander**

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## Prologue

Deep within the Kingdom of Nerandra, there lives an ancient power. It is a magic gifted to the people who live within the kingdom's boundaries, giving them the ability to heal, to grow plant life, to have amazing strength and speed, to feel the emotions of the animals and vegetation around them.

And it is a magic that gives them the ability to procreate and grow the kingdom, even when outside forces try to prevent such a thing from happening.

This power is not unique and given only to the people of Nerandra. It exists within the other kingdoms as well. However, while the Kingdom of Troalath, with its people known as the Hery, had a healthy respect for the ancient power, they had long ago begun to deny its true power. The people of the Kingdom of Ereari, with the Gerey people, lost sight of the beauty of magic as they became more conservative and began to breed with the Rardierians, people from the Kingdom of Adethiel. The Jamunds, from the Kingdom of Jeravia practiced the ancient power, but were known for using their magic for selfish gain. However, the Kingdom of Nerandra and her people respected the power, honored the magic and were thankful to the Goddess Sadita, whom they called Shadita Lyra, for blessing them with it.

And still, as with most legends, the Kingdom of Nerandra was not without its enemies, for the Kingdom of Adethiel found the people of Nerandra to be barbaric, classless and undeserving of the lush, beautiful land they inhabited. The fact that the people of Nerandra also embraced, and even celebrated, same-sex unions was also cause for much discord and strife between the two kingdoms.

Greed, envy, and bigotry led to centuries of fighting between the two kingdoms, causing blood to be spilled all over the planet, seeping into the soil and causing the ancient power much distress. The people of Nerandra could sense the ancient power thrumming, growing, and becoming angered by their constant battles with the people of Adethiel, and so the royal family sought the wisest scribes to find a solution.

Before an answer could be found, however, the magic within Nerandra surged, causing her people emotional pain, though they did not know why. Seeking the source, the royal army rode out of the gates of the kingdom and found a family, sobbing, bruised and seeking revenge, huddled over their daughter.

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Seeking vengeance, the army was dispatched towards Adethiel where the murderers of the child were from. Rage filled their hearts and clouded their minds making them unable to feel the prompting of the ancient power. Their magic, for once, being overwhelmed by their own emotions.

And so this army forged on, surrounded by magic that hid them from their enemies until it was too late, with their minds and hearts turned towards retribution.

And yet, the presence of one child of Nerandra, who was not really a child, but a man, within that army, changed things forever. For his magic still burned brightly within him, coiling and spinning, expanding and breathing life to all those he touched. He was a prince of Nerandra. A healer. And the ancient power, that magic which had begun to retreat from the other kingdoms and started to swell within the walls of Kingdom of Nerandra, began to grow within him.

His story, and that of the prince of Adethiel who had to choose between his duty and his heart, is where this legend really begins.

The legend of the Tauma.

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## Chapter One

Prince Yarulf Cossobberth, heir to the throne of Adethiel, sighed as his manservant, Biumula, moved around him to adjust the shoulders of his royal blue coat, grunting when the short, brown haired man stuck him, again, with a sewing pin.

“That is fifteen, Biumula,” Yarulf growled.

“I am sorry, Sire,” Biumula apologized with a squeak. Yarulf rolled his eyes and tried to keep his body as still as possible as Biumula tugged on the bottom of the coat to make further adjustments. He still could not comprehend why his father, King Gilrad, insisted on him wearing such an ugly garment. Yarulf wasn't sure if it was the gold detailing, like sharply angled leaves woven into the cloth, or the belt that just *had* to go with it, but Yarulf had the insane urge to rip the blasted garment from his body and hurl it across the room.

“Your Highness? You must cease from twitching if I am to finish the adjustments in time for your sister's wedding,” Biumula said softly.

Yarulf sighed in disgust and stopped moving, even though he hadn't been aware that he was doing so.

“I don't even understand why I have to go to this blasted wedding, Biumula,” Yarulf grouched. “It is Sumardea's wedding, not mine. I had absolutely no say in her marrying the Jamund. If I'd had the chance to give my opinion, she would be marrying a Rarder, someone worthy of her position as one of the princesses of Adethiel. Hell, even a Gerey would be preferable to a Jamund.” Yarulf did not consider himself a snob, but the Jamunds, people from the Kingdom of Jeravia, were loud and crass. While the Gerey, from the Kingdom of Ereari, were educated and conservative, even if they did have the misfortune of having pointed ears. And then there was that whole same-sex business. They were almost as bad as the Tauma, people from the Kingdom of Nerandra. Then again, nothing could be as bad as a Tauma.

Biumula gasped at Yarulf's use of profanity. Yarulf wanted to growl and grab the smaller, round man and shout out all of the profanity he'd heard spoken in the taverns by the peasants and the commoners. The ones he'd heard on one of his many secret escapes from the stifling restrictions of the life of a royal. But he did none of those things. Instead he sighed and lifted his head, adopting an air of decorum. Glancing down at Biumula, who hadn't moved

from his position in front of Yarulf, still looking up at him in shock, Yarulf inclined his head.

“Forgive my errant tongue, Biumula. I misspoke. I’m afraid having the soldiers constantly underfoot in the castle, what with the wedding plans and the increase to security, has caused me to pick up some rather, unpleasant habits,” he apologized. While he knew that apologizing to a servant was beneath a royal, he did not need Biumula gossiping about his use of the word “*hell*” to the other servants. Gossip like that tended to get back to his parents, and Yarulf had to try his hardest to stay away from his father’s assessing eye, lest the man discover Yarulf’s darkest, deviant desires.

Biumula nodded his head quickly. “It is quite alright, Your Highness. I am just a servant. You don’t need to apologize to me. I was just surprised that you would speak in such a way. It is quite unlike you.”

“Yes, well.” Yarulf straightened the bit of fluff that made up the ruffles at the collar of his stark white shirt and stared across his dressing room to a point on the wall. “I am afraid that there are many things that are not quite as they once were.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Biumula agreed though he sounded confused.

Yarulf tuned out the little man and continued to stare at the wall as Biumula continued with his tailoring. Yarulf was still flabbergasted that his parents were not only allowing his sister to marry the Jamund, Prince Dugezoo Caehigh of the Kingdom of Jeravia, but they were encouraging the match. All of his life, Yarulf had heard nothing but how he should be proud to be a Rardarian, how the Rardars were a proud race of people, noble, strong, moral, and conservative. They did *not* under any circumstances, mix with races that didn’t meet their strict conditions. There were only two other kingdoms that came close, the Kingdom of Ereari, where the Gerey people lived and the Kingdom of Troalath, where the Hery people came from. The Kingdom of Adethiel had a longstanding treaty with the other two kingdoms, and an unspoken agreement to find consorts for the royal offspring from among either the royal family or the members of the lords and counts. It had worked for millennia. Why would his father change his mind now? It made absolutely no sense.

“I guess I should be glad that he isn’t trying to marry her off to those Taumas from the Kingdom of Nerandra,” he muttered to himself.

“What was that, Your Highness?” Biumula asked.

Yarulf waved his hand at the servant and went back to his own thoughts.

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The Kingdom of Adethiel had once been nothing more than a small patch of grass. Only large enough for a home, a barn and a few animals, when Yarulf's ancestor, Orazil Cossobberth, first inhabited it with his wife, Marikke, and their five children. They worked the land tirelessly, praying to the Goddess Sadita for prosperity and a plentiful harvest. The Goddess had done so much more. During a particularly bad storm, the mountains that surrounded the Cossobberth home crumbled down around them, giving the family more land, and buried deep inside of the rocks were gold and the most beautiful diamonds, rubies and other jewels. Orazil and his sons mined the mountains for years, while his wife and daughters worked the land. Before long, others traveled to the land, paying Orazil in order to be able to live on his property and to have the opportunity to mine the crumbled mountains as well.

Builders, blacksmiths, healers, teachers. They all came, and it was not long before there was a town where once there had only been a home and a barn. When a fight broke out between two men over a piece of gold and one of the men wound up dead, Orazil knew that he needed to establish laws. Soon he and a group of men he hand-picked were the rulers of this country. Adethiel, which meant "*Sadita Will Provide*" in Rarderian. The town continued to grow, and it wasn't long before Orazil's son, Zhall, a wise and very shrewd man, had become king and turned the town into a kingdom. The Cossobberths had been in power ever since.

"I am finished, Your Highness. You may remove the coat," Biumula stated, breaking into Yarulf's musings.

Yarulf blinked and looked down at his manservant, a little taken aback that he'd allowed himself to lose focus in such a manner. As a soldier and heir to the throne, he was supposed to be aware of his surroundings at all times, never allowing himself to become distracted. Shaking off the cobwebs from his mind, Yarulf unbuckled the belt around his waist and pulled the coat off, handing it off to Biumula. He walked through the doorway into his bedroom and picked up the black coat with the red embroidery around the cuffs and pulled it on, sighing at the bland colors that were once again wrapped around him. He knew that no one in his family understood why he loved wearing black and dark brown, for they all loved to be extravagantly dressed in an assortment of colors and patterns, but it made him feel better. Able to blend in with his surroundings more, which was something he would not be able to do once he was king.

When he would be forced to take a wife.

And provide the kingdom with heirs.

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Yarulf pressed his closed fist to his mouth as nausea curdled in his gut, willing away the reaction. He would not allow himself to give into that physical weakness. Especially not while Biumula was in the other room. The man was nose-y and would want to know if Yarulf was ill. There was no way that Yarulf would confess his deepest, darkest secret.

The things he dreamed about late at night.

The reason he touched his throbbing shaft in the pitch black.

And the real reason he snuck out of the palace every few months.

He hadn't done anything yet. He never would. But he liked to go out and see others who *did*.

“Yarulf! Yarulf!” his brother, Dubair's voice sounded frantic as he raced into the room. “They're here!” Seconds later the warning bells sounded, alerting the palace and the kingdom to invaders. Yarulf's heart pounded as he heard battle cries, shouts, and screams drifting up through his window and echoing throughout the halls of the castle.

Yarulf dropped his hand and turned to face his brother, shoving away his deviant thoughts of sweaty, hard limbs tangled together in sheets, and grabbed his sword and scabbard from where they lay on the bed.

“Who is here?” he asked, his tone firm even as he strode forward, his boots echoing loudly on the wooden floors of his bedroom. He struggled to remain calm and steady even as he trembled internally, his blood thrumming with the promise of battle. His palms grew sweaty and his mouth dry as he prepared himself for the inevitable: *To kill or be killed*.

“The Tauma, those savages! They are accusing Father of sending an army into their kingdom's territory and attacking them. They are saying that a child was murdered and are demanding retribution!” Dubair said breathlessly as he raced behind Yarulf. Yarulf's mind rebelled at his brother's words, at the accusation of the Tauma. His father would never do such a thing. He growled at the false claim as rage flooded him. He ignored the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach that told him there might be some truth to the Taumas' claims.

Yarulf raced from the room, heading through the corridors of the palace towards the courtyard where the sound of yelling and the clanking of steel could be heard. Soldiers raced alongside him, running down the stairs to launch themselves into battle. Servants headed towards the lowest part of the castle to hide and wait for the battle to end. Yarulf's blood began to pound in his veins,



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the thrill of battle rushing through him, even as his soul and heart mourned for the murdered child.

“What are they demanding in retribution?” he asked his brother as they raced down the stairs.

“They want Sumardea.”

Yarulf slipped on the step in front of him at his brother's words, tumbling headfirst down the stairs. He could hear his brother yelling his name, as he continued to fall until he finally came to a stop at the bottom with a grunt.

Looking up at the stone ceiling, Yarulf struggled for breath, his entire body a knot of pain and agony, though whether it was from the tumble he'd just taken or because those barbarians, those *fucking* barbarians, wanted his little sister, he didn't know.

“Yarulf! Are you alright?” Dubair asked.

Yarulf pushed to his feet with a groan, allowing his younger brother to help him, and nodded. His body protested his moving, but Yarulf had a duty to fulfill, not only to his people, but to his sister. Dubair's bright blue eyes, which looked so much like Yarulf's, were filled with concern.

“I am fine,” Yarulf told the younger man, reaching up to smooth his thick, dark-blue hair into some semblance of order and turned towards the doors. “Let us go and protect our people, Dubair, and more than that, let us go and defend our sister from those barbarians.”

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## Chapter Two

Milenther Dagorn, a proud Tauma Prince of Nerandra, rode his stallion into the middle of the melee a grimace on his face as his eyes swept over the battle erupting around him. He hated fighting. He wasn't a warrior. He was a nurturer, a healer. It was what he was born to do. The fact that his father, King Fiacus, had commanded him to ride out with the army was beyond preposterous. Even his mother, Dravica, had tried to reason with his father against sending him with his brothers, but his father had been adamant.

“Milenther! Pull your head out of your *dulanthar!*” His older brother, Reprimuric, his flaming red hair pulled back tightly into a ponytail, yelled as he brought down the handle of his sword onto the head of an enemy soldier.

Milenther shook his head and nodded before he threw himself into the battle. His hand shook as he pulled his own sword from its scabbard and let out a yell before shutting down his mind and slashing the steel at the torsos of the advancing enemy. He knew what they were fighting for. There was a dead child in their village. A family in mourning. All because the Rarders thought they were superior to the rest of the world, but the thought of fighting still tied Milenther's stomach in knots. Only remembering the broken, bleeding body of the Tauma child, who, while out in the kingdom's territory with her family, distant cousins to Milenther's family, was struck down by the Rardarian army, kept him engaged in the battle.

Milenther turned his attention back to the fight but found his attention arrested by the appearance of a tall, broad-shouldered, dark-blue-haired *god*. He raced out into the battle. His blue eyes blazed like fire as he took in the scene. His mouth pulled down into a frown before he raced headlong into the middle of the skirmish, and Milenther had the urge to send his horse towards him to protect him. Him, the stranger, the Rarder.

It made no sense. Milenther was not sure who he was, though he knew they fought for opposite sides. Which made them enemies, and judging by the other man's attire, he was a royal, which really made him Milenther's enemy. And yet, Milenther's heart sped up at the sight of him. His cock hardened, and he found himself hoping, wishing, longing for the other man to look up at him, to smile at him, to come to him and ask for his name.

Milenther let out a grunt when he felt someone grab his hair and tug it. His healing powers flared within him rushing to his scalp, and Milenther turned his

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head to look at the perpetrator. Didn't they know anything about the Tauma? Did they not know how special, how precious the hair of a Tauma was? The hair of the Tauma contained their power, their strength, and their very life's essence. The Rarder pulling on his hair was tugging on the very core of who he was. Seeing the ice cold rage in the Rarder's eyes, Milenther pulled back his sword and ran the tip of his sword through the other man's belly.

He heard his brother, Catillawn, let out a victory squall and jumped slightly as the Rarder released his hair and fell to the ground.

"Milenther has made his first kill!" Catillawn exclaimed.

Milenther's face flamed, and he looked around as the Tauma army continued fighting but with renewed vigor, their yells and shouts louder as they took pleasure in his kill.

*I'm going to be sick.*

Recalling his halted training as a warrior, Milenther shoved the image of the fallen Rarder into one corner of his brain. He needed something else to focus on, to think about. He needed something that was going to remove the lifeless gaze from his mind's eye, if only for a moment.

"Milenther! Look out!" Catillawn shouted.

Milenther blinked and ducked just as an ax came flying towards his head. Sighing in relief, he firmed his jaw and returned his attention to the battle raging on around him. He had no time for daydreaming. He was in the middle of a battle. He could put his hand to his groin later and think about the dark-blue-haired beauty, when they had won this battle and made the Rarders pay for the grief they had caused the Taumas. Right now he had to fight.

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Yarulf winced as his head was yanked back by the Tauma prince, Reprimuric.

"We do not want your land, or your palace. We do not even want your paltry money. We want an eye for an eye. We want what you have taken from us."

Yarulf trembled, his body weak as blood flowed from the cuts on his body. He glared at the Tauma army that held his own army in a similar submissive fashion. His father and mother were kneeling in the middle, in the dirt. His sister was the only one standing, her head raised in a sign of defiance as she glared at the Tauma prince.

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Yarulf wanted to leap up from where he knelt on the ground and drive a knife through the barbarian's chest, but his father shook his head. They had been beaten, bested, and while Yarulf knew that his father was cunning and smart and undoubtedly had a trick up his sleeve, he would not go against the rules of the spoils of battle.

“You have bested us, it is true, Prince Reprimuric. However, my daughter, Sumardea is with child. It is why we were having such a hasty wedding,” Gilrad said.

Yarulf's eyes widened, and he looked at Sumardea, who blushed and looked away from him, her eyes darting up to Dugezuu before looking away. Yarulf could scarcely believe it. The Rarders were a moral, conservative, noble race. The women did not engage in premarital relations unless they were lightskirts and then only if they were women of ill-repute and were paid handsomely to do so. For his sister to be pregnant before she was married was unheard of. It was cause for scandal, for her to be shunned, for her to be sent away.

Yarulf shook his head. No wonder his parents had been so frantic about the wedding.

Reprimuric laughed loudly. “You Rarders and your rules and restrictions. Your moral code. Fine. We will not take your daughter. But we will take someone from your palace. The little girl that you killed was promised to the palace. She was to marry one of the princes when she came of age. You have prevented that from happening and so, whomever we choose will be married to one of us.”

Gilrad gasped and so did the rest of Rarders. “But Your Highness, I have no other daughters...”

Reprimuric shrugged. “I don't give a fuck.” Yarulf grunted as he was passed over to another soldier who held him by the hair just as tightly as Reprimuric.

Yarulf's jaw dropped, whether from the man's profanity or from the fact that the prince was going to marry two men together, he did not know. His heart pounded and his hands grew sweaty. He tried to wiggle out of his captor's grasp but winced when the Tauma soldier only clenched his hand tighter in his hair. Yarulf watched as Reprimuric turned and gathered a group of men together for a discussion, their red heads clustered together as they talked. Yarulf tried to listen to them, to hear what they said, but from this distance he could hear nothing.

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When Reprimuric's shoulders tensed and he glanced over his shoulder and stared directly at him, the bottom dropped out of Yarulf's stomach.

"No. No, no, no, no," Yarulf whispered.

Reprimuric turned back around and continued to talk to the other men, his movements seemed frantic and agitated now, and Yarulf was desperate to know what was being said. Moments later they separated and Reprimuric turned around, crossing his arms over his wide, naked torso. He glared at Yarulf before turning to Gilrad. He pointed at Yarulf.

"My youngest brother, Milenther, has requested him. In order to bring peace between our two kingdoms, Adethiel and Nerandra, your son Yarulf will fulfill his duty and marry my brother, Milenther."

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## Chapter Three

Milenther had never been so nervous in his entire life. He stood, surrounded by his twelve brothers, and watched as Yarulf's trunks were loaded onto a carriage.

"Have you ever seen a man who had so many clothes?" Cunedith asked with a sneer.

"It won't matter how many clothes he brings with him. He won't need them once he gets back to Nerandra," Evien, Milenther's second oldest brother said, cleaning the dirt from beneath his nails with the tip of his dagger.

Milenther glared at his brothers and turned to face them with his hands on his hips. "Are you all going to be nice to him, or are you going to be complete assholes the whole time?"

Milenther watched as his brothers looked at each other before they grinned and said simultaneously, "Assholes." He rolled his eyes and laughed. His brothers were overprotective and overbearing, it was true, and they were all huge, broad-shouldered warriors, Princes of the Kingdom of Nerandra. When Milenther had been born, his parents had been positive he was a girl for the first three years because he'd been so small. He was just a girl with a cock. When he'd shown no affinity or desire for fighting, the outdoors, or physical activity growing up, his father had despaired, seeking the elders and the shamans to see if they could tell him what was wrong with his youngest son. It was only when Milenther had placed his hands on Pertink's open wound, his fourth oldest brother, and the wound had healed, that the family had realized Milenther didn't have a desire to fight because he was a healer.

Now, as Milenther watched his much larger, dark-haired *husband* walk towards the carriage, he wondered, for the first time in his life, if he wasn't good enough.

"Do you think he wishes that I was a warrior like the rest of you?" Milenther asked quietly.

Silence greeted his question for a long time, and growing concerned, Milenther looked around at his brothers and saw the way they all looked at him, worry etched on their tanned faces.

Ioellenan placed his large paw on Milenther's shoulder and squeezed slightly. "Milly," he said, using Milenther's nickname, something he only did

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when he was trying to soothe Milenther's emotions. "I think you could be the fiercest warrior and that Rarder would still be one pissed *volke*."

Milenther looked over at the carriage where Yarulf was talking with his parents, his face pulled into a scowl as he glared at Milenther and his brothers, his arms folded across his chest and then back at Ioellenan. "Why?"

"Because, Little One, the Rarders do not believe as we do. They believe that only men and women should lay together. For a man and a man to lie together, or a woman and a woman, is disgusting and an abomination. Yarulf is bringing dishonor and shame to his kingdom and his family by marrying you. But he is doing it to bring peace. He does not like it. So you may want him, but you are fighting an uphill battle."

Milenther's eyes widened at his brother's words. He looked over at his new husband, a new understanding flooding his being. He did not know much about the Kingdom of Adethiel, having spent most of his life in the apothecary, the palace, the hospitals, and the schools caring for the sick and spending time with the children. He was not really cut out for the cutthroat world of politics and the bloodthirsty world of the military. He was a healer. He was a *zemitushu*. A homebody. A lover, not a fighter. So he didn't know a lot about the outside world. That had apparently done him a disservice when it came to being married to a Rarderian soldier. While he knew many other *zemitushus* who were just as fierce, or could be just as bloodthirsty in battle as their spouses, his being a prince and a healer had not afforded him the same courtesy. Now, his marriage to Yarulf, the Rarderian prince of Adethiel, was going to suffer for it.

What had he gotten himself into? How was he ever going to get his new husband to like him, much less love him, if the man thought the idea of the two of them being together was inherently wrong?

"And more than that, the fact that his father agreed to it, makes me suspicious," Reprimuric said, his tone suspicious, as he narrowed his eyes in Yarulf's direction. "I'm all for you being happy in your new marriage, little brother. However, until your new husband shows that his loyalties lie with the Tauma, I will not trust him."

"Does that surprise anyone?" Grote said with a laugh. The closest to Milenther in age, Grote's hair was cut short, stopping to just above his ears. His eyes were a bright purple, and he was the jokester of the group. He always knew what to say to make Milenther laugh.

Milenther chuckled and cuddled into Grote's side when his older brother wrapped his arm around him.

“Come on, Milly. I’ll give you a quick lesson on pleasing a man,” Grote said.

Reprimuric spluttered. “You will not! That is for Father to do!”

Grote shrugged. “We have two days of riding ahead of us, and we do not need to use the magic wielders to keep us hidden as we do so. Once we return home, Father is going to give Milly a beautiful, romantic lesson about love and emotions. I’m going to tell him about nipples, cum, cocks, balls, and swallowing.” He wagged his eyebrows, and Milenther’s face flamed at his brother’s crassness even as he hurried after him curiously.

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Yarulf focused his attention on his father, his arms folded across his chest as he struggled to not scream out against the injustice of it all.

“My son, I know that you are infuriated and disgusted by the circumstances you currently find yourself in, but, believe me, we can work this to our advantage.”

Yarulf narrowed his eyes, trying not to show how much he doubted his father’s words, but also trying not to show how incredibly turned on he was by his new *husband* either. *Cyalni* above! Was he actually married to a Tauma barbarian? Granted, their wedding ceremony had merely consisted of signing the peace treaty and acknowledging in front of the holy eunuch that they would be wed, but still, in the eyes of the Adethiel kingdom, he was married to Milenther Dagorn. Well, Milenther Dagorn-Cossobeth or rather he was now Yarulf Cossobeth-Dagorn, since his kingdom was the one that had been conquered.

“How shall we work this to our advantage, Father?” Yarulf asked.

“You will of course be allowed to correspond with your family. Whether it is through visits home, or through letters and messengers. Either way, you will use the ancient language that your grandfather created for battle to communicate, and you will provide us with secrets, intel, weaknesses. And when the time is right, when they are at their most vulnerable, you will let us know, and you will join with us and help us to not only defeat the Tauma but to completely wipe them from existence.”

Yarulf looked into his father’s blue eyes, shivering at the cold, unholy, calculating glee that gleamed within them and then to his left, where his new husband stood surrounded by his brothers. Milenther and his twelve brothers



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stood surrounded by the Tauma army, their red hair gleaming in the waning sun, their chests shining with sweat, and Yarulf's throat went dry with lust. His stomach clenched as he thought about betraying these people, especially as he watched them smile and laugh, patting each other on the backs, teasing and shoving each other, Milenther the smallest and thinnest one of the bunch. They wore brown leather kilts around their waists, and though Yarulf would deny it, they seemed a lot happier than he had ever been in his entire life.

And that pissed him off.

"I'll do it."

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## Chapter Four

Milenther glanced over his shoulder at the carriage for the fourteenth time and sighed before he turned back around to face forward.

“You know, for a soldier, your new husband is a bit of a pussy.”

Milenther glared at his brother Daimiro and growled. “He was injured, Daim,” he offered in way of explanation, “and would not allow me to heal him as you all did. So allow him to travel in his carriage with his manservant. Besides, I am sure he needs this time to come to grips with the fact that he is leaving his kingdom behind and coming to Nerandra. If the shoe were on the other foot, I know I would want my husband to extend me the same courtesy.”

Daimiro snorted. “If the shoe were on the other foot, Milly, you would have figured out a way to escape with your manservant without him being the wiser, while your new husband rode with his brothers ahead of you on his horse.”

Milenther chuckled before a feeling of dread filled him. His eyes widened and he turned to look at Daimiro. His brothers ceased their chatter and all conversation came to an abrupt halt. Milenther turned his mount around and maneuvered him back towards the carriage. Easing down off the side of his horse, Milenther wrenched open the door of the carriage, worry flooding his body at the possibility of finding it empty.

He gasped when he found himself face to face with his husband, the blue eyes filled with a sort of cold amusement. Yarulf's lips pulled up into a smirk as he leaned forward and stared at Milenther.

“Did you expect to find me gone, *husband*?” Yarulf asked.

Milenther swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat from embarrassment and scratched the back of his neck as he looked over his shoulder at his brothers, who all whistled and walked away. He stammered as he looked back at his new husband.

“Or perhaps you merely raced back to the carriage to check on the well-being and the countenance of your new *husband*?” Yarulf asked, his lip raising in disgust as he put emphasis on the word husband.

Milenther's face grew hot, but he tried to smile reassuringly at Yarulf, to placate him. However, he caught sight of the wince on his new husband's

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manservant's face. It gave him pause. Perhaps this type of behavior was normal for his husband. Maybe this highhandedness was his normal way of behaving. If it was, Milenther was not going to put up with it. He may be smaller than his new husband; he may not be a warrior or a soldier, but he was Tauma, and it was engrained in his genetic makeup to stand up for what was right, for what was good and pure, and he would do just that.

“No, actually, I came to tell you that since you are a soldier and I am not, you are to ride the horse. I am going to ride in the carriage,” Milenther told him.

Yarulf's eyes widened. “What?” he stammered.

Milenther nodded. “Or we could both ride the horse.” He shrugged. “It's really up to you. But either way, as a soldier, you are not to ride in the carriage. It is not fit for the husband of a Tauman prince to ride in the carriage unless he is at the *River of Zenith*, preparing to enter into the Great Beyond. Even then he is to try and ride a horse. You are to ride a horse at all times. So, get out of the carriage and get on a horse. You can either ride my horse alone and let me ride in the carriage with your manservant, or we can ride my horse together.”

Milenther grinned at Yarulf.

“The choice is yours.”

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Yarulf clenched his jaw as he stared at Milenther's smug face and then glanced over at Biumula, who looked back at him fearfully. He knew that his manservant did not want to ride with Milenther in the carriage alone, but Yarulf also did not want to ride on a horse with Milenther. The thought of being pressed against the other man's naked back, or having Milenther's naked chest pressed against his back made Yarulf's groin tighten. He wouldn't be able to keep his twisted desires a secret that way. But what choice did he have? He couldn't put his manservant into the unpleasant position of having to sit with the barbarian.

Yarulf growled, opened the carriage door and stepped out. He climbed down the steps. “I will ride with you,” he said between clenched teeth.

“Oh look, the prissy Rarder is actually going to ride a horse!” one of the Tauma soldiers mocked him.

“Cieron!” Milenther yelled, his face flushed red. Yarulf's eyebrows rose in the face of his husband's anger. “He may be a Rarder, but he's still a prince of

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Adethiel, and as such, he outranks you. Not only is he a prince, he is my husband, which means he commands respect. I may not be a warrior like my brothers, but I am still a prince.”

Cieron bowed his head from where he sat atop his horse, glaring at Yarulf before he looked apologetically at Milenther. “Apologies, Your Highness.”

“*Seken*,” Milenther said, thanking the soldier for his apology, then looked over at Yarulf. “Shall we?”

Yarulf nodded, a small seed of respect for his husband burrowing itself inside of his heart. As he followed Milenther towards his horse, Yarulf found his eyes drifting down over Milenther’s naked back to his pert, round ass. Yarulf’s mouth went dry, and his mind filled with salacious images of himself kneeling behind Milenther, his tongue buried in the red-haired man’s bum.

He was pulled out of his dark musings by the sound of someone clearing his throat. Yarulf glanced up to see Milenther’s older brother Madita staring at him with a smirk on his face.

“Better get on the horse, Rarder,” Madita said with a chuckle.

Yarulf cleared his throat hoping no one saw his hardness pressing against the front of his breeches as he walked over to the horse, placed his right foot in the stirrups, swung his left foot over the back of the horse, and settled himself in the saddle.

Milenther stared up at him and smiled. “How do you want me?” he asked softly. Yarulf swallowed and shoved away the images that filled his mind, sure that Milenther didn’t mean his words the way Yarulf had taken them. He shook his head and wondered which position would wreak less havoc on his senses. Knowing that if Milenther were sitting in front he would feel Yarulf’s hard shaft, Yarulf pressed forward and gestured behind him.

Milenther nodded and held up his hand. Huffing out a breath of annoyance, Yarulf reached down to help Milenther up into the saddle behind him. When Milenther’s toned arms wrapped around his waist, and the other man’s warm breath blew against the side of his neck, Yarulf shivered slightly, and realized that he may have made a mistake.

“Milly? Can we go?” Yarulf looked over at Milenther’s brother Nusaces and scowled. The broad shouldered man looked as if he were exasperated with Milenther and, for some reason that irritated Yarulf. Pulling Milenther tightly against his back, Yarulf glared at Nusaces.

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“Perhaps you could be a little more patient with your youngest brother? As I understand it, he is a healer, not a warrior and soldier like you, your brothers, and I. He has fought in a battle, survived, gotten married and ridden half a day astride a horse with nary a complaint. I have heard some of your own soldiers, who are currently bringing up the rear of your caravan, who cannot boast of the same fortitude. So before you dare show that impatient glower towards my husband and your brother again, remember that he has matched you in endurance this day, without being trained to do so.” Yarulf picked up the reins of the horse’s bridle and, after clicking his tongue, lightly pressed his heels into the horse’s side. Leaving a stunned Nusaces staring after him and Milenther as they went to join Milenther’s other brothers at the front of the returning military caravan.

“Wow,” Milenther breathed against Yarulf’s neck.

Yarulf shivered. “What?” he croaked out.

Milenther shook his head against Yarulf’s shoulder. “N-no one’s ever really stood up for me before.”

Yarulf looked over his shoulder at Milenther, his eyebrows raised in surprise. “Really? I find that hard to believe. You and your brothers seem very close.”

Milenther shrugged. “We are. Extremely close. No one really messes with me outside of them. They tease me all the time and my parents are always telling me that I just need to grow a thicker skin because my brothers are joking with me. But do you know what it’s like to be surrounded by warriors and not be one? No one’s ever really pointed out to them that, even though I’m different from them, I still keep up. That was—wow.”

Yarulf didn’t want to examine the warm feeling expanding in his chest. He couldn’t feel anything for this barbarian. For this... Tauma. He wasn’t going to be in Nerandra for long. He was only going to be there long enough to get information. For the family to trust him and reveal their weaknesses. Then he would convey the information to his father, and at the right time, Adethiel would strike and wipe the Tauma off the map. Yarulf would walk away and forget that he’d ever been married to Milenther.

He’d forget that Milenther’s arms had ever been wrapped around him.

That Milenther’s breath ever feathered the hairs at the base of his skull.

That he could feel Milenther’s heartbeat.

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He'd forget all about the fact that the thought of Milenther *not* being his husband caused his stomach to clench and bile to rise in his throat.

He had a duty to fulfill and he was a Rarder. A Rarder always fulfilled their duty.

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## Chapter Five

Milenther yawned and opened his eyes, looking around blearily when he felt the horse come to a stop. He lifted his head from Yarulf's back and wiped the drool from the side of his mouth, blushing furiously and hoping his new husband didn't find his drooling disgusting. He tried to figure out where they were, but the inky darkness, coupled with the large trees of the forest that surrounded them, made that impossible.

"We'll sleep here for the night and continue in the morning," Reprimuric stated loudly.

Milenther noticed the way Yarulf stiffened as he looked around and wondered what was going through the Rarder's head. Deciding that he would wait until they were bunked down for the night, Milenther kept his mouth shut. He leaned forward, allowing his hair to touch Yarulf more fully and made sure that as they had been riding, his hair and healing magic had been healing Yarulf's injuries. Satisfied that Yarulf's wounds were sealed and had become new flesh, Milenther sighed in exhaustion and relief.

"Milly, you and your *husband*, can take the tent. His manservant can sleep in the carriage, that way we don't have to hear the carriage rocking," Milenther's older brother Jacoun teased him.

Milenther flushed and felt Yarulf chest vibrate as he growled.

"Do you all always speak in such a manner?" Yarulf asked.

Jacoun looked at his brothers and back at Yarulf. Milenther felt confusion fill him, what was wrong with what his brother had said? He knew that he'd complained about his brothers teasing him, but he'd been talking about them teasing him about being a healer, or being smaller. This was them showing their support for his marriage. What was Yarulf's problem?

"You got a problem, Rarder?" Silain, another of Milenther's brothers, said, scowling at Yarulf.

Yarulf sighed, and Milenther unwrapped his arms from around the other man's waist and watched as Yarulf climbed down off the horse, steadying the large animal. Before he turned to face Milenther's brothers, he folded his arms across his chest, the fabric of his jacket pulling taut across his biceps and shoulders. Milenther's mouth went dry at the sight, and he dropped his hand to his lap to hide his hardening erection.

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“I understand that the Tauma are a . . . classless society. You lack morals and dignity, but what I may or may not be doing with your brother is not something that you should be thinking about, much less discussing in public,” Yarulf said.

Milenther's eyes widened at his husband's words and he could tell from the way his brothers all slowly lowered themselves from their own horses and walked towards Yarulf that things were about to get really ugly, really fast.

“Sil! He is not like us. Let us remember this. Mother would not have you behave this way,” Milenther pleaded with his brother in their native tongue.

Yarulf's head swung towards him when he heard Milenther speak, and it was that moment of distraction that cost him. Milenther's brothers pounced on him when his head was turned and lifting him above their heads, they walked with him, shouting and demanding to be put down, through the forest towards parts unknown. Milenther hurried down off the horse, tumbling ungracefully to his face with a grunt of pain. The cluster of trees was too close together for his horse to get through, and he wondered for a moment why his brothers had chosen this place to stop. Until he passed through the trees and came to a breathtaking beach.

His eyes took in the sight of the rolling blue waves and the clean sand that pressed sensuously against a wide grassy meadow. Milenther inhaled deeply, the salty sea air filling his lungs and calming his anxious spirit. For the first time since his father had sent him with his brothers to fight against the Rarders, Milenther felt himself relax and become at peace. He'd always felt a closeness with nature and being here on this beach made him feel as if a part of his soul were being cleansed from the filth of battle.

A harsh yell pulled him out of his spiritual introspection, and Milenther turned to see his brothers toss Yarulf into the sea. Milenther gasped and ran forward. He stopped at the edge of the water and watched as Yarulf stood, spluttering, his thick, dark-blue hair dripping and plastered around his face and head. His fancy clothes clung to him like a second skin, and Milenther swallowed back the moan that threatened. He could only hope that none of his brothers looked his way right then, because he had a serious problem going on beneath his kilt in that moment.

His brothers chortled at Yarulf's discomfiture, and as Yarulf raced towards them each individually, they easily evaded him. Milenther stood at the edge, watching as his brothers essentially teased his new husband, and wondered if Yarulf knew that his brothers were welcoming him into the family.



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After racing past Evien and having the man use his momentum to lift him and toss him back into the water, Yarulf stood, squaring off against Milenther's twelve brothers, and glared at each of them. Milenther gnawed on his bottom lip, realizing that his husband didn't understand that this was the way many Tauma men welcomed a brother-in-law into the family. He stepped forward to explain when he saw Yarulf's blue eyes settle on him.

Milenther froze when that cool gaze traveled up and down his form, before resting on his groin. He watched Yarulf's Adam's apple bob as he swallowed and looked back up into Milenther's eyes. He regarded Milenther intensely before looking back at Milenther's brothers. Then, to Milenther's complete surprise, Yarulf began pulling his clothes off piece by piece until he only wore his trousers, having tossed everything up on the beach near Milenther. Crouching into a fighting pose, one leg behind the other, he beckoned Milenther's brothers mockingly.

"I am ready Tauma bastards. Bring it on."

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Yarulf finally understood that Milenther's brothers had, in their own way, been welcoming him into their family. He wasn't exactly sure how he felt about it. Whenever someone married into a Rarder family there was a huge banquet, a formal celebration with well-dressed people as they welcomed the new member of the family. Of course, the Tauma were not as cultured as the Rarder so he should have expected that their way of welcoming him into their family would be completely different.

He watched as Milenther's brothers traded looks before they smirked at him. Letting out battle cries they came at him one after the other. Grappling and wrestling in the water ensued, and Yarulf found himself laughing as he tussled with the muscled Tauma warriors. He was tossed into the water more times than he cared to think about, but before long, he and all of the other men rested on the beach on their backs, chuckling.

Milenther stood above them, his arms crossed over his chest as he stared down at all of them, his eyebrow quirked.

"Are you all done with your display of brawn?" he asked.

Yarulf felt a surge of lust and adrenaline rush through him, and he had to fight the urge to leap to his feet and sweep Milenther up into his arms and kiss the other man senseless. Or to give into his other, darker desires and push his erection deep into the slender man's body.

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“Oh Milly, calm down. Your new husband has done well. Father will be proud of the match that you have made,” Daimiro said.

Milenthier scoffed. “Yeah well, that is not the point. The point is, that we stopped so that we could eat, cleanse our bodies and sleep, so that we could continue our journey tomorrow. Yet you all are acting like children.”

Yarulf pushed himself up into a seated position and turned to look at Milenthier, his eyebrows raised at the other man's tone. He would have thought that Milenthier would have been happy that Yarulf had been bonding with his brothers. Instead, it seemed as if he were annoyed.

Silain chuckled. “Fine, Milly. We'll act like adults and get the camp set up.”

Milenthier nodded, turned on his heel, and walked off. Yarulf watched as he walked away before turning to the man's brothers, opening his mouth to question them. Grote shook his head and held up his hand.

“Milly isn't really upset that we were having fun with you. He's just upset that you were having fun without *him*. I think you need to go and talk to your new husband, Rarder,” Grote said.

Yarulf nodded, nervousness settling in his belly as he stood, brushing the sand from his ass. Could he trust himself to talk to Milenthier without pulling the other man to him tightly and ravishing him in the middle of the forest? Regardless of the fact that they were essentially wed, Yarulf had been raised to believe that two men lying together was inherently wrong. A depravity, a dark and perverse desire. It was one of the reasons that his father wanted the Tauma exterminated. It was the reason Yarulf hid his own desires so fiercely. Milenthier made those desires extremely hard to ignore.

*I am a soldier and prince of the Kingdom of Adethiel. I can talk to a Tauma male and not be ruled by my flesh.*

Squaring his soldiers, Yarulf marched after Milenthier. He found the other man standing by his horse, removing his saddlebags and directing the army towards the beach to set up the camp. Yarulf stood and watched the play of muscles in the other man's back for a moment. His mouth grew dry, and he imagined himself walking over to Milenthier and licking the naked skin from the man's neck down to his round, pert ass.

Swallowing back his groan, Yarulf walked up to Milenthier and cleared his throat. He saw Milenthier stiffen for a moment, but the other man continued his earlier actions without turning around or even acknowledging Yarulf's

presence. Realizing that he was going to have to actually speak to his husband, Yarulf sighed for a moment. Yarulf tried to figure out what to say.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

Milenther turned to assess him, his gaze traveling up and down Yarulf's body for a long moment before he stared deep into Yarulf's eyes. “Do you actually want to help, Rarder, or are you merely asking to be nice?” Milenther asked. “Because your manservant did the same thing.”

Yarulf looked over to where Biumula sat on the edge of the carriage, watching as one of the Tauma warriors carried the supplies through the forest towards the meadow, his tongue tracing his lower lip, and raised his eyebrows in amazement. When Biumula's gaze swung over to Yarulf he blushed furiously at being caught and looked away ashamedly. Yarulf knew, when he got a chance, he would be talking with his manservant about more than just his unwillingness to assist with setting up camp.

“I will talk with him later, Milenther, but I really would like to help,” Yarulf assured the Tauma.

Milenther nodded and handed Yarulf his saddlebags. “Well then, I thank you. Can you take this to the clearing?”

Yarulf nodded and accepted the saddlebags from Milenther. Their fingertips touched and Yarulf inhaled sharply at the zing of awareness that coursed through him. He took a step back and looked down at his hands before glancing at Milenther to see if the other man was similarly affected. When he noticed Milenther rubbing his fingers together, as if confused by the shock, Yarulf was pleased that he wasn't the only one who had experienced the sensation. When Milenther looked up at him, Yarulf smiled at him feeling an urge to lean over and kiss the other man's full lips. He might have done just that if his father's voice hadn't penetrated his mind at that moment, reminding him of why he was there. Straightening to his full height, Yarulf nodded to Milenther and turned to walk away.

“Yarulf?” Milenther called. Yarulf stopped and glanced over his shoulder at Milenther, his heart pounding as he watched Milenther free his hair from the ponytail he'd had it in and run his fingers through the long strands. “I look forward to tonight.”

All of the air in Yarulf's lungs left him in a rush, and turning back around, he hurried through the forest to the clearing to place the saddlebags into the tent he would be sharing with Milenther.

The Tauma.

A man.

His husband.

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## Chapter Six

Milenther shook his head as he watched Yarulf rush away from him. He didn't understand what had just happened. He'd seen the desire in the Rarder's eyes, darkening the blue orbs. It had pulled him in, making him want to ignore all of the warriors and animals around them and strip his clothes as he begged Yarulf to fuck him. Shivering as the image of Yarulf and him locked in such an intimate embrace rose to his mind, Milenther cleared his throat and turned back to his horse, rubbing his hands along the animal's side in an attempt to calm his racing heart.

"You should not get your hopes up, Tauma," a voice said behind him. Milenther turned and found himself looking into the eyes of Yarulf's manservant, Biumula if he remembered the man's name correctly. Milenther's eyes took in the sight of the other man as he tried to figure out if the warning came from friend, foe, or jealous lover.

Biumula was a few inches shorter than Milenther, with the dark hair that was common with most Rarderians. But his ears were slightly pointed, which spoke to his having a Gerey heritage. Where Milenther was slender, Biumula was round, though not in an entirely unpleasant way. Where Yarulf's eyes were a gorgeous, dark-blue color, Biumula's were an interesting blend of blue and green. Milenther found himself intrigued by them, probably more than he should have been. Shaking his head mentally, he placed a hand on one of his hips resting the other on the back of his horse while he regarded the manservant carefully.

"I don't know what you mean, Rarder," he said with a tight smile.

Biumula scoffed as he walked closer and gestured with a tilt of his head in the direction where Yarulf had just ran off. "Yarulf is a proud prince of the kingdom of Adethiel. He follows the rules and customs of our people without fail. Two men lying together is against our laws. That is not something that he would ever go against. Even if he has been forced to marry you."

Milenther glanced over his shoulder towards the forest, his thoughts swirling as he contemplated Biumula's words. Could the manservant be right? Yarulf had run away from him quickly. Perhaps theirs would not be the marriage that Milenther had been fantasizing about for the past few hours.

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No sooner had that thought entered his mind, than he remembered the way Yarulf's blue eyes had darkened with desire as he'd looked at Milenther. Yarulf may be trying to fight against his attraction to Milenther, but that attraction was still there. And Milenther would do everything he could to make sure that his husband saw that two men being together was not wrong but was, indeed, very beautiful.

Turning back to Biumula, Milenther smiled and nodded at him. "*Seken* for your advice, Rarder. I shall take it under... advisement. Now, if you will excuse me. I find that I have need to wash myself."

With that, Milenther walked away from the speechless Biumula and made his way through the forest and to the sea. He heard his brothers and the other Tauma warriors teasing each other as he approached them, and he smiled at them when they asked him to come and join them in a game of shaconr. It was a game of skill, not brawn, and it was one that Milenther had beaten his brothers at numerous times over the years. Usually he didn't pass up a chance to display his mental prowess, but he had more important things on his mind.

He was acutely aware of Yarulf standing just outside of the tent they would be sharing that night. It sat on the edge of the grass, away from the rest of the camp. Milenther walked past the tent before stopping at the edge of the water and inhaling deeply to prepare himself for what he was about to do. He wasn't as bold as his brothers. It came from being a healer, and the youngest. He'd spent his life being coddled and babied, sheltered from most things, almost hidden away. But, if he wanted to make sure that he and Yarulf had a chance at having a real marriage, he was going to have to show the man that being with another man was not wrong.

Resolved in his actions, Milenther nodded and reached down to remove his belt from around his waist. He dropped it to the sand even as he reached up to pull his baldric over his head and lay it on the ground next to his belt, carefully, since it held not only his sword but some healing potions and herbs within the leather pouches, and they were quite delicate. While he was bent over, Milenther pulled off the leather sandals that were strapped up his legs to his knees. Once that was done, he released the fastening on his kilt and let it fall on top of the rest of his things. He heard a choked gasp and smirked. Yarulf sounded a lot closer than the tent and it gave Milenther hope.

Stretching his arms up above his head, making sure to put his body on display for his husband, Milenther ran his fingers through his hair, before he

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bent back over, his ass pointed directly at Yarulf, as he pulled out his bar of lye soap mixed with strips of bergamot and cinnamon. Without a backward glance, Milenther headed straight into the sea water to bathe, knowing that Yarulf would be watching him the entire time.

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As Yarulf sat with the Tauma that evening, eating the elk some of the soldiers had hunted and skinned earlier for the meal, he was acutely aware of Milenther sitting on the log next to him. Watching Milenther undress for his bath earlier had been the most foolish thing that Yarulf had ever done. No. No. Watching Milenther bathe was the most foolish thing he had ever done, watching him undress was the *second*. Yarulf's shaft was still hard in his breeches, in spite of the fact that he'd shot his load twice during his own bath. He had no idea how he was supposed to sleep in the tent with the red-haired siren without giving into his depravities and fucking him until they both expired from bliss.

The thought of dying from too much pleasure caused Yarulf's lips to twist up into a smile and he turned to Milenther when the other man nudged him.

“What is that smile for, Rarder?” Milenther asked.

Yarulf shrugged. “Nothing. It was my own private thought, Tauma, or am I not allowed those?”

Milenther blinked and nodded, his cheeks colored slightly. “Apologies. I just wanted to share in whatever would bring a smile to your face.”

Yarulf sighed. He'd been short with the other man, which hadn't been his intention. He would never be able to fulfill his duty to his father if he couldn't get close to these people, and the way to do that was through Milenther. He reached out to touch the back of Milenther's hand.

“No need to apologize. I must admit that my shortness with your question was not because I did not think you allowed me to have my own private thoughts or because I feel as though you and your family have caused me some offense. It is merely due to the... nature of the thoughts. They are of a more... intimate nature.”

Milenther's eyes widened as he listened to Yarulf, and he glanced around, as if he were afraid that someone would overhear their conversation, then he looked back at Yarulf. He leaned closer. “I understand. I'm the same way. I don't like to share my sex fantasies with my brothers either.”

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Yarulf chuckled. "Well, these thoughts would have caused me much problem back home had anyone been aware of me having them. Because they were of me with another male. They were of me and you."

Milenther gasped and Yarulf's grin widened even more, perhaps this wouldn't be as hard as he'd originally thought. He watched as Milenther's pale cheeks reddened and a pleased expression came onto his face before the man looked over at him shyly. Yarulf had the insane urge to sweep Milenther into his arms and kiss him passionately, but he resisted, but only just barely.

He turned to look out across the fire and noticed that Milenther's brother Laselni watched them closely, rolling a piece of bark between his teeth. Yarulf scowled at the other man and glanced away from him, only to find Milenther's gaze trained on his face. He raised his eyebrows and hoped his expression was open and not too surprised.

"You think my brothers and I are truly barbarians, don't you?" Milenther asked with a tight smile on his face. It wasn't a happy smile. It was an expression that made Yarulf nervous when he saw it. Nervous and yet, still aroused.

Yarulf felt his own face heat. He opened his mouth to apologize but stopped when Milenther raised his hand and shook his head.

"Our people may not dress and act the way your people act, Yarulf, but that does not make us barbarians. We are free people. We laugh. We love. We are not bound by the restrictions that are placed on your people. That tell them, if they do not act a certain way, or if they do not speak or dress or live or even *love* a certain way, then that means that they are worthless." Milenther stood and glared down at Yarulf, his eyes flashing purple fire, and try as he might to resist it, Yarulf's dick leaked a bit of pre-cum. He found Milenther irresistible in his fury. "To you we may be the barbarians, but to us, you are the animals."

And with those words Milenther turned and marched off in a fury. Yarulf watched him and knew that had they been in Adethiel, in the Royal Theatre, at that very moment the crowd would have surged to their feet to applaud Milenther's impassioned speech. Yarulf himself was hard-pressed not to find a dozen *poszumas* flowers and toss them before the flame-haired beauty.

"So do you plan to sit there looking like a *dulanthar* for the rest of the evening, or are you going to go after him like the *chrabivina* that we think you are?" Brylir questioned Yarulf from across the fire, though he never once looked at him.



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Yarulf's eyes widened at Brylir's use of the word *chrabivina*. Being called a *dulanthar*, an ass, was something he expected as a Rarder. But a *chrabivina*? A man of integrity and honor? A Tauma gentleman?

Guilt settled like a lead weight in Yarulf's gut. He nodded his head, pushed shakily to his feet, and, without another word, went after Milenther. What had he done to merit such quick trust and understanding from the Tauma? Was it engaging in their playful brawl in the sea? Was it assisting them in setting up camp? What had he done to gain such favor in their eyes?

Centuries of fighting between Rarders and Taumas had led to thousands of lives lost and hundreds upon thousands of families broken. There was no trust, no love lost between the two people, and yet, here he was, married to a Tauma prince, chasing after the man, with not only the blessing of the other Tauma princes to aid his cause, but their trust behind him.

Yarulf stumbled. Why were Milenther's brothers so supportive and encouraging? Perhaps this was all a part of their plan? To get him to chase after Milenther so that the Tauma could kill him out in the darkness.

"I don't know what you are thinking about so intensely, but I assure you, whatever it is, you are wrong." Milenther's soft voice drifted in the wind to him, and Yarulf turned to see him standing just to the left, leaning against a tree. Yarulf walked closer to him, his steps measured as he tried to assess if the other man was on the verge of attacking him or was merely in a contemplative state.

"How can you be so sure that whatever I am thinking is incorrect?" He asked.

Milenther shrugged. "You have been wrong about most things concerning me and my people. Since you are chasing after me, I naturally assumed that I was on your mind. Or my brothers." He tilted his head to the side as he regarded Yarulf silently. "So how about it, Your Highness? Was I correct in my thinking?"

Yarulf grunted and glanced away but did not answer. Instead he stepped closer to Milenther, so close he could feel the other man's breath on his skin. The warm air on his flesh caused Yarulf's skin to prickle and his nipples to harden. He stilled, the witty remark he'd been about to make locked inside of his chest. He stared down at Milenther, watching as the other man's eyes darkened.

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When Milenther's tongue peeked out between the seam of his pink lips to wet the bottom one, Yarulf groaned. His hand lifted to tangle itself in the strands of Milenther's hair, even as his brain shut down. He gently pulled Milenther's head back and lowered his down to inhale the intoxicating scent of Milenther's body.

His father's angry voice reminding him of his duty to his people was a distant hum in the back of his head. The rules and laws he'd grown up with, that he wrapped around him as a shield and flayed his spirit with whenever his groin tightened at the sight of another man, was just a tiny itch beneath his skin. One he easily ignored when Milenther's hands came up and fisted themselves in the back of his shirt.

Yarulf pushed out his tongue and licked a line up the side of Milenther's neck to his ear, sucking the lobe into his mouth. He growled at the taste of Milenther flooding his mouth even as his other hand dropped to wrap around Milenther's waist and pull them flush together. The feel of Milenther's erection rubbing against his own made Yarulf shiver, and he released Milenther's earlobe to kiss along Milenther's jawline to his chin. He nipped the skin there gently before lifting his head and staring down into Milenther's eyes.

What he saw there caused his heart to stutter and his lungs to expand quickly. Milenther's eyes had darkened to such a degree they almost seemed black. Yarulf knew it wasn't black magic or anything to fear, it was lust, desire... *need*. He knew, because he felt the same emotions echoing deep within himself.

With a snarl, angry at himself for being weak, angry at Milenther for being so fucking beautiful and desirable it made him weak, angry at his people for making same sex relationships wrong, and angry at the Tauma for not having an issue with it, Yarulf took Milenther's lips in a hungry kiss. The sounds of the forest stopped around them, as if someone had closed the door trapping Yarulf and Milenther inside a cavern, alone. Only the sound of Yarulf's frantically pounding heartbeat penetrated the harsh breathing, groaning, and whimpering that flowed up between him and Milenther, passing from one mouth to the other.

Milenther tasted sweet and slightly smoky, the food roasted over the fire combining with his natural flavor. Yarulf couldn't get enough, and he pressed himself even closer to the man. He slid his hand from around Milenther's waist to clutch the side of his ass. Yarulf trembled at the feel of the flesh filling his palm, and he pushed his tongue deeper into Milenther's mouth.

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Their tongues dueled for dominance, something which thrilled Yarulf. None of the women he'd lain with back in Adethiel had ever fought with him for the upper hand and, although Milenther eventually conceded, melting into Yarulf's arms, the fight for it, for control, thrilled him. Yarulf pushed Milenther against the tree, turning his head as he continued to plunder the man's mouth, biting gently on his lower lip, and licking away the sting.

Milenther's hands on the front of his breeches, fumbling with the fastenings, made Yarulf's mind fill even more with the fog of lust, and he slid his hand beneath Milenther's kilt just as the other man's hand slid down into the front of his open breeches to grip his shaft. Yarulf wrenched his mouth away from Milenther's and leaned his head back as he groaned. It was such a delicious feeling, his entire body felt aflame with need and yearning.

He gave himself a moment to bask in the feeling of Milenther's hands on him before Yarulf lowered his head to kiss and lick the base of Milenther's neck.

"I need to be inside of you," he panted. It had been a long time since he'd gone deep into the darkest parts of Adethiel to deal with his deepest desire. To stroke himself as he watched other men share their bodies with each other, but even if it had been just the day before, he still would be trembling with need. Lifting his hands from Milenther's body, Yarulf fisted them and pressed them on the trunk of the tree on either side of Milenther's head.

They stared into each other's eyes, sharing their desires without speaking, exchanging breaths as Yarulf inhaled, Milenther exhaled, and vice versa. Neither of them moved for long moments, until Milenther finally held up a vial of liquid. Yarulf flicked a glance at the gleaming blue substance inside and looked back at Milenther.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It will help you ease your way inside of me," Milenther told him.

The air locked in Yarulf's lungs, and he slowly released his breath before accepting the vial. He would worry about the implications of laying with the Tauma on the morrow. Perhaps then he would agonize about how what he had done was *wrong*. Right now he was going to stop fighting himself and give into the fire blazing throughout his body.

He pulled Milenther to him tightly for another kiss even as his hands pulled at the stopper in the vial. This oil was different from what he usually used, but as long as it worked...

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Milenther pulled away from the kiss and brushed a hand against the side of his face. Not only did Yarulf's cock twitch, but his heart as well, and it gave him only a moment of pause before he was once more back in the arms of his Tauma husband.

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## Chapter Seven

Milenther was nervous about finally giving himself to a man. And while he would have preferred to be in their tent, or rather in a bed back home, in the forest, alone, could work too.

Or at least that was what he was telling himself.

When Yarulf's fingers, slick with the stretching oil Milenther had brewed in the apothecary shop, moved over his hole, Milenther shivered. He moaned and tightened his fingers around Yarulf's shoulders. The firmness of the Rarder's body sent a thrill through him even as the cloth of his tunic, dampened from his sweat, chafed against Milenther's skin. His body was on the verge of bursting apart at the seams and he was helpless to stop it. He wasn't sure he wanted to. Instead he hissed out Yarulf's name and delighted in the feel of his broad fingers moving up, down and around his hole. Milenther's head pressed against the trunk of the tree, and he whimpered when Yarulf pushed the tip of one finger into his body.

"You are so tight. How is that possible? Has it been a while for you?" Yarulf sounded awed by that fact, and Milenther gave him a tight smile.

"I have never... been with another man, that is why," Milenther confessed.

Yarulf froze and he pulled his finger free. Milenther opened eyes he wasn't even aware of ever having closed and looked up into Yarulf's blue ones. How had he ever thought Yarulf's eyes were shards of blue ice? They blazed with a blue fire, and Milenther felt scorched, warmed from the inside out. He was desperate to be filled by Yarulf, to be stretched by his hardness.

"You are an *inxoten*?" Yarulf asked. Milenther was taken aback by the surprise and... possessiveness he heard in Yarulf's voice. The possibility that Milenther was a virgin obviously thrilled Yarulf, which sent an echoing shiver of delight to course through Milenther's body. He nodded, unable to speak, enflamed by the heat of desire in Yarulf's voice.

Yarulf's eyes closed for a moment as he exhaled, but when he opened them, he appeared to be a little more in control, though his eyes still gleamed with dark pools of passion.

"I will not take you against a tree in a forest for your first time," Yarulf promised. "Though we will revisit the idea. I find the idea of you naked in nature very attractive."

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Yarulf's hand grabbing onto his own and tugging him forward, prevented Milenther from speaking. Shock warred with desire within him, his body flushing hot and cold as he tried to make sense of Yarulf's actions. He walked dazedly, stepping over branches, as Yarulf led him from the forest with neither of them speaking another word. As they drew closer to their tent, Milenther could hear his brothers and the Tauma soldiers sharing tawdry stories and singing bawdy songs of women with large tits and men with tight asses and huge cocks. Milenther's face flamed, and he looked up at the back of Yarulf's head wondering what the Rarder thought of the revelry.

Yarulf didn't say a word or mention what was happening at the fire, instead, he held up one side of the tent's opening so that Milenther could step within. A fact for which Milenther was both relieved and surprised. Perhaps Yarulf was growing accustomed to his people and their enthusiasm for life and laughter. Or perhaps, Yarulf was so aroused and intent on consummating their relationship that he paid the Tauma soldiers and Milenther's brothers no mind. Either way, Milenther kept his mouth shut as well and fixed his gaze on the back of Yarulf's head, happy that no one stopped them. Relief warred with his aching groin and clenching hole. He wanted to talk to Yarulf, to discuss things, and yet, he desperately wanted them to be joined together.

Once Milenther was inside, he removed his sandals and turned back to Yarulf to watch as the other man sat down on the animal pelts that made up the floor of the tent to remove his boots. Milenther inhaled sharply, a soft groan spilling out as his eyes watched the muscles in Yarulf's forearms constrict and move as he undressed completely. Yarulf continued, not stopping until he knelt on the bed in the center of the tent, completely nude. Milenther followed Yarulf's lead and removed all of his clothing, until he too stood bare in front of Yarulf. Fear caused his hands to shake as he took in the sight of Yarulf's naked form. Now that they were here, together, naked, Milenther was nervous and afraid. What if he did something wrong? What if he disappointed Yarulf? Would the Rarder cast him aside? What if Yarulf hated sleeping with him because he was a man? What if it hurt? Milenther had been told countless times that lying with a man would be painful.

Yarulf held out a hand to him, and Milenther stepped forward to accept it. He let out an exhalation as Yarulf tugged him against his broad, muscled torso, their chests colliding and erections rubbing against each other. Milenther trembled as Yarulf's hand moved up and down the skin of his back, soothing him. While still nervous, Milenther's fears were slowly being replaced by

excitement and anticipation. A sort of cautious excitement and hesitant anticipation, but it was there, nonetheless. He pushed himself as close as he possibly could get to Yarulf, rubbing his lips along Yarulf's neck. He smiled when Yarulf groaned and lifted his own hands to tangle them in the strands of Yarulf's dark-blue hair.

Milenther lifted his lips from Yarulf's neck and stared up into his husband's gaze. He lifted his lips as if Yarulf's mouth were drawing him in and pressed them against Yarulf's again. This kiss wasn't as punishing as the one in the forest, but it was still infused with passion and desire. Letting his instincts control his movements, Milenther moved up until he straddled Yarulf's lap. Milenther hissed when Yarulf licked and nibbled his way down his neck to his hardened nipples. He fisted Yarulf's hair and pushed his chest up as Yarulf lashed the pebbled nubs, his blunt fingertips back between the globes of Milenther's ass, rubbing, stroking and pressing gently at the entrance to his body.

"O-oh," Milenther breathed. His mind was awash in desire. Tendrils of passion licked at his skin, causing it to turn pink. His ears filled with his own whimpers and moans, a beautiful accompaniment to Yarulf's harsh breathing and deep groans, as he slid his finger deep within Milenther's body.

Milenther felt as if he were falling and realized, only when he felt the softness of the animal furs against his back, that Yarulf had effortlessly laid him down upon the bed. Yarulf's blue eyes gleamed in the firelight that penetrated the tent's covering as he looked down at Milenther.

"You are beautiful," Yarulf whispered. Milenther's eyes burned at the feeling in the other man's words and he wondered why Yarulf sounded almost saddened by what he'd just said. He opened to ask but his words were cut off by the press of Yarulf's fingers upon something deep within his body that caused Milenther's back to arch.

"Yaaaruulffff," he groaned as Yarulf continued to push against that small, glorious spot within Milenther's body. Milenther fisted the animal furs on either side of his hips as Yarulf continued to send his pleasure skyrocketing to new heights.

"I'm trying to be gentle with you," Yarulf growled.

Milenther looked up and noticed the way the other man's arm trembled as he held himself aloft over Milenther's body.

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“I never asked you to be,” Milenther pointed out. And as if that were the only thing he were waiting to hear, Yarulf began pushing his fingers in and out of Milenther’s body, harder and deeper than before. He kissed and licked all over Milenther’s torso, biting his nipples before digging his teeth in the base of Milenther’s neck. Milenther gasped and arched his back.

Sweet, agonizing pleasure spread throughout his body from the point of that bite, his magic flaring within him as it recognized he was about to join his body with another, and he felt his balls draw up towards his body. Milenther wasn’t sure if his brothers’ magic reacted the same way, since they were warriors and the Tauman magic within them was merely a fraction of what it was within Milenther. But if their magic sizzled beneath their skin as well, it was no wonder they spent so much free time finding people to sleep with. He began panting, his hands moving from the back of Yarulf’s head to the furs, trying to find something to keep him grounded.

Yarulf finally pulled his fingers from Milenther’s body and rose up onto his knees between Milenther’s legs. He stared down at Milenther, unspeaking, and Milenther was frozen by the conflagration of lust that burned within Yarulf’s gaze. He was aware of movement, and he glanced down to see Yarulf pouring some of the oil onto his *quoxpine*.

“You have a *quoxpine*, not a cock,” Milenther gasped out. His eyes taking in the long, thick shaft between Yarulf’s legs and the large, heavy balls that hung beneath it. While he hadn’t seen many cocks in his life, Milenther knew a *quoxpine* when he saw one.

Yarulf let out a choked chuckle and looked down at his hard shaft. “*Rucopa*,” Yarulf said thanking him and smiling at Milenther.

Milenther shook his head. *Quoxpines* were only found on the most blessed of men. How Yarulf thought he would get such a thing inside of Milenther’s channel, he did not know. Milenther’s body tensed as he considered it from every angle but stopped when he felt Yarulf’s hand on his chest soothing him.

“You have to relax so that I will fit, Mil. Do not worry,” he said calling Milenther by a nickname that caused his insides to warm. He nodded up at Yarulf and tried to relax as he felt the head of Yarulf’s *quoxpine* against his wrinkled pucker.

“Breathe out,” Yarulf instructed him and Milenther did as he was commanded, groaning when Yarulf’s erection pushed past his guardian muscle and the head popped inside of his body.



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“Oh Shadita Lyra, preserve me,” Milenther groaned, praying to the goddess, as he took Yarulf fully within his body.

Yarulf pushed himself into Milenther's passage until his balls rested against the curve of Milenther's ass and Milenther pressed his head into the furs he lay on. He felt so full, so incredible, that there were no words. He groaned, whimpered and pleaded with Yarulf, though he wasn't sure for what. Yarulf seemed to know what he needed, however, for he pulled his hips back until only the head of his *quoxpine* remained within Milenther's body, before sliding back inside of him deeply.

Milenther reached up to bury his fingers in Yarulf's hair and yanked the other man down to him, taking his lips in a hard kiss. He could taste blood and wondered if it was his own or Yarulf's, though even that thought was driven from his mind as Yarulf began to grind his hips against Milenther's own for long moments. The sounds of his brothers and the other Tauma soldiers sitting around the campfire outside, dozens of feet away became a hazy buzz as Milenther's ears were filled with the sound of harsh breathing and groans. Soon even his breathing and moans, a mellifluous harmony to Yarulf's own, were drowned out by the sound of skin slapping against skin as Yarulf slammed his *quoxpine* in and out of Milenther's chute.

Milenther's eyes flooded with tears as bliss snatched him beneath the tide of passion. When Yarulf lifted Milenther's legs and placed them over his shoulders, Milenther let loose a loud groan. Clear fluid, the evidence of his own desire, leaked from the head of Milenther's own cock onto his belly, and since his body was practically folded in half, the fluid created a puddle that streamed down towards his neck. He ran his fingers down over Yarulf's slightly hairy chest, feeling the muscles there, his fingertips tingling at the sensation and the proof of Yarulf's power and strength.

“O-oh!” Milenther's mouth opened as a tingling began at the base of his spine racing throughout his entire body. He gripped Yarulf's shoulders, digging his nails in the flesh there as fire spread through his veins.

“Give it to me, Mil. I want it.” Yarulf growled as hips sped up, thrusting his *quoxpine* deeper and faster within Milenther's channel.

At Yarulf's words, Milenther released a shout to the heavens as the head of his cock spurt volley after volley of his seed through the air to land on his torso and even up onto his cheek. Milenther felt as if he were soaring through the air and dying all at the same time. His heart was pounding, his mind wiped of

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anything that wasn't Yarulf. His hole clenched around Yarulf's shaft, pulling him into Milenther's body harder and he felt Yarulf tremble above him as wet heat filled his passage.

Milenther's stomach clenched as he realized that he and Yarulf had consummated their marriage and he now truly belonged to Yarulf. He didn't feel any remorse about it, however. All he felt was contentment and a need to sleep. He resisted the darkness that tried to tug him under and wrapped his arms around Yarulf when he fell forward. He ran his hand up and down the planes of Yarulf's muscled back to his rear, palming the globes before drifting his hands back up. He opened his mouth to ask Yarulf if making love was always that explosive and all-consuming but the snoring that reached his ears stopped him. With a tired smile, Milenther found his own sleep.

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## Chapter Eight

At some point, after he'd fallen asleep on top of Milenther, Yarulf's *quoxpine* had softened enough that it slid out of Milenther's body. He'd rolled to his side and pulled Milenther with him so that when they woke up the next morning, to the sounds of the Tauma soldiers growling at each other and splashing in the sea as they bathed, Milenther was lying on top of him. Yarulf had been stunned by the almost crushing embrace he'd been holding Milenther in and the way he'd felt so... complete and content lying there with the Tauma prince in his arms. He hadn't had too long to consider why that was before Milenther was waking up and staring at him with a small smile on his face.

Yarulf had found himself snared by Milenther's purple-eyed stare. They were guileless and so open that Yarulf felt guilt eating away at his stomach like a snarling beast. He'd inhaled sharply and when Milenther had asked if they could "come together" again, Yarulf had shoved the vile emotion deep into the farthest recesses of his mind and had taken Milenther again, though this time it was much gentler. Perhaps it was an attempt to make things as pleasant as possible for Milenther before Yarulf was forced to betray him and his people and then participate in their slaughter.

*Whatever you have to tell yourself Yarulfsian.* He winced at his conscience's use of his full birth name. *You know that you were gentle this morning because you wanted to be. Because you are starting to fall for the Tauma you married, and if you believe you can still betray him, you are a fool.* Yarulf shook his head to dislodge the troubling thoughts and rubbed a hand across his forehead.

"Get up you two. We need to get back onto the road," Reprimuric's voice penetrated the silence of the tent, and Yarulf attempted to smile at Milenther. The concerned glance he received, as well as the gentle hand upon his shoulder, let him know that he was not successful.

"Come. Let us dress," he said to Milenther and rose without another word to do just that. They dressed in silence, Yarulf's eyes constantly straying over to Milenther as he dressed. When Milenther pushed his fingers through his hair, Yarulf found himself striding forward and taking Milenther's lips in a heated kiss.

"Yarulf. We don't have time," Milenther panted out when Yarulf lifted his head. Yarulf smiled and began kissing down Milenther's jaw to his neck, desire

snarling in his ear and passion breathing down his neck as lust gripped him in a firm embrace.

“We will make time,” Yarulf said and licked Milenther’s neck, where the heady taste of his sweat, his seed and a deeply masculine taste that was all Milenther, burst over his taste buds. Milenther’s soft whimper enflamed his senses, and he lowered Milenther back to the furs. A voice shouted in his mind, reminding him that what he was doing was wrong in Adethiel, but he reassured himself with thoughts of duty. His father wanted him to get close to the Tauma, to learn their secrets so that the Rardorian army could strike. What better way to get close to them than this way?

Ignoring the clenching in his gut and the softer voice that called him a liar, Yarulf set about trying to get as close as possible to Milenther.

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Yarulf groaned, exhaustion and guilt waging a battle inside of him, making him have the urge to vomit or to slam his fist into something.

“Are you okay, Yarulf?” Milenther asked from where he sat atop the horse behind Yarulf, his arms wrapped around Yarulf’s waist, his chest pressed tightly against Yarulf’s back.

“Yes. I am fine,” Yarulf lied. “I am just tired from last night.”

Milenther let out a choked noise, and Yarulf could not help the smug grin that spread across his face.

“I am tired as well,” Milenther stated. He mumbled something beneath his breath, and even as close as they were, Yarulf couldn’t understand what he’d said.

“What did you say?” Yarulf asked.

“I said that I am in pain in my ass as well,” Milenther hissed out, and Yarulf coughed in order to disguise the laugh that threatened to escape.

He waved his hand at Milenther’s brother Evien, who looked back at them, to assure him they were fine, before freeing one hand from the horse’s reins to pat the back of Milenther’s hands.

“I am sorry that I have caused you such discomfort,” Yarulf said, returning his hand to the reins.

“I’m not,” Milenther confessed. Yarulf was surprised by Milenther’s words so he said nothing and hoped Milenther would explain. “I would endure much

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more discomfort to feel you moving within me again.” Yarulf was so shocked by Milenther’s honesty he couldn’t speak. So, even though he knew it would cause his already twisted, complicated thoughts to become further entangled, Yarulf lifted one of Milenther’s hands to his lips and placed a gentle kiss on the backs of his fingers.

When he lowered Milenther’s hand back to his waist, Yarulf found himself being hugged and swallowed the lump that rose in his throat. Milenther was so innocent, so giving, and Yarulf was going to betray him. Because, even though a part of him didn’t want to, another part, a larger part knew that he would because Yarulf had been raised to follow the orders of his father, the king.

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They came to a stop on the top of a hill and Yarulf’s breath caught in his lungs as he looked down on the splendor of the Nerandra kingdom. While Adethiel was filled with gorgeous buildings, it was also quite congested and filled with people. The roads had been paved and were now cobblestone instead of dirt, and the trees that once filled Adethiel had been cut down to make room for more buildings and more people. He couldn’t remember a time when Adethiel hadn’t been filled with buildings and people, however, and wondered if the stories of a more beautiful Adethiel were told merely by old Rardarians longing for something more.

Looking down into Nerandra he realized just how much he was missing.

Nerandra was lush. Filled with trees, flowers, and gorgeous plants that lined the sides of the dirt road that ran throughout the kingdom. Animals loitered just outside of the edge of the kingdom, some of them brave enough to enter the kingdom where they were treated with kindness. In the center of Nerandra sat the palace, which was magnificent in its glory. The outside gleamed white, shining brightly in the sun, the turrets, and roofs were all a brilliant dark lilac, and Yarulf could see a gorgeous blue pool in the center that, even from a distance, looked extremely refreshing.

“Wow,” he breathed. While he’d been engaged in a number of skirmishes with Tauma soldiers or their allies, he’d never been to Nerandra since the Tauma were determined to keep their fighting away from their kingdom. Yarulf had never figured out how they’d been able to do such a thing, but as he looked down at the kingdom’s beauty, he was very glad they had.

“She’s beautiful isn’t she?” Milenther asked softly behind him.

“Who?” Yarulf replied, just as quietly.

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“Nerandra,” Milenther stated as if the answer should have been obvious.

“You refer to your country as a she?” Yarulf was amazed. Rarders spoke of Adethiel as an inanimate object. It was just land. It wasn't sentient. It didn't breathe or grieve and yet as he looked at Nerandra he couldn't help but accept the country as a living, breathing entity.

“Of course. Nerandra has blessed the Tauma with a place to live, love, grow, and return into the arms of Shadita Lyra. While Shadita Lyra is our goddess, Nerandra is our mother. So we are careful with her. We treat her other children, the animals, fairly when we take their lives for sustenance. We do not bring battles onto her land so that we do not contaminate her soil with the blood of soldiers or the innocent.” Milenther placed his lips against the back of Yarulf's shoulder and he trembled slightly as he heard the way Milenther spoke of his country, with such reverence and awe. “We are the keepers of Nerandra. The Goddess Shadita Lyra chose for us to make our home here, and we will not dishonor her, nor the mother, in any way.”

Yarulf shook his head as he listened to Milenther speak and felt shame curdle in his gut making him ill. His father planned to not only bring a large-scale battle into the Kingdom of Nerandra, he planned to spill the blood of every Tauma upon her soil. How was Yarulf expected to help his sire complete such a task having heard Milenther speak so passionately about his kingdom?

“Come,” Milenther said, happiness filling his voice. “Let us enter Nerandra. I am anxious to see my people and to introduce you to my parents.”

Yarulf nodded to Milenther and gripped the reins tighter in his hands, turning the mount's head to join up with the rest of the Tauma party.

“You know that not all animals need such a firm hand,” Milenther said softly and Yarulf glanced over his shoulder at the other man.

“You think I hurt the animal?” Yarulf asked incredulous. “He is a very large beast; I am sure that he can handle it.”

Milenther shook his head and dropped one of his hands from around Yarulf's waist to pat gently at the horse's neck. He made a few unintelligible noises in the back of his throat, and Yarulf felt confusion fill him at the other man's actions.

“Tauma animals are not beasts. They are our brothers and sisters, in a way, here in Nerandra.”

Yarulf snorted. “And does everyone in Nerandra feel as you do?”

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Yarulf could feel Milenther shaking his head side to side and shivered when the other man sighed sadly. “No, unfortunately this sentiment is not shared by all Tauma, though most of us believe this way. But still, a gentle hand, yet a firm tone will get the same result. Especially with a Tauma-trained animal. Especially with my horse.”

Yarulf looked down at the back of the large horse's chestnut head, his eyes moving over the thick, black mane and realized that to Milenther, his horse was more than just an animal. His horse was a pet. A friend. And Yarulf had offended him with his handling of the bea... uh... animal. Just another offense to add to his list when it came to Milenther and his people. At this rate, he was going to be making amends to Sadita until the day he died.

“Apologies,” Yarulf said contritely.

“*Rucopa*,” Milenther said.

“Are you two *filepas* going to spend the rest of the day making eyes at each other or are you going to join us?” Daimiro yelled from the back of his own mount, and Yarulf's face burned. Did he and Milenther really look like sweethearts? Like lovers? Yarulf couldn't suppress the way his chest expanded with pride at the thought of someone seeing him with Milenther and recognizing they were together as more than just friends or traveling companions.

The laws of his people and his father's harsh voice burst that happy feeling seconds later, and Yarulf's shoulders dropped as he nodded his head.

“Yes, we are on our way.”

Yarulf grew more and more unnerved the closer they got to the gates of the kingdom. As if there were something, or someone, compelling him to turn around.

“It's the ancient magic that surrounds our kingdom,” Milenther told him, and Yarulf stiffened. He had heard word that the Tauma and their allies used magic in their kingdom, but being confronted with it made him edgy.

“Why do you need magic to surround your kingdom?” Yarulf questioned him.

“To keep out all of those who would seek to do harm to Nerandra.” Milenther's voice was confident and determined. Yarulf found himself growing aroused by the sheer masculinity that threaded through his words. He pushed away thoughts of Milenther, naked beneath him, and instead wondered if he

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would even be able to pass through the gates of the kingdom with the magic surrounding it. As they passed over the drawbridge into Nerandra, Yarulf released a sigh.

Milenther chuckled behind him. “Were you concerned that you would not be able to enter, *Yeluh?*”

Yarulf startled at Milenther’s use of the Rarderian term of endearment for husband and took a moment to clear his throat. “Certainly not, *S-Shinaw.*” Yarulf stumbled over the Tauman endearment but the pleased sound that came from Milenther’s lips made him happy at his attempt. While his brother and his sister had not been required to learn the languages of other cultures, Yarulf, as the heir, had spent countless hours learning Tauman, as well as Jamudian. He was inordinately pleased that Milenther, even as the youngest Tauman prince, seemed to know Rarderian as well. Especially since the Tauman had fought so hard to keep their language over the past few centuries. Only three languages had survived all of the many battles and wars, with Rarderian and Tauman being the most widely known throughout the planet. With the smile on Milenther’s face, Yarulf was very happy for those extra lessons he’d had to endure.

“Well that is good. I would hate to think that you were concerned about such a thing.” Milenther grew silent, and Yarulf wondered why until he heard the sounds of laughter, cheering, and music.

“Is there a party?” Yarulf asked.

“They are welcoming us home victoriously,” Milenther said softly. “I have always been in the crowd celebrating with my people. This is the first time I have been the one celebrated.”

Yarulf squeezed Milenther’s arms where they wrapped around him. His eyes widened as they rode deeper into Nerandra and his gaze took in the sight of numerous couples, arms wrapped around each other, holding hands, or kissing, who were of the same sex. Yarulf yanked back on the reins of the horse and looked around. While *lukoshefs*, or same-sex relationships, were not the only relationships he saw within the kingdom of Nerandra, they were plentiful. His mind was abuzz with the reality that the Tauma were not only accepting of a *lukoshef*, but they were comfortable and almost encouraging of them.

“Yarulf? Are you okay?” Milenther asked.

Yarulf nodded. “Y-yes. I’m fine. I just...” He paused and surveyed the area again before nudging the horse’s sides with his heels. He shook his head and



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refrained from speaking further. When Milenther's hand rubbed his stomach reassuringly, he knew the Tauman prince was quite possibly well aware of what he'd seen that had so affected him.

"It is fine, *Yeluh*. Nerandra is extremely accepting of *lukoshefs*. I know this is different for you, but you'll grow used to it in time."

Yarulf nodded and focused back on where they were going. They rode through the streets of Nerandra, and Yarulf took in the sights of the small, rustic homes, the lush and thriving trees and other flora that surrounded them. He was aware of the press of Milenther's groin against his backside and could feel the man growing aroused, a matter which ramped up his own arousal. Yarulf swallowed back the groan that threatened and focused on the palace that they rode towards.

Standing outside of the palace, garbed in the lightweight, sophisticated garb of the royals, stood a man and a woman, their red hair shining like fire in the sun. Yarulf knew, without needing an introduction, that they were Milenther's parents, and he felt himself grow ill.

They pulled their horses to a stop, and Yarulf climbed down off the horse before turning to help Milenther. Milenther chuckled and patted Yarulf's chest, affectionately.

"I am not a Rarderian woman who needs your care and assistance with all things, Yarulf. I am a man. A Tauman man. I may not be a warrior, but I am still all man. Do not treat me as if I am weaker than you just because I am not a soldier."

Yarulf nodded at Milenther's words and turned when he heard the Tauma's name being called.

"*Onod! Omafwe!* I have missed you!" Milenther said with a smile rushing towards his father and mother and accepting their embrace. He turned back towards Yarulf and gestured him forwards. "May I present to you my *kukis*, Yarulf Cossobberth, prince of Adethiel. Yarulf, these are my parents, King Fiacus and Queen Dravica Dagorn of Nerandra."

Yarulf bowed to Fiacus and took Dravica's hand with one of his own, placing a kiss on the back of it. "It is an honor to meet you both."

"Milenther, you are m-married? To a R-Rarder?" Dravica asked, and Yarulf released her hand to step back.

Milenther nodded. "Yes Mother, it was a part of the treaty that Reprimuric agreed to when we defeated Adethiel. Unfortunately, the sister is *ohfo*. She

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didn't look as if she would give birth soon, but still, she is with child, else she would be here and married to him as originally planned. But we felt as though this was an even better trade, since Yarulf was the heir to the throne." Yarulf was uncomfortable, knowing they spoke about him as if he weren't there, but when Dravica looked at him in an assessing manner, he realized that it was probably for the best that he did not bring any more attention to himself than absolutely necessary. He thought of his brother who was now the heir to the throne and wondered how Dubair was going to handle his new responsibilities, just as he wondered how he would handle his own new position.

Fiacus stepped close to him and sniffed at him deeply before stepping back with a grunt. Yarulf's eyebrows lowered at the man's actions wondering what that meant, but smart enough not to remark on it.

"Not all of his motives are pure, though much of that could probably be attributed to his lust for Milenther without love being involved, and his presence within Nerandra proves that he means our kingdom no ill will." Fiacus nodded. "Welcome to the family Rarder."

Yarulf exhaled and bowed to Fiacus and then to Dravica. "Thank you."

When he rose to his full height, he glanced over at Milenther and felt his heart leap. He was in Nerandra and had been welcomed into the family. Everything was going according to his father's plan, but Yarulf was starting to care about the Tauma. When the time came, would he choose duty to his people or the man his heart was trying to connect itself to?

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## Chapter Nine

Milenther nervously led Yarulf into his quarters and turned to face him with a smile. "These are my... our quarters," he pointed out needlessly, watching as Yarulf stepped further into the room. Milenther stared into Yarulf's eyes, unmoving as Biumula and other Tauman servants brought in Yarulf's trunks and chests.

"It suits you," Yarulf replied and Milenther looked around, nodding. The walls of the room were painted a soft orange color. The pillows, cushions, furniture, and bedspread were all a plethora of colors. Milenther never felt as at home as he did in his quarters.

"Will there be anything else, Your Highness?" Biumula asked Yarulf.

"No, Biumula. That will be all. Please find your room and settle in," Yarulf directed the other man, and Milenther watched him leave before turning his attention back to his husband.

"We have a few hours before we need to be downstairs for dinner," he hedged. "I can show you around the palace or—"

Yarulf shook his head. "A tour that can wait for later. I find I have an appetite for something much different right now."

Milenther's body heated and he smiled as Yarulf pulled him closer. "And what are you hungry for, *Yeluh*?"

"You." Yarulf growled as he pulled Milenther to him and kissed him passionately, ceasing all further conversation.

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Milenther led Yarulf into dinner that evening with a wide grin on his face, feeling extremely relaxed and satiated. While it had only been his third time having sex, he was fairly certain that he was an expert at it by this point.

"You look quite pleased with yourself, little brother," Catillawn said as Milenther and Yarulf stepped into the dining room. Milenther turned to his older brother with a wide grin and shrugged.

"I find married life to be quite agreeable," Milenther responded.

"And it seems to agree with you as well," Catillawn said with a grin before wrapping his beefy arm around Yarulf's neck. "So, *Thykuwu*, now that you are

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officially a part of the family, tomorrow I shall take you out to the stables and let you choose a horse.” Milenther’s chest swelled at Catillawn’s calling Yarulf by the term of endearment for brother-in-law. He knew that his family would be accepting when it came to Yarulf, but he could only hope that things went both ways. He sensed a hesitation, a guilt, on his husband’s part, and it concerned him. For once he wished his magic was a little more precise, like that of a few of the elders. Then perhaps he would know what troubled Yarulf. He wasn’t exactly sure why Yarulf would feel guilty, but he knew that he would do whatever he could to help the man ease that guilt.

“*Seken.*” Yarulf bowed to Catillawn, pushing and wiggling in an attempt to escape the tight hold. Milenther grinned. He knew how tight Catillawn’s embraces could be, even when he was teasing. He would not want to be in Yarulf’s place right then.

“Come now, Rarder, we are family. No need to be so formal,” Catillawn said.

“Apologies,” Yarulf replied.

“Catil, leave Yarulf alone. I’m sure that he is not used to our ways,” Milenther’s mother said as she breezed into the room, her blue gown made of *fukoye* material swirling around her legs. “We must give him a chance to settle in. Then you can toss him around the room all you want.”

Milenther tried not to laugh out loud at the wide-eyed look on Yarulf’s face at his mother’s words. When Catillawn released Yarulf’s head, Milenther stepped up to Yarulf and touched his arm. “She’s teasing,” he reassured his husband. He chuckled at Yarulf’s sigh of relief. “She would never let Catillawn toss you around the dining room. She’d make him take it outside.”

When Yarulf twisted around to look at him, Milenther let out a laugh of delight and leaned forward to kiss his cheek. “Calm down, *Yeluh*. You will get used to us in time. I promise.”

He led Yarulf over to the large dining room table that was surrounded by his entire family and sat down on a pillow, gesturing for Yarulf to sit down next to him.

“You do not sit in chairs?” Yarulf asked.

Milenther shrugged. “Why? This way we’re much closer to each other.” Milenther demonstrated what he meant by laying his head on Yarulf’s shoulder. He tried not to take offense when Yarulf stiffened beneath him, reminding

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himself that where his husband had come from affection and love between two men was against the law, so it would take some time for the other man to warm up to him. With a mental sigh, and an internal pep talk to give his husband some time, Milenther kissed Yarulf's shoulder and sat up fully.

"Tonight's dinner is doubly blessed," Milenther's father stood at the head of the table, raising his goblet of *ekanan*, which sloshed and spilled over the edges of the golden rim. The dark purple liquid rolled down Fiacus's fingers to drip onto the wooden tabletop, and Milenther was thankful that it wasn't the day they set aside to use a tablecloth. Otherwise, Pertink would have had a slight fit over the stain.

"Not only are we celebrating our victory over Adethiel, we are celebrating the marriage of our youngest, Milenther, to the heir of Adethiel, Yarulf Cossobberth, who has become a Dagorn on this day."

Milenther raised his goblet along with everyone and smiled at his father before turning his attention to Yarulf, who had a stunned expression on his face.

"You did know that you would become a Dagorn, didn't you?" Milenther whispered to him.

Yarulf shook his head. "I have... *taken* you each time we have lain together. I did not think that I would be taking your name."

Milenther snorted. "Just because I like having you inside of me doesn't make me weaker, Yarulf. Besides, my family and my people were the victorious ones. Why would I take your name?"

Milenther stared at Yarulf and waited for him to reply. When he shook his head, Milenther leaned forward and kissed him gently, giving him what he hoped was a smile but what he knew probably came across as more of a smirk. When he looked up, he realized that his entire family was staring at them.

"Everything is fine. Thank you for the toast, *Onod*. Can we eat now? I am starving!" He said with a grin.

"I bet you are. All the energy you've been using up with the Rarder, I'd be starving too," Grote teased.

Milenther's face flamed and he picked up a roll of bread to toss it across the table at his brother. "Shut up, Grote."

"*Omafwe!* Milly is throwing food at the table," Grote whined with a smile, calling out to their mother.

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“Boys, if you don’t stop, I will send you both to bed without dinner,” Dravica said with a grin.

“Hey! No fair. If you send Milly to bed, he gets to have the Rarder for dessert,” Grote pointed out.

“Perhaps you should stop being such a *dulanthar*. Then someone will want to marry you. That way you will have someone waiting for you at the end of the night as well.” Milenther stuck out his tongue.

He turned to Yarulf when he heard a choked sound coming from the man and grinned at him. As his family started to carry on conversations around them, Milenther found his gaze trapped by Yarulf’s, and he wondered what the Rarder was thinking. He wasn’t left wondering for too long.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been to a family meal that was so... free and warm before.”

Milenther’s heart broke for Yarulf’s upbringing and grabbing the Rarder’s hand, he kissed his knuckles before staring into the warm blue eyes that watched him intensely.

“Welcome to my family, Yarulf. Welcome to what it means to be a Tauma.”

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## Chapter Ten

Yarulf walked with Catillawn, Daimiro, and Silain towards the stables, a few weeks after that first dinner, listening as they told him everything they thought he would need to know about being married to a prince of Nerandra. “There are fourteen members of The Rangers of Tahyrst,” Daimiro stated, rubbing his hands along the neck of a black stallion.

“The Rangers of Tahyrst?” Yarulf questioned looking over at the red-haired man.

“They are a group of special Tauma soldiers whose sole purpose is to guard the royal family.”

Yarulf nodded and looked back at the horse he stood in front of. The chestnut gelding stared at him with an implacable gaze, as if he could see deep into Yarulf's soul, and he had the urge to confess all to the animal.

“So they were with us on the road then?” he asked.

“Some of them were,” Silain remarked. “We couldn't take them all. Some had to stay here at the palace.”

Yarulf agreed. “How long does it take to become a ranger?”

Daimiro chuckled. “If you ask them, they will tell you that they have been training since they were children, but they are chosen from among the army. They do not train especially for it. The most dedicated, the strongest, the quickest, the most loyal are chosen, and then they are given additional training.”

“They have to sign The Covenant of the Arcane Arrow in order to actually become part of The Rangers,” Catillawn stated.

Yarulf looked over at the other man and lifted his eyebrows. “There is a covenant?”

“Of course there is! They must pledge themselves to the royal family. To our safety and well-being until they draw their last breath,” Silain said.

Yarulf looked between the three men and waited for one of them to recite it but neither of them did. He burst into laughter. “Well? Aren't one of you going to say it?”

Daimiro blushed. “I don't actually know it.”

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“Neither do I,” Silain stated with Catillawn agreeing.

Yarulf rolled his eyes. “So how do you know what the covenant actually says?” He asked them.

The three brothers shared a look before looking back at him in surprise.

“Thibaud!” Daimiro shouted, crossing his arms across his broad chest. Yarulf turned to see one of the Tauma soldiers who had been with them out on the road step into the stable. Though his face showed no expression, Yarulf could see amusement lighting up his green eyes and felt his own lips twitching.

“Yes, Your Highness?” Thibaud responded.

“What is The Covenant of the Arcane Arrow?” Silain asked. Yarulf noticed the way the prince’s voice seemed extremely husky when speaking to the soldier and wondered if there was something going on between the two of them.

“Would you like me to recite it for you, Your Highness, or tell you its purpose?” Thibaud questioned.

“We know its purpose, Thibaud, we just don’t know what it says,” Silain said.

Thibaud nodded and bowed to Silain, his stare so intense that even Yarulf was uncomfortable. He watched as Thibaud reached over to remove his sword from its sheath and hold it in front of his face, before twisting his wrist so that the sword was in profile to his face. He pulled it down until the tip of the sword touched his chin, twisted his wrist again, and laid the steel of the sword over the left side of his chest, where his heart was.

“I vow from now until the second the Goddess Shadita Lyra takes my final breath from my body to protect, serve, live and die for the safety and well-being of the royal family of Nerandra. I pledge my body, my blood, my breath, my life and my death to the Dagorn line. I give my word that I will do everything in my power to ensure they are happy and safe from those who would seek to do them harm. May the Goddess spill my blood upon the sand and send me into *gejirbo*, if a member of the royal family dies while in my care. This I pledge. This I vow as a Ranger of Tahyrst,” Thibaud recited solemnly, his gaze trained on Silain as he spoke.

When he finished, the air was thick with tension, and Yarulf was afraid of moving, though he wasn’t exactly sure why. It wasn’t until he noticed Thibaud’s sword darkening that he realized it was shining like a torch. Yarulf’s



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breath froze in his lungs, and he felt fear racing through him. The Tauma had extremely powerful magic on their side. His people did not. They had denied their magic for so long now that there was only the faintest trace of it, and only in the scribes, elders and some of the healers. If he gave his father the information he was obtaining, would the Rardirian army be any match against the Tauman army?

“Yarulf? Are you okay?” Daimiro called out, and Yarulf jumped slightly, blinking his eyes. He looked at the man and nodded his head.

“Yes. S-sorry. I was just... stunned. It was really... p-powerful.”

Thibaud bowed. “I will return to my post outside, Your Highnesses.” Without a further word, Thibaud turned on his heel and walked out of the stable. Yarulf turned to look at Silain and noticed the way the prince watched the soldier walk out. How long did the two men have together before his father, Gilrad, decided to gather the Adethiel army to strike?

And what could Yarulf do to stop him?

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Yarulf stepped into the suite of rooms that he shared with Milenther and found his husband standing in the middle of the room, completely nude, reading a book. Yarulf almost swallowed his tongue at the gorgeous image Milenther made. He swiftly shut the door and pulled off his boots before walking towards Milenther.

He wrapped his arms around Milenther's waist and laughed when the other man gasped.

“Sorry if I scared you.” He placed a kiss on Milenther's shoulder.

“It's fine,” Milenther said breathlessly.

“What are you reading?” Yarulf asked.

“I am studying about The Order of the Dagger and Scepter,” Milenther replied sounding distracted.

“What is that?” Yarulf looked over Milenther's shoulder and noticed the images on the page looked as if it were a ceremony of sorts.

“It is the wedding ceremony between a Tauman healer and a soldier from another kingdom,” Milenther stated off-handedly.

“Are there different wedding ceremonies for different people?” Yarulf asked.

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Milenther turned to face him. "Of course." He sounded surprised. "You wouldn't expect two soldiers to have the exact same wedding ceremony and wedding vows as, say, two farmers. That's just silly."

Yarulf nodded and shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, of course it is."

Milenther shook his head and pushed Yarulf until the back of his legs came into contact with the loveseat in the room and he sat down. Milenther then set the book down next to Yarulf and straddled his lap.

"It doesn't matter anyway. We can't get married for a while." Milenther ran his fingers through Yarulf's hair. Yarulf's eyes started to droop as his *quoxpine* thickened at the pleasant sensation of Milenther's hand on his head, in his tresses.

"We can't? Why not?" He wondered if his words sounded as slurred and thickly aroused to Milenther as they sounded to him.

"Because The Order of the Dagger and Scepter can only be performed if we are truly in love. If we try to do it before we are, then we'll both be killed."

Yarulf's eyes snapped open and he stared at Milenther. "Are you serious?"

Milenther bit his lower lip, then burst into laughter. "No! You should have seen your face. Of course not." He collapsed into a fit of giggles, and Yarulf stared at him for a moment before he lifted his hands and set them to Milenther's sides. He started to tickle the other man, laughing along with him, the two of them falling to the floor, rolling and wrestling with each other.

After a while, their laughter turned into groans and gasps of pleasure and tickling turned into caresses. Yarulf licked and kissed his way down Milenther's neck, his hand stroking down the man's body to his thigh. He stroked his fingers up and down the inside of Milenther's thigh, kissing Milenther gently.

"Y-Yarulf," Milenther moaned his name, sending shivers up Yarulf's spine. He cupped Milenther's groin then ran tender fingers up to the head of Milenther's cock. He lifted his head, releasing Milenther's lips from his own, and looked down into his eyes. Seeing the happiness and the unadulterated pleasure shining in his purple gaze, Yarulf swallowed the lump that rose in his throat. Kissing his way down to Milenther's nipples he sucked and licked them, still swirling his finger around the head of Milenther's cock.

As Milenther lifted his hips, trying to press himself closer to Yarulf's touch, Yarulf closed his hand around Milenther's cock, stroking it slowly up and

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down. He pressed his lips against Milenther's, moaning the other man's name as he stroked him. When Milenther moaned into his mouth and his cum spurt over Yarulf's fingers seconds later, Yarulf's *quoxpine*, which had been pressing insistently against the front of his breeches, twitched and released a torrent of spunk into the fabric.

Yarulf sighed and leaned his forehead against Milenther's, waiting for his heartbeat to slow. He shared a number of slow, drugging kisses with Milenther, neither of them speaking. When Milenther wrapped his hand in Yarulf's hair, he knew that his duty to his father and his people was going to be at war with his affection for the Tauma prince.

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## Chapter Eleven

There was something in the air and it was making Milenther nervous. He wasn't exactly sure what it was, but he'd been on edge ever since he'd awoken that morning and found Yarulf missing from their bed. Walking into the room of The Jaded Guild of Lyra, Milenther looked around to see if perhaps his husband was within. The man had seemed completely fascinated with the magic of the Tauma people. Milenther thought it was adorable, though Reprimuric thought it was suspicious. But he thought that of everyone.

Not seeing Yarulf in the room that was completely furnished in jade and thick with the power of magic, Milenther turned and left. He stepped out into the hallway and right into Biumula, who looked disheveled and nervous. Seeing Reprimuric only feet away, also looking disheveled. Both men's lips were swollen, and Milenther noticed that Biumula's eyes were glazed. He smirked at his brother before turning his gaze fully back to Biumula. "Biumula, have you laid eyes upon Yarulf today?"

Biumula glanced back at Reprimuric and blushed before returning his gaze to Milenther. "N-no, Your Highness. I have not. But I believe that he was going to meet with his family outside of the kingdom."

An icy, hot shiver wormed its way up his spine. Knowing that it was his husband's meeting with his father that was causing him such distress, Milenther turned and hurried away from Biumula and Reprimuric. He was determined to tease them about their liaison later.

"Milly! Where are you going?" Reprimuric called after him.

"Something is wrong with Yarulf! Or he's about to do something wrong. I don't know. I just feel something in the air. I have to go to him," Milenther fired back. Sensing the thrum of magic, or even the change within the ancient power, was something Milenther was used to, but being this acutely aware of another person caused his insides to tremble. Was there more to what he thought was a spontaneous decision to marry Yarulf. His skin prickled as his hair brushed against his swinging arms. His magic was pulsing and Milenther felt as if there was something he was supposed to understand, something he was supposed to see, that he just wasn't.

"I'm coming with you," Reprimuric promised and raced to catch up with Milenther. Milenther didn't argue with his brother, too busy racing down the steps of the palace and out towards the stables.

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He was aware of the members of The Rangers of Tahyrst running alongside them, but he paid them no heed. There was a driving force inside of him, thrumming, screaming at him to find Yarulf, save him, before he did something they both regretted forever. He didn't know what was going on between Yarulf and his father, but he knew that whenever they had discussed Yarulf's father, Yarulf's face had leached of all color and he appeared ill.

Milenther had questioned him about it more than once, only to be told that it was nothing. Yarulf had told him it was only him thinking about how much different his life could have been had his father not ordered their marriage. But Milenther had always known that there was something more to it than that. And now? Now, there was a knot in the pit of his stomach that was growing tighter and telling him that his husband was in danger and didn't even realize it.

"What is the Rarder up to?" Reprimuric asked as they waited for their horses to be saddled.

"I do not know," Milenther replied, quickly twisting his hair up at the nape of his neck and tying it off with a strip of leather. He watched as Reprimuric did the same and smiled, sadly when Biumula raced out after them and headed straight towards his older brother.

"I am not sure what is going on, but please be careful," Biumula panted out, before looking around and lifting up on his toes to place a gentle kiss on Reprimuric's lips.

"I promise that I shall return to you," Reprimuric said.

Milenther turned away from the two of them and instead, focused his attention on climbing up onto the saddle of his horse. Once he was settled, he waited for Reprimuric to climb up onto his own horse. Then Milenther turned toward the main gates of the kingdom. He had to get to Yarulf, and he had to do it as quickly as he possibly could. He could feel the magic inside of him clawing, trying desperately, to get out, but he didn't know why. He just knew he had to get to Yarulf.

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"It is a blessing to see you looking alive and so well *Orebebo*," Gilrad said to Yarulf as they sat around on top of the hill overlooking Nerandra. It felt good to hear his father refer to him as "my son". Especially since Yarulf was pretty sure that was not going to last for too much longer. They rested atop of the blankets laid out by the Tauman servants and the two members of The Rangers

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of Tahyrst who had ventured out with him. Yarulf glanced over at the warriors, standing dozens of feet away and wondered, not for the first time, if he was making the right decision.

“*Rucopa, Yawe*. I admit that living with the Tauma people is not as heinous as I expected it to be,” Yarulf admitted, using the Rardarian word for father in an attempt to soften the blow of his actions. He lifted a handful of *iyuta* to his lips and popped them into his mouth one at a time. The succulent, sweet juice of the fruit burst onto his taste buds, and Yarulf closed his eyes at the flavor. How he wished Milenther was with him at that moment. He would feed the man the *iyuta* slowly, rubbing the small, round fruit around Milenther’s lips, then along the seam of his mouth before slowly pushing it inside.

Yarulf cleared his throat and squirmed where he sat on the blanket before returning his attention back to the conversation with his father. He could not allow his mind to drift away on daydreams about his lover. That wouldn’t do at all. Especially not in front of his father. Not with what he had to do.

“That is good, *Orebebo*. But, your *Uvela* and I are happy this matter is drawing to a close today.” Gilrad smiled as he mentioned Yarulf’s mother. “I have our soldiers waiting at the bottom of the hill. Tell me what you have learned and we will strategize throughout the night and strike when the Tauma barbarians least expect it.”

“I’m sorry, *Yawe*. I can’t do it. I won’t do it.” Yarulf shook his head.

Gilrad’s eyebrows lowered, and he rose to his feet, towering over Yarulf. “What do you mean you *won’t* do it?”

Yarulf rose slowly, knowing his father had a very violent temper and knowing, also, that what he was about to say was going to incite his sire to react.

“I am saying that I have gotten to know the Tauma, the people, the royals, my husband, and I will not betray them. I know you are going to tell me that my duty is to the people of Adethiel, but when you married me off to Milenther Dagorn, my duty shifted. My duty is now to him. To protect him and his family. His people and his kingdom.” He took a deep breath. “Even if that means protecting them from my own father.”

All of the air was forced out of Yarulf’s lungs when his father’s large hand shot out to wrap around his throat. Yarulf choked and grabbed at the fingers that cut off his breath. He reached up to free himself, to fight back, but was

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surprised at what felt like invisible bands wrapping around his wrists, preventing him from doing so. His father was using magic? When had his father begun to use magic? Unlike the pure, sweet magic that thrummed in the air surrounding Nerandra, Yarulf's nostrils burned at the stench wafting up from his father's body. He could hear scuffling and knew his father's soldiers were fighting with the royal guards who had been sent to protect him.

Yarulf's face heated, his eyes felt as if they were about to pop out of his head, and his thoughts swirled with a cacophony of Milenther's name and regrets over all the things they would never get a chance to do together. His father suddenly released him, and Yarulf fell to his knees, wrapping his hand around his throat as he fought to take in air. He coughed repeatedly, wheezing as he struggled to take in a deep breath. Tears streamed from his eyes, and he sniffled, since even his nose was running. His throat felt raw, his limbs weak, and for the first time in his life, he was afraid, truly afraid, of his own father.

Gilrad squatted down in front of him and yanked back his head, staring down into his face, his blue eyes hard. "Had I known that marrying you to the barbarians would make you betray us in such a way, I would have sent your brother. I never thought you were so weak, Yarulf'sian. I am glad that I know now. Your weakness shall lead to the downfall of the Tauma people, and when I destroy Nerandra and all who live within, I will consider you among them."

With that Gilrad pushed Yarulf away and rose to his full height. He snapped his fingers and even Yarulf jerked as the sound of fighting stopped almost immediately. Turning his head, he was alarmed by the sight of the Tauma Rangers, unharmed and once again standing as they had been before. He looked at his father in alarm. Who *was* this man? How did he have such magic and how strong was the magic in Nerandra that he couldn't penetrate it? "Leave this *rovemugu* here. He is no longer a prince of Adethiel." Yarulf's heart broke at being called an abomination by his own father, but he lifted his chin and refused to show how much the word had hurt him.

Hearing a gasp behind him, Yarulf turned and saw Milenther, Reprimuric, and a handful of The Rangers of Tahyrst coming up over the side of the hill. He lowered his head, trying to hide the shame that reddened his face at his father's slight. While he'd been prepared for his father's wrath, he hadn't been prepared for his husband to see it.

"Get the fuck away from my husband." Milenther's voice was angry as he hurried off the back of his horse and over to Yarulf's side. Yarulf wrapped his arms around his husband and ignored his father as the other man left.

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“I am so sorry. I could feel that something was about to happen, but I didn’t know where you were to get to you,” Milenther murmured into the fabric of Yarulf’s tunic. Yarulf pulled away and looked down into Milenther’s face.

“You could sense that something was going on with me?” He was astonished, no one had ever been that connected with him before.

“Of course. You’re my husband.” Milenther shrugged as if that explained everything.

Reprimuric patted Yarulf on the shoulder and gestured back at Nerandra. “Well, *Thykuwu*? What do you say we head home?”

Yarulf looked at Reprimuric and back at Milenther before a wide grin spread across his face. Home. That had a nice ring to it.

“Yes. That sounds like a good idea.”

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## Chapter Twelve

“Wake up,” a voice sang in Milenther’s ear. He blinked his eyes open, blearily looking up into the gorgeous blue eyes of his husband.

“Good morning, my beautiful Tauma prince,” Yarulf said with a grin.

“Good morning to you, my handsome Rarder prince,” Milenther replied.

Yarulf shook his head. “No longer.”

“Always.”

Yarulf sighed and rolled his eyes, an action that shocked Milenther. It was so unlike his very conservative husband and so similar to something that Grote would have done, that Milenther instantly knew that his husband and his brother had been spending *way* too much time together.

Looking towards the window of the bedroom, Milenther noticed the sun had not yet risen. “Yarulf? Why did you wake me up so early? It’s still dark outside,” Milenther pointed out.

“I know, but I do believe I made you a promise right after we were first married.”

Milenther’s eyebrows lowered as he tried to remember every promise Yarulf had ever made to him.

“To cherish me?” he asked.

Yarulf shook his head. “No.”

Milenther huffed and crossed his arms. “Does that mean you’re *not* going to cherish me?”

Yarulf poked his nose and climbed off the bed, holding his hand out. “I am going to cherish you. It just means that’s not the promise I meant.”

Milenther nodded and continued to think. He pulled on the green kilt Yarulf handed him and pulled on the white tunic to go over it. Though it wasn’t officially *temefu* yet, the weather was definitely starting to turn colder and the leaves on the trees, plants, and flowers were turning colors, going from their usual brilliant greens, oranges, golds, and whites to purples, blues, and reds. Though most Tauma hated the colder seasons, like *temefu* and *rumalezi*, Milenther loved them. Especially now that he was married to Yarulf. He

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couldn't wait to curl up in front of the fire with his husband while it snowed outside.

“Is the promise about you not snoring in bed?” Milenther asked. “Because if not, it should be.”

Yarulf turned and glared at him. “I do not snore.”

Milenther chuckled. “Yes you do.”

He followed Yarulf down the stairs of the palace and outside. They walked past the stables, waving to the servants who were already awake and starting their work for the day. Milenther was aware of the rangers who walked with them, though they were discreet and hidden from plain sight. He wanted to laugh when Yarulf turned to glare at one of them, but he wisely held his tongue.

“Is the promise about you trying *mucetni*? Because I will tell you, Cook is extremely hurt that you refuse to at least try it.”

Yarulf shuddered. “No. It's not about the *mucetni*.”

Milenther laughed. The first time they'd had *mucetni* after Yarulf had come to live in the palace, Yarulf had made the fatal mistake of asking what was in the meal. Finding out that *mucetni* was a dish made up of chunks of numerous animal tongue, marinated in their own juices and served over the leaves of an *ifubo hire* flower, had made Yarulf sick. He'd refused to eat the meal ever since. In spite of always saying how good it smelled.

“Okay, I give up,” Milenther groaned. “What is the promise about?”

Yarulf finally came to a stop in front of a tree that was buried in the forest on the palace property. They were far enough away from any buildings that no one could hear their passionate moans but close enough that if they needed help, they could get it easily. Milenther looked at the tree and his face grew hot, his palms sweating and his heart racing.

He looked up into Yarulf's eyes and felt his lips stretch into a wide smile.

“I promised that I would take you against a tree in a forest like you wanted me to. Do you remember this?” Yarulf asked, running the fingers of his left hand down Milenther's cheek, causing him to shiver.

Milenther swallowed and nodded his head. “I remember that entire night vividly.”

“As do I,” Yarulf said with a smile. He stepped forward into Milenther's body, pressing his back up against the tree before dipping his head and rubbing

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his lips up and down the side of Milenther's neck. "We haven't had a chance for me to fulfill my promise, but now we do. And as I told my father, my duty is now to you."

Milenther lifted his arms and wrapped them around Yarulf's neck, pulling him closer until their lips pressed against each other. "Well then, *Yeluh*, fulfill your duty."

"With pleasure," Yarulf said before taking Milenther's lips in a deep kiss.

**The End (?)**

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## Author Bio

*Vicktor Alexander (everyone calls him “Vic”) is a southern gentleman by day, and a writer and purveyor of steamy, sticky, hot man-on-man (sometimes on-man-on-man-on-man-on-man-on-man) sex by night. He started out writing about his sister destroying the world with her breath, then went on to writing steamy, erotic interracial historical romances in the middle of his classes but noticed the guys seemed to enjoy each other’s company much more than being with the women. He now enjoys writing about shifters, humanoids, cowboys, firemen, rent boys, fairies, elves, dancers, doctors, Doms, subs, and anything else that catches his fancy, all sexy men falling in love with each other and having lots of naughty, dirty, man-on-man sex. He is a huge fan of the “happily-ever-after” ending, but while all his characters ride off into the proverbial sunset, sexually satisfied and in love (because it’s the least he can do), they all bear the scars of fighting for that love, just like in real life. Out and proud, he doesn’t believe that love only comes in one form, one race, one gender and that not only is gender fluid, by sexuality as well. He loves to make people laugh (and guys hot) and when he’s not writing, or rather, procrastinating in writing, he’s reading, playing the Sims 3, talking to his adopted daughter whom he calls Chipmunk, seeking the man or men who can handle his crazy, stressful, soap opera-esque life and being distracted from said writing by pictures of John Barrowman, Charlie David and Shemar Moore. All interested men in the role of “Future Husband(s)” may apply, auditions are being held every night... multiple times.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# ZIPPADACIOUS

By AR Noble

## Photo Description

A ripped, dark-haired young man sprawls against some shelves. Shirtless, his dirt-encrusted abs exposed, with his fly unzipped, his dirty jeans have slipped down to his thighs, revealing white designer briefs and teasing mesh fly. On the shelf behind him, are storage boxes full to capacity, a small portrait of a serene, dark-skinned man rounds out picture frames, loose photographs, and pair of a heavy-duty work gloves.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*It has been one of THOSE days where everything goes wrong from the start of the morning until the end of the day. Besides the alarm clock malfunctioning, my hair has decided to defy gravity in clumps today taking on many intriguing shapes while the rest of my hair lies flat and behaves.*

*Something clearly has happened to my boss last night. He is so prickly it's like he has a stick so far up his ass that I can see it in the back of his throat as he yells at me. (My job: up to you but hopefully very dirty and physical)*

*And while everything is going to shit and I am at my worst who walks in but a virtual GOD of course!*

*Can you help me win him even not at my best? (oh please no kids and if there's a rescue scene that brings them together that would be great!!)*

*Sincerely,*

*Morgan*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary, with a small mystery

**Tags:** blue collar, graduate student, interracial, cross-dressing, Aboriginal history, antiques

**Word Count:** 16,647

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*Author's Note*

The historical portions of this story are constructions of real historical accounts; Angus and Reynard, alas, are figments of my imagination.

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# ZIPPADACIOUS

By AR Noble

*Travis*

A loud *whump* woke him up from a dream of lips and tongues, muscles and big, dripping dicks. He rolled over wondering why his neighbors were fighting so early in the morning. With one eye open, he sought his alarm clock—six thirty-eight—*shit-fuck-damn*. That was the end of his morning wood; he had twenty-two minutes to take a shower and get to work. Piece-of-shit clock never failed when he wanted to sleep in. Cap was going to skin him.

In the shower, he barely had enough conditioner to work through his hair. The towel, the last of the starter set his mom gave him when he'd moved out, ripped as Travis tugged it across his back. *Damn*, he knew he needed to go shopping, but *ugh, shopping*. Things got worse while he dressed; his only clean pair of socks had a hole in one, and he had to take them off and switch feet so the hole was over the little toe. And underwear—his choices were an ancient pair of boxers, fit only for a day sick in bed, and a pair of strange, white briefs—a gag gift from Kier, the least favorite of his (so far) three brothers-in-law. Probably bought it off the clearance table at Marshalls, the cheap bastard. With its absurd mesh fly, he didn't even know how it made it home with him from Ripon. There was no choice; he couldn't work commando or in boxers that fell down all day. Add laundry to the list of things he needed to do.

Heading into the parking lot, he was almost unmanned by a jogging stroller stashed on the pathway. And as he backed out of his spot, the owner of the stroller showed up to unfold it, blocking Travis's path to the driveway. No help for him now; Cap was going to ream him a new one, with a wire brush no less, for being late again.

Travis raked his hand through his hair, belatedly realizing he forgot the sprunching mousse, leave-in conditioner he normally used. Why did curly hair only look good on children? Already, part of his head had riotous frizz while the rest was flat.

He caught every red light between his apartment and the shop, as well as the Sprinter trains for both directions, diesel fumes wafting pleasantly in their wake. It felt like a miracle that he was only five minutes late by the time he



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turned into the driveway of Mantiques Anatolie, “purveyors of manly artifacts,” but he knew Cap wouldn’t see it that way. Just when he began to think he was home free, she rose from behind the pallets he’d stacked for pick up. A cigarette danced on her bottom lip, smoky curlicues floating upwards in defiance of city ordinance.

“All right, let me have it,” she rasped. Cap’s voice could peel barnacles from a trawler, and some days Travis was certain she was part harpy. She even wore some sort of tight-fitting dress with huge, long sleeves that *thwapped* as she moved her arms.

“I’m sorry, it won’t happen again,” he mumbled. He tried to slide past her to the door.

Cap tossed her head back and squinted at him through her fake eyelashes. “Come on, hit me with it, everyone else has.”

*Hell, was she expecting him to make a decision already?* “Um, I’m not, I haven’t—”

“Travis.” She pulled herself up so the two of them stood almost eye to eye. Five-foot-eight Cap in Frigidaire harvest gold stilettos to six-foot-three Travis. “I’m talking about the show.”

*Show? What show?*

“Cap!” Somewhere, further inside the shop, Rigo was calling her.

“Just a minute!”

“*¡Mi amor!*”

Cap huffed a big recycled, nicotine breath. “There’s sunflower seed shells in the back of the van; I want it pristine.” She looked around the shop area. “You ever get that racing set cleaned up?”

Last week, she’d told him to put it aside and concentrate on some milk glassware. Used to her capricious thinking, he’d done both. At least, for now, he could safely avoid admitting he had no idea what show she meant. “Yeah, the box isn’t in the greatest shape, not much we can do about that, but we’ve got all the parts now.”

“*¡Cappadocia, ya!*”

“*¡Ya lo sé!* I’ve gotta call the garbage company, fuckers put the bins back crooked again.” How she could wear heels like that and not break something, he just didn’t know.

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Shrugging, he hopped up to the loading dock and entered the shop. Travis didn't have a real job title. When the government insisted on one, Cap declared he was "Skilled Worker № 3," a catchall for all the planing, gluing, welding, washing, and sanding he did. A box was on the floor near the chair he used when he did close work. Travis bent to move it, and his foot landed in Bask's water dish. While he jerkily tried to shake water off his Vans and wipe the floor at the same time, Bask, the shop cat, ran out between his legs. Travis flailed, narrowly missing Woody, who had appeared from nowhere.

Woody steadied Travis, and then let him go immediately.

"Fuck man! What's with Cap today?"

"*Junque Trunque*. The episode was on last night—don't tell me you missed it? They even showed the part where Auntie threatened the camera woman with her umbrella. Hilarious!"

Yes, of course Travis missed it. Relive that incredibly embarrassing train wreck? No, just no. The reality program that wandered the country from antique galleries to pickers had seemed like a great opportunity when the producers called back in January. But it only took Cap about five hours to totally piss them off during filming, so instead of two days, only three hours were filmed before the entire crew packed up and left.

"I went to the *dojang*, and sparred for a bit, ate dinner, and went to bed." *Avoided thinking about my life imploding.*

"Twenty-two is too damn young to be as boring as you, dude." Woody sucked a long draw on his Big Gulp of Dr Pepper. Since the summer of seventh grade, Woody began every morning with Dr. Pepper. It made Travis shudder just thinking about that much sweetness and that many calories this early. Woody snagged Travis's mug and shoved it in his face.

"You look out of it man, get your caff—" The ringing telephone followed by Cap's holler interrupted Woody, and he loped off to answer it.

As he poured his coffee (a splash of two percent, no sweetener, thank you), Travis breathed a silent "bless you" to the caller, saving him from another of Woody's "Get laid already, gay guys have it easy" speeches. Best friends since prekindergarten, they were as close as brothers. Still, Travis drew the line at sex advice from a straight guy.

The buzzer on one of the exit doors sounded, and he listened as the chimes rang out indicating someone had opened the door. Travis checked a packing list

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against an order, sealed the box, and finished his coffee. He reviewed his pick list; a buyer in Kamloops wanted some rare Triumph parts that Rigo picked up in an auction awhile back. All they needed was a little cleaning, and Cap could send the potential buyer photos.

Woody walked by, carrying a monkey wrench. Travis raised an eyebrow, since, as a rule, Woody was not handy with tools. Maybe he was bringing it to Rigo.

Woody ran his hand across one of the shaved sides of his head. “You know, a change of type worked for me.”

“Huh?” Now Woody was speaking in riddles.

“I switched from blondes to redheads, met my Brenda. You should drop those pretty twinkies and try something new.”

Several replies came to mind, none of them worth ruining nearly twenty years of friendship. Nor did Travis want to hear, *again*, about the Bromeliad Princess and her endless perfection. Woody’s happy engagement to the elegant law student had him acting like Travis’s sisters, determined to find him a permanent man. And twinkies? Travis dated *men*, culled from the endless parade of lovely strangers on their way, usually, from or to Hollywood or San Francisco. Guys who wanted to be actors, models, doing their best to get by on their looks, so yeah, most of them had Twinkies for brains. Besides, the last redhead he’d gone out with had been a disaster. “Pretty? Duuude!”

“Some of those guys were prettier than girls I’ve dated.”

“No argument there.”

A thumping sound came from somewhere in the shop. “Woody!” shouted Rigo. “I need some help with this manifold.”

“*Un momento, Tio.*”

Woody tossed the wrench from one hand to the other, shuffling his feet uncharacteristically. He cleared his throat. “Trav, everyone—no, ah, I just want to see you happy, ya know?”

Travis nodded and hoped Woody would drop the subject. Evidence notwithstanding, he *could* find love; just too many other things were fucked up right now.

“*¡Perfecto, ven acá!*”

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Travis smothered a laugh as Woody ran to his uncle. Woody's real name still cracked him up after all these years. An almost perfect friend and near perfect doofus but probably not what Mrs. Alvarez had in mind when she named him.

He was just pouring a second cup of coffee when Cap huffed into the room, startling him.

"Travis! What do you know about some picture?"

"Cappadocia!" he yelled. Quickly, Travis yanked some paper towels and wiped down the counter with one hand. His shirt was soaked, and he held it away from his body while paying attention to Cap.

"I told you guys to use shop rags, we're spending too much on paper towels." From somewhere in the rafters, Woody tossed down a blue shop rag, which threw off dust and smelled like rotten eggs. Uh, oh. Woody was good at many things, but repairs were not among them. Cap tapped her foot, returning his attention to her.

He took a breath. "What picture, Cap?"

"Some guy on the phone, so excited, I couldn't understand him, yapping about a picture on the show last night."

Travis tried to cast his mind back three months; he couldn't recall any noteworthy pictures in the shop, then or now. Something heavy hit the floor above with a thump, then Woody's swearing filled the air. Travis and Cap looked at each other, both of them rolling their eyes.

"A picture of what?"

She shrugged.

"So you don't know what he wants?" He pitched the towel into the bin.

She shrugged again. "Be here in case he shows up, huh?"

Travis nodded; he wasn't planning any runs today. He'd be around.

"Damn, I'm hella good," shouted Woody.

"Woody, why didn't you wait for me?" Travis glared at Cap's back. She'd bitched for months about the smell of the hot water, and for months, Travis told her that the temperature was too low. But not until a customer complained last week did she tell Travis to go ahead and add shock treating the water heater to the work schedule; and now Woody had beaten him to it. Travis sighed and

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checked his clipboard again. Logically, the smart choice would have been to move the water heater down here. Whatever idiot thought having it above in the loft was a good idea should rot in commercial real estate hell, designing daycare facilities, perhaps.

He spent twenty minutes looking for his tape gun. Why did people take things he needed and not put them back?

Something went *bong*. He looked upwards and yelled, “Wood, you need any help?”

“Relax, homes, I got this.” A grunt and several clanging sounds followed that before the trickle of running water could be heard. Woody clambered down from the loft and snatched the clipboard from Travis. He crossed off the water heater on the list, looking smug.

Travis slammed down his second cup, and turned to a shipment of barbed wire. Growing up near a farming community taught him that farmers collected all sorts of crap. That rich folks would pay top dollar for barbed wire had been one of the first things he'd learned when he started working at Mantiques Anatolie, Cap's store, that sold “antiques”, collectibles, and junk that people, mostly men, or women shopping for men, actually wanted. Advertising signs for obsolete products manufactured by defunct companies, vintage appliances for man caves, old toys, dashboards from ancient airplanes, sexist souvenirs from countries that no longer appeared in any atlas—you name it, Rigo would find the junk, and Cap would find a customer. Travis and Woody cleaned the finds, crated and uncrated them, shipped or unloaded; Travis fixed anything with moving parts. Rigo took care of most of the walk-in sales.

He popped the crate open then pulled on his heavy work gloves. The first bundle was 7-Strand Glidden, just rusty enough to please a collector in Oklahoma. He set it aside on the workbench and reached in for another. There was a sharp pain in his thigh. *Crap*, another pair of jeans ruined? Travis looked down but saw no tear so he pulled out the second bundle, 3 Diamond Hearst Ranch. He'd seen a want ad on a collector's site last week for some. He put that lot down, intending to look for the ad later.

Now his thigh was itching, and throbbing. He took off his gloves and touched it experimentally. A hot, hard lump, and not the good kind. Fuck, now what? The door to the restroom was closed, Rigo most likely.

The red first aid kit beckoned from the other workbench. He grabbed it and went into the break room, glancing around quickly before he unzipped and

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shoved down his jeans. His wet shirt was bugging him so he tore it off and tossed it into the sink. A glance at his thigh showed a huge, pink welt with off-center fang marks. Fuck, a spider bite.

Cap, like Woody's mother, fervently believed in Vitacilina, the Mexican wonder cure-all. He dabbed some on the bite and started to pull up his jeans.

Later, everyone else swore there had been loud boom, but all Travis knew was that one moment he was pulling up his pants and the next he went flying backwards.

When the ringing in his ears quieted to a murmur, Travis opened his eyes. The back of his head hurt and a voice he didn't recognize was asking if he was all right. And when he focused on the voice, he found an intriguing combination. Deep forest green eyes above high cheekbones, framed by shiny, shoulder-length, brandy-colored hair, all wrapped up in skin like those See's Candy suckers his brothers-in-law gave out, nephew after niece after nephew. While everyone else fought for the chocolate or caramel, Travis always went for the butterscotch.

"Mate, mate, are you all right?" The speaker had an accent, kind of like that insurance company's lizard.

Wow, this man was stunning. Travis tried to stand, but his jeans fell to his knees, and he pitched face first onto Mr. Gorgeous's meaty shoulder. *Way to make an impression, Garamond.*

And *of course*, that's when Woody burst in. "Fuck, Travis, man, you promised I'd never have to see no faggy stuff! This place is 'bout to blow and so are you?"

Travis, his face flushed, pushed himself up and stole a glance at Mr. Gorgeous, who shrugged. What did that mean? Could this day get any weirder? Scratch that, he didn't want to know. He pulled up his pants and gestured for the stranger to move before him.

"Woody, you dumbass, did you turn off the gas?" At Woody's stunned look, Travis shook his head and moved towards the door. Something swung past his peripheral vision, and then *smack!* a fluorescent fixture swaying by its wiring. He barely staggered out of the way in time to avoid its return trip. He shook his head and nearly stepped on Bask, who was running full-throttle for the exit. Travis overbalanced, heard the stranger's sudden intake of breath, and then, he was awkwardly tossed over a rounded shoulder.

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Well *this* was different. It was as if his fifth grade fantasy, the one where the Beast was Woody and Travis was Belle, had finally happened. But this time, Beast wouldn't bloody his nose after the kiss, unlike Woody. He shook his head; he didn't want to think about that right now.

The heat from his rescuer's hands on his thigh and biceps was the most thrilling feeling he'd felt in ages. All too soon though, the light from outside burst through as they reached the parking lot.

The stranger bent over, probably trying to set him down gently. Travis twisted himself upright and opened his mouth to speak to the stranger. Woody bounced over. "Dude, seriously, homes?"

Before Woody could say anything else, Travis asked, "Did you turn off the gas, dude?"

"Uh, no, I'll go do that."

"Forget it, I'll do it." Travis tried zipping up as he ran, but the damn slider fell off. Didn't that just figure?

He turned off the gas, and by the time he made it back to the others, the fire department was already getting out their equipment. The beautiful man was gone.

Cap waved some EMTs toward Travis, and he crab-walked with them, holding his pants up until they reached their vehicle. As they checked him over, he could tell they were trying not to comment on his pants. He explained about the bite, and they insisted on checking it. He was sure they were barely holding back giggles when they saw his underwear. The ebony-haired female EMT offered him a safety pin; he declined her assistance in fastening it. Finally, they cleared him.

Woody was signing some paperwork for the police. He looked up, shook his head, and smiled at the officer. Then he crossed the parking lot to Travis. He gestured at Travis's wrecked fly. With an even bigger smile, he said, "Finally."

"Huh?"

"You finally found one."

Maybe Travis wasn't the only one to get knocked in the head today. He was tired, hungry, and pissed. None of this would have happened if Woody had let Travis take care of things. Like he always did. Briefly, he wondered if this incident would change Cap and Rigo's minds—not likely.

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“A real ‘Z’.”

*Not that, really?* He must have looked as skeptical as he felt.

“When your zipper breaks, it’s zippadacious, man. I’m telling ya, true love is just around the corner.”

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Rigo told Travis to leave for the day. He’d get his daughter and some of his nephews to start on clean up. Travis agreed to meet Woody in the morning at the doughnut shop and headed out.

He was hungry and urgently needed a shower. *Fuck laundry*, he thought, and with teeth clenched, headed for the mall. A quick run through Old Navy yielded new jeans, a pack of normal boxer briefs, two packs of socks, and a few T-shirts.

In Target, he picked up a couple of towels, some groceries, conditioner, and, fuck the calories, beer. Woody’s comment on his dating life came back to him as he passed the electronics department.

The summer of their freshman year in high school was the first Travis and Woody spent at Rigo and Cap’s. Woody’s mom wanted to keep him from the ice queen blondes at the Christian high school. Travis was different. When you are allergic to almond trees, yet born into three generations of “ahmand” farmers, the only boy in a family of five sisters, and gay, meeting people’s expectations was doomed from the start. He’d spent most school breaks with his great-grandpa Noriguchi. Gramps showed Travis how to repair any motor, refinish all types of wood, and fix any clog in any drain. But Gramps died at the end of eighth grade, and Travis was at loose ends without that escape.

Coming to southern California was a different world. When they weren’t working, Travis and Woody went to the beach or park and quickly learned kids down here really did talk like kids on TV. And when either of them used “hella,” it was a dead giveaway they weren’t local. In turn, Travis and Woody laughed over words like “bodacious” and the way even girls called other girls “dude”.

Travis had his first blowjob out at Guajome Park that summer, and Woody pursued blonde after blonde. Until Brenda and her mother came into the shop, turning Woody into a slobbering hunk of steel to her electron super magnet. Her mother bought a *fin-de-siècle* pot that Woody and Travis delivered to the family business, Wright’s Bromeliads. Travis made a comment on the colorful,



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spiky plants, and while Mrs. Wright launched into how even a pineapple was a bromeliad, Woody and Brenda wandered off into the greenhouse. She led him on for three weeks before finally sneaking him into her room one night. After dressing, Woody found out his zipper was stuck inside the seam. He already had his Chucks on so he didn't take them off again. Brenda brought him to the kitchen and her mother's craft table. He had just started using the hot-pink needle-nose pliers on the pull tab when the *au pair* got up to see what all that noise was about. She screamed, Woody got the pliers stuck in the slot, and then Brenda's dad and brothers arrived.

Travis smiled at the vision of Woody leaping around with a pink tool hanging from his pants. They went home to Ripon soon after, but Woody and Brenda stayed in contact online. Their parents made them date other people, but every school break, when Woody and Travis came back to Vista, Brenda occupied most of Woody's free time. That second summer was when Woody first expounded his zipper theory of love, and to needle him, Travis coined "zippadacious."

Fated zipper love was not going to happen for him; he didn't even know his mystery man's name. He threw off his wool gathering and finished his shopping.

At home, he took a shower and was on his (rare) second beer, when his mother called. The Alvarez-Reyes network had reached out and touched his mom. He reassured her that he wasn't injured.

"Oh, Sally's amnio results came back, she's having a boy." She paused, but Travis knew his mother possessed no subtlety whatsoever, and braced himself. "Any luck on the boyfriend hunt?"

"Mom!"

"Don't Mom me. Everyone else has found their prince, why not you?"

Next would come the "gay men can adopt or use surrogates, give me more grandchildren" speech. Not. Happening. Ever. "Last week, you were all 'You should go to college already, you got great grades on all your A-G classes.' How'm I going to do that if I'm off marrying and birthing babies?"

"Travis Isao Garamond! Find a nice boy. Go to college. Be happy! That's all you need to do."

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*Taj*

After a day of undergraduates and their inane midterm answers, Taj walked from the bus stop to his apartment, hoping for some peace and quiet. No luck, his roommates were camped out on the sofa, one of those pawnshop reality shows on TV. For Seb and Ian, all reality shows and any sports were preferable to silence. Undergrads. How did they get any studying done? The televisions stayed on night and day, one for sports and one set to watch *Judge Lowlife*, *Chicken Farmer Swingers*, *Dumbass on the Tundra*—Taj couldn't keep up. He usually spent most of his time at the university or the club. A cock-up on his paperwork when he first arrived left him without the on-campus housing he'd planned on. By the time that was straightened out, he'd answered a Craigslist advert and ended up in this flat with the brothers.

It turned out for the best, though. Taj had the master bedroom, complete with en suite bathroom. The previous roommate had installed shelves, organizers, *two* extra mirrors. It was a dream come true. Almost as soon as he signed the rental agreement, Taj emailed his sister back in Melbourne his new address, with instructions to start shipping his boxes.

Ian, at least, was a fanatic about cleaning, so he and Taj made up for Seb, who was a bludger, plain and simple. Taj made it a point to eat at the kitchen bench, joining in on their conversation. Keep things neighborly, right? That's how he saw it and *him*. One of those programs that follow people buying other people's junk, fixing it, and then selling it. This one had a Latino couple, him grizzled, full head of hair, one arm missing, the other tattooed, quiet, until his wife's histrionics drove him to bark. She wore genuine Bruno Frisonis! Her long, black hair piled on her head like Jasmine, and a cigarette hanging from her painted lips. Oh, what Taj could teach her! She bitched and yelled at everyone, eventually getting into a shouting match with the show's host.

And that was when he saw Him; from the kitchen sink, as he washed his plate. Tall, dark, curly hair, beautiful, perfectly sculpted arms, almond-shaped eyes—and when his sweat-soaked tee rode up? Unbelievable ridges and valleys of muscle—Taj's fingers ached to travel that landscape. He wanted to shimmy up that long frame and dig in. But then the camera followed him into an area where it roamed the shelves. Tools, old canvases, miscellaneous motors, pictures, and a small framed picture of a man in a white shirt: Reynard Perouse—Taj couldn't sodding believe it.

What in the hell was a photo of the very man he'd done his senior seminar project on doing in an American junk shop?

“See something you like, Taj?” asked Seb.

Ignoring his question, he asked one of his own, “Where is this shop?”

“Ooo, you are interested.”

“Knock it off, butthead,” said Ian. “It’s right around here, Taj.”

Here? “In UC?”

“Naw, somewhere in North County.” Where was that? Taj had moved in just before fall semester started. He’d been to L.A. twice, gone to visit his buddy Aerik in San Francisco at New Year’s. As far as he was concerned, anything past the university was nebulously north.

“Gimme that remote, dork.” Ian traded remotes with his brother, pausing the lacrosse game he was watching, first. He rewound the program. For the hundredth time, Taj wondered, *if you are already watching, why do you need to record?*

Seb laughed and said, “Hey, that guy almost looks like you, Taj.” There was a young Latino man, shiny black hair, soul patch, and tattoos. As far as Taj could see, he bore no resemblance to him. Well, okay, the body type did. They probably were even the same height, same just shy of chubby, stocky frame. But Taj’s hair was an amber-red, thicker and more lustrous, not to mention, impeccably styled, as always.

“You’ve been checking Taj out,” chortled Ian at the same time Taj said, “Darling, if only I’d known you were looking.” The brothers were never short on the rent and always generous with beer. Even came to his show twice. At Thanksgiving and Christmas, they had dragged him back to Los Angeles to their parents’ home. Christmas Eve he went to the African Methodist Episcopal church with the whole family, and when they told their “awnts” about his hobby, the women were only too happy to swap shopping tales with him. He’d had a blast and come back to San Diego with three new hats.

“Shut up, dickwad.”

“Fuck off, you—” And over the sofa they tumbled. Taj barely managed to grab the Takis before the carpet became red no. 4, permanently. He fumbled with the remote, eventually figuring out how to stop the DVR at the beginning. The shop was in Vista; all he had to do was figure out how to get there.

Leaving the brothers to fight on, Taj went to bed.

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This quarter, Taj taught two classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. After his last class, Taj took the shuttle to the Coaster and the Coaster to the Sprinter. He knew how to drive, even on the wrong side of the road as they did here. Having a car in California was expensive, and as he was undecided on what to do at the end of the term, why lay out the dough for a vehicle he'd have to get rid of when everywhere he needed to go could be reached by public transport?

Taj came to California by accident, almost. When his degree was finished at Monash, he had considered applying at Queensland. He also thought about chucking the whole idea of being an academic. Studying aboriginal linguistics was his gran's idea; she wanted someone in the family to honor their past. To make up for the randy bastard her son, Taj's father, was. Granny was proud of her successful son and of all her many grandchildren, but the fact that he only sperm donored most of them was a never-ending source of shame for the old girl.

Finding out what happened to that rabble rouser Perouse, would satisfy his curiosity, but also, he reminded himself, could go a long way towards mollifying Granny, not to mention boost his career. The trouble with interdisciplinary studies was that nobody understood what you were on about, and it seemed easy to lose his way. A major or even, he reflected, a minor discovery, enough to publish and even present at a conference, *well, darling*, what to do about next year could solve itself.

Because Taj had discovered that he really liked California. There was an intoxicating freedom when people saw you as special and not a likely criminal.

Twenty-seven years old and no boyfriend, a sad state to be sure. One night, he'd come home from the Greyhound, his favorite drag club in Melbourne, to find his boyfriend waiting up. Stoney, still wearing his ghastly persimmon, WolfeTel uniform, the usual, bitchy questions: why couldn't he stay home, why did he need other men looking at him? There was a fight and the next day, as Taj walked across campus, he saw an advert for a fellowship program to study in the States. He was still so pissed at Stoney that he went straight to the library completed the app, uploaded recommendations from his advisors, and pressed "send". Then he forgot about it until the email came with news of his acceptance. He applied to UCSD and to UC Berkeley as well.

The Coaster hugged the shoreline, providing magnificent views of the Pacific and the lunatic surfers who braved those cold waters. He thought about getting off in Solana Beach to ogle surfer lads on the way back.

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The Sprinter stop was supposed to be about half a kilometer from the shop. Typical quirky southern California with apartments right behind auto mechanics and furniture stores, surrounded by canyons full of trees and weeds that seemed to go up in flames daily. The mix was still a little disorienting to Taj, who grew up in Perth, went to uni in Melbourne—a city boy through and through.

The station was within a Y made by three roads. Across the tracks, roosters crowded; on the opposite street were donkeys! The “leg” of the Y was a dodgy-looking strip mall, where scruffy, over-muscled blokes with their pants sagging below their crease loafed about, real derros. It had been a long time since his early childhood in Balga, one of Perth’s toughest neighborhoods until Mum got a good enough job to move them to Midvale when Taj was nine. He walked taller; he may look a right poofter, but he could take care of himself. He opted to walk instead of waiting for the bus, but soon wondered about that decision, because there wasn’t even a footpath. *Should have changed from the Pradas I wear for work to my Chucks before setting out here.*

Mantiques Anatolie turned out to be in an industrial park; they had an entire building among purveyors of valves, used tires, and hair salons. No one was at the front desk, so Taj walked forwards past a chaotic assortment of furniture, petrol pumps, curious art, and barbed wire. A television blared one of those Spanish chat programs. Taj recognized it because Ian liked to watch them for the women in their gravity-defying dresses. There was an odd banging noise that he felt like he’d heard before, but he couldn’t place it. Strange that no one was about.

The smell of coffee led Taj towards a hallway off to the left. There he was, the bloke from the show last night. Not only was his shirt off, but his pants were down! *In front of the microwave?*

A great big, booming noise cracked then, and suddenly there was stuff everywhere, and the bloke, that lovely man, flew out of the room. Naturally, Taj followed him.

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Water and flaky stuff fell down around them as Taj bent to check on the very fine specimen of man who’d landed in front of what looked like the shelves he’d seen on the show. A little guiltily, he looked for the pic of Reynard, but didn’t see it. He turned back to the man.

“Are you all right?” He looked very pale.

Taj thought he muttered, “Butterscotch sucker.” Maybe a head injury—where was everyone? All that shouting on the show, that irritating woman on the phone, where were they?

Then his shop mate appeared. A mention was made of a potential gas explosion, and the three of them were trying to get out of there, when a light came crashing down on his bloke’s head. He looked a bit wobbly, and as his mate wasn’t taking care of him, Taj heaved him over his shoulders and tried to carry him out.

He had always fancied himself a fireman. *’Course, in the fantasy, he was meant to be carrying me off.* The mesh fly rubbed on his biceps the whole way. Masculine scents drifted up to his happy nose—sweat, grease, varnish, and something that reminded him of that bloody terrifying summer camp Mum sent him to once.

When they reached the outside, Taj did not want to let go, but the golden-eyed man had to turn off the gas as his friend was bloody useless. Then the real firemen showed up, looking nothing like his fantasy. A female police detective took him aside to take his statement, and then told him to go. The man with the picture was chatting with the ambulance people. Taj decided to try again another day.

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### Travis

Morning brought the marine layer and cool fog. Travis and Woody were scheduled to make a pick-up at Doc K’s down in Descanso. Travis drove to the shop and saw yellow caution tape flapping from a door handle. Cap had some of Woody’s cousins cleaning things up. Bask was snoozing on the dock, stretching and meowing once he spotted Travis.

“Hey buddy, where’d you spend the night?” A flash of guilt passed through Travis. Usually Cap and Rigo asked him to take Bask home on long weekends.

Bask head butted his legs, purring and circling Travis. He found Bask’s bowls and filled them, then went in search of the litter box, which, happily, was neither wet nor in need of cleaning. Wherever Bask spent the night, he’d done his business out there too.

With a wave to the cousins, Travis walked to the Laotian doughnut shop on Grand. By text, Woody told him that he was filling up the box truck’s tank. After breakfast sandwiches, they took doughnut holes to go, stopped for

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Woody's Dr Pepper at 7-Eleven, and were on their way. Neither spoke about yesterday's disaster.

It was a seventy-mile long trip, one-way. A great ride on the Goose, but a little lonely without someone else along.

Travis thought about the call from his mother last night. "Dad's medical bills are all paid off now, your sister got a full-ride scholarship, stop working at that shop and do something with your life. Go to college, marry someone, move to a house instead of another dump, be with the same someone for more than a week."

That was when he'd cut her off. "I'm fine, Mom, talk to you Sunday, I love you, bye."

It was true that his lease was up in a couple of months; he wanted to move to a better neighborhood, have more privacy from his neighbors. He'd like a boyfriend, too, but they didn't exactly pop up like ground squirrels either. Guys were usually all about getting off and getting gone, not that he ever met anyone he wanted to keep.

Doc's modest ranch house stood at the end of a long driveway, off a dusty road. The surrounding hills were prematurely brown. Like almost everywhere around this part of the county, drought made April look like September. An old man, snow-white hair perfectly styled, stood next to the oversized steel barn, outrageous in an orange suit, matching fedora and purple-banded collar shirt, and purple Timberland boots.

"Oh, boy," exhaled Woody.

"Don't start," warned Travis.

"Come on, man."

"Finish that thought and you'll finish this run on your own!" Doc had been a great customer in the years he and his partner Louis had the expendable income. Now, Louis was back east, undergoing cancer treatment, and Doc was liquidating everything so his "Louie" got the best possible care. Lou was a big-hearted man, and Travis sincerely hoped the clinic Lou's daughter found fixed him up. But he didn't like talking or thinking about it—too many memories of his own father's lost battle.

Doc shook hands with both of them, then directed Woody to back up to the roll-up doors on the side.

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Doc put a hand on Travis's arm. "Come along, I have something special I want you to take pictures of for me. Cappadocia says she may have an excellent buyer."

Travis accompanied Doc to a side entry to the house. It was a study, dark wood, green leather upholstery, and crystal lamps. Doc walked to an Asian-looking set of faux double doors hanging above a very modern desk. Travis's heart sank. Kung fu movie memorabilia sold well, classic early Datsuns, early Honda bikes, but no one shopped Mantiques Anatolie looking for carved screens. Doc pressed a button on the desk, the double doors opened and they were looking at a charming painting of an elegant woman wearing a huge, old-fashioned hat and dress. On the lower right side, in elaborate lettering, Travis read "Julien Eltinge, 1913."

"She's a dude?"

"He was the greatest female impersonator in the world, a superstar ahead of his time," replied Doc. "I got this off a fellow who said he got it from Julien's ranch in Alpine before it burned down. This has been authenticated, and I won't be talked down on price."

Travis nodded before he got to work with his camera. He knew Cap was planning to offer one of their premier clients first crack at this piece. He made a little small talk with Doc, listened as Doc told him, *again*, how he and Lou met as members of the Gay Liberation Front and their fleeting attempt at a gay commune, and then headed to the barn in time to help Woody load up a pie safe with a rainbow finish.

On the way back to the shop, Travis thought about the beautiful stranger from yesterday. Was his hair a shiny red or maybe orange? The heft of his hands as he carried Travis outside. Travis snorted back a laugh, carried wasn't the right word; they must have looked like kids in one of those stupid party games. He wondered if the man had spoken to anyone else in the shop, maybe signed the guestbook, if he would ever come back; he didn't know why but he felt cheated that he did not even know his name.

When they got back to the shop, Travis wanted to groan. Rufus was here. Woody gave a sympathetic headshake. Rufus's mother, Rosalia, was a very good customer, and Rufus sometimes picked items up or brought them into the shop for appraisal or repair. He was the only customer Travis had ever gone out on a date with. That date was the one and only time Travis called Woody to his rescue. In the two years since, Rufus had mostly behaved himself. He wasn't



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exactly a friend, now, but he knew Rufus wanted to be, and that he accepted there could never be anything between them.

They unloaded the truck and Rufus wandered into the warehouse area. “Yo, Woody, I’ve got a shed needs demolishing,” he yelled.

Woody flipped him off, Rufus laughed, and as Travis came back around with a dolly, he hissed, “Beat it, people work for a living around here. Besides, customers aren’t allowed back here, you know that.” Rufus wandered off, whistling.

Travis sat down to complete his paperwork when he became aware of Rigo speaking to someone.

“I think I know the one you mean, but you will have to talk to Travis, our technician. I think you met him the other day? The portrait is his personal property.”

Travis looked up to see Rigo with the man from yesterday. Wearing a teal button-down, open at the throat, hair clubbed back, tan Dockers again, and those eyes—like iridescent moss in an old forest, they went from impersonal regard to unmistakable interest to shyness.

Rigo said, “This gentleman is interested in the print you insisted on saving last summer, you know, the one from that tallboy we picked up at that Laguna estate sale.”

He remembered. An odd Rocco reproduction, a bit ugly for his taste but lovingly finished, the drawers smelled amazing, like nothing he’d ever encountered before. The picture was in the back, missed somehow by the previous owner. The man’s vulnerability and dignity captured in the picture called to him, he couldn’t explain why, not attraction, just maybe that someone had cared enough to save the picture, and so would he. It had no monetary value, and Cap was going to throw it away, but Travis said he wanted it, and Rigo told Cap not to charge him. Getting something free off Cappadocia Reyes was always win-win.

Travis wiped his hand on his jeans, then held out his hand. “Travis Garamond.” The stranger’s hand clasping his was unexpectedly soft, and when Travis looked down, he could see that his nails were well-manicured, making Travis conscious of his own rough, calloused, permanently grease-stained ones.

“Taj Djaru, pleased to meet ya.”

Wow, an exotic man with an exotic name, not to mention that accent. New Zealand, maybe? Travis knew he sucked at small talk; he wondered if he should ask about the name or the accent. He was still wondering and staring when Taj asked, "May I see it?"

It? Oh, the photo. "Come on," said Travis, leading the way to the employee lockers. "So who is he?"

"I'm hoping he's Reynard Perouse."

They had reached the lockers. Travis opened his, dug through a few 1950s gay magazines, his collection of vintage gay pulp fiction (the lesbian ones like *Dyke Bait*, the gay ones like *Cockalorum*, he kept at home), a silk aviator's scarf he thought too purple to wear himself but too cool to pass up, and finally the cheap plastic frame with the print inside. "Is that someone I should have heard of?"

Taj took the offered print, holding it by the edges as if it were a precious relic. His face looked enraptured as he studied it. "He was a leader in the fight against the Second Dispossession. How much?"

How much? Travis never meant to sell it. It was supposed to go in his new place. Instead, he said, "Why don't we discuss it—over dinner. I'll buy," and then held his breath.

The smile that filled Taj's face made every nerve in Travis tingle. "Really? Oh, but I'm meant to catch the 5:40 Coaster."

"I'll run you home if you miss it, where do you live?"

"UC, University City, are you sure?"

Oh yes, it might be tomorrow morning, but yes, Travis was sure.

"No problem." He looked down at his clothes and frowned. "I've got to take a shower."

"Nothing wrong with how you're dressed, and I don't need fancy."

"Nah, come with me, and I'll clean up."

Travis grabbed his paperwork and went to find Cap.

"Sure go ahead and take off. I don't have anything that needs to be done until tomorrow. You did a great job with Doc."

Well that was nice; she didn't give many compliments. "Just be sure to come in on time tomorrow."

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“Yes ma’am.”

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The drive from work to his apartment flew by. All green lights, no trains, and Taj sat happily beside him—no cracks about whose mother he’d stolen his 2004 Honda Element from. Yes, he’d bought it off of his middle sister, Cherie, but it was practical and reliable, he couldn’t give a fuck about popular.

“So where are you from, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Australia,” Taj said, then sat straighter as if expecting a crack from Travis. *As if*. He thought back to sixth grade geography. “Big place, what part?”

Taj relaxed. “Perth, I was born in Brisbane but lived around Perth until I went off to university in Melbourne.”

“Yeah? What was your major?” He turned into the apartment complex’s parking lot.

“Linguistics.”

“Why?”

Taj stretched his legs out a little more. “My granny, mostly. She wanted someone in the family to do something good for our people, and I’m the only one who went to uni. Linguistics was easier than anthro and less depressing than social work.”

“What kind of people is that?”

Taj looked at Travis quizzically. “We’re mixed, Aboriginal and white. Because of, well, not to get political, let’s say Australian government policies, we know we’re Aboriginal but not much about where we came from.”

Travis parked in his space, and they both got out of the car. “My family is mixed, too. Scots and Japanese on my mom’s side, California Okie, Italian, and Native American on my dad’s. One of my sisters is marrying an African American, another a Chicano, and the oldest married a closet case dickhead.”

Taj snickered. “I wasn’t aware there’s a genus ‘dickhead’.”

“Woody and I think he’s an alien or mutant, not human anyway.”

“Woody, the bloke at the shop?”

As he led Taj up the stairs, his neighbor was coming down. She stared open-mouthed at Taj and almost missed a step.

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*He really is a beautiful man.*

He unlocked his door and stood back to let Taj in. Thank fuck he cleaned up yesterday. “Woody and I have been best friends since pre-K. My sister Cherie even married his brother Rodolfo.” He watched Taj look around his small place with approval. The furniture was mostly used, damaged goods from work: two mismatched Eames chairs that he replaced the broken legs on, a Platner lounge, the scratched, wood surface restored, its upholstery replaced, the futon that used to be his bed before he could afford a real mattress. It had never been his intention to have a color scheme in 1950s avocado and pimento, but once he picked up the orange, gold, and chrome cocktail cabinet, the theme had been set. A shelving unit from Home Depot held his books and CDs, and a card table his mom gave him rounded out the front room. Woody called it “Vegas on a budget,” but it was unique and all Travis’s.

“You want, well, I wasn’t expecting company... would you like beer or water?”

“No thanks, man, I’m good.”

“Uh, I watch TV on my computer, want me to power it up?”

Taj grinned and said he appreciated no television for a change. Travis didn’t know what he meant by that but hurried into his room for his new threads, and then to the shower. But first, he made his bed. Good thing he had clean sheets.

Extra care in the shower, he had a good feeling about Taj.

The navy-blue tee and his new maroon jeans, not as dressy as Taj, but it worked and was nice contrast to his amber eyes. He sat down to put on his black Chucks and remembered his youngest sister complaining, “You’re the most un-gay looking gay guy ever.”

*Well, this is me, like me or not.* Course many guys couldn’t handle that he supported his mom by paying his dad’s medical bills. Or had.

He hurried back to his living room. Taj turned from the bookshelf, putting *Coxswains from Malibu* behind his back and returning it to the shelf, Mr. Smooth. He settled back into the sofa, only to turn around and reach back for something. A DVD. He looked up and smiled at Travis.

“*The Swingman,*” he read aloud.

Fucking Rufus and crap. “Hey!” He tried to snatch it up.

Taj smirked, looked at the cover closely. Travis hated how this looked. A hunky man, baseball cap over long flowing locks, that dark makeup ballplayers

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use making his eyes pop from his face. Baseball pants down around his knees as a hefty ginger was swallowing his giant cock. A large blond with a catcher's mask over his head prepared to slam his cock into the Swingman's glossy ass. The copy on the box read: "Some days he's a starter, some days he's a reliever. In between, he's in between!"

"Is this what you're into?"

"No! That belongs to Rufus." Travis's mother decided to clean out her garage at Christmas. She persuaded him to take an old New Home sewing machine back to Vista. He hadn't known anyone who wanted it and was complaining about bumping into it one day while Rufus was in the shop. Rufus called his mother's partner and the damn thing was sold. Against his misgivings, he invited Rufus into his apartment after they stowed the sewing machine in Rosalia's truck. Rufus brought out some Aztec Sacrifice Red IPA, an ale from one of the local breweries and tarallinis from a deli in Little Italy. Rufus put on the DVD, but the combination of seven point six percent brew and not very entertaining porn put them both to sleep. He must have missed the DVD during his cleaning spree. "Never mind, you ready to go?"

Taj frowned. "Rufus?"

Travis muttered, "Someone from work, let's go."

They could have walked, but one look at Taj's shoes and Travis concluded driving was better. He hadn't been to Vittorio's in a while and Philomena greeted him with effusive hugs, kisses, and scolding. She insisted on being introduced to Taj, turning his hand over and declaring Taj "*maschio, coraggioso*." It was weird; she'd never made a big deal over any of his other dates.

Over spaghetti and meatballs, Menabrea, and kick-ass garlic bread, Taj explained that he was a graduate student in linguistics at UCSD.

"I'm currently working on comparative aboriginal narrative discourses, not just Australian, but dispossessed aboriginals all over," he shrugged, "it got me the fellowship at a time I really needed a change."

"Do you like it here?"

"Absolutely! People in San Diego are friendly; no one ever has negative expectations about my family background. Although it was startling the first few times someone asked how long it took me to learn English."

"Really?"

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“Yeah, I thought the first few times they confused Australian with Austrian, but that only made things more embarrassing.”

Travis regaled him with tales of customers and the odd things they wanted and stranger reasons why. He even mentioned Doc's Eltinge panel, but changed the subject, grimacing as he thought of Louis. They talked about films and music and laughed at each other's jokes.

“So this Woody fellow, are you and he...”

“Woody?” Travis was startled by the idea. “We're from the same small town up in the Central Valley. Both of us are the babies of our families, well, until my little sister was born. We met in preschool, two chubby boys, too out of shape to keep up with the other kids. So, we hung out together. Some girl picked on Woody one day for his name,” he looked around quickly, then whispered, “it's Perfecto.” He resumed in a normal tone, “and I went after her.” He smiled ruefully. “She wiped the floor with both our asses. The director called our folks and both our moms sent our dads to pick us up. Turned out they both worked at the tampon factory over in Modesto and didn't know each other until that day.”

“You hit a girl? Man, my mom would have had my balls, and my dad would have, well, I don't know, but it wouldn't have gone well for me.”

“I have four older sisters,” Travis offered as defense for the four-year-old he'd once been. “They were always thumping on me and blaming shit on me that I usually hadn't done. But, yeah, it wasn't acceptable. Except for my grandfather, Woody was my favorite person in the world, and I couldn't let her get away with it. There was a taekwondo studio up the street from the school and our dads arranged for us to take classes to control our anger.” He picked up a breadstick from the basket on the table, started to put it back, then chomped on it. “We were both too fat to wear a *doh bahk*, a uniform. So, we would change into sweats, and one of the older teens that ran the preschool would walk us over and bring us back until our parents picked us up. Wood's dick was very obvious under his sweatpants and one of the older kids dubbed him Woody.”

The waitress asked if they wanted refills on the Menebrea or breadsticks. They both declined, asking for more water instead.

“I never thought much about being gay, right? Woody's older brothers would say stupid shit like ‘that's so gay’ or ‘don't be a fag’. My sisters took us to see *Shrek*, and... I don't know, all that true love talk, I guess, led me to think

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‘I like him more than anyone.’ So I kissed him one day when we were hanging out after soccer practice.”

Taj looked sympathetic. “Not a good idea?”

“Nope. He decked me, and I went home and tried to hide what happened. My mom found the bloody towels, and my dad and I went fishing.”

“Do you want dessert?” asked Travis.

“Not unless you’re on the menu.”

Travis grinned and picked up the check the waitress left and reached for his wallet.

“Is that a euphemism?” Taj mused. “Gone fishing?”

“No, we really did head over to the Tuolumne River. I don’t think we caught anything. He told me it was okay that I liked boys, but I needed to learn when another boy was okay with me liking him, and it’d be better to wait before I tried again.”

“Very cool, my dad was like,” he deepened his voice and broadened his accent, “Figures, your mum had you hanging around *those* people.”

“Ready to go?” Travis stood, left the tip, they walked up to the front desk, and Travis paid. It was cooler now than when they had arrived. The restaurant was in between a Laundromat and a martial arts studio. Not the one he belonged to; this one was full of small children.

Taj paused in front of the studio’s window, watching the little be-robed bodies bow their heads to their instructor. Smiling, he asked, “The exercise is that good?”

“Huh?”

“Bloke like you, looks like an underwear model?”

Travis sputtered, shook his head as he laughed softly. “Taekwondo is good exercise, but it was more like I just grew, I’m built like my dad and my mom’s dad. But I went on a few dates with a model once.”

Taj waited, but Travis didn’t continue. “And?”

“His name was Jack, and he was from South Africa. There’s a lot of them here because of all the golf and Cal State’s athletics. We had a little fun.” Travis blew out a gust of breath. “Went up to L.A. for a day with him, he had a modeling job. His agent meets us, she rags on him, didn’t he know he wasn’t

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supposed to gain weight? Why had a piece of ass been more important than working out? She went on and on. Then she threw a box at him and started yelling at another guy. He kind of looked at me, all embarrassed, and pulled a packet out and tossed it over.

“This man was skin and bones! I mean people call me skinny, but you could’ve counted his vertebrae from the front, you know?”

Taj nodded.

“So I looked at the packet, and it’s a lemongrass ‘cleanser’. I kinda lost it, don’t remember what I said, but—fuck! I’m a gay man, what don’t I know about hygiene?”

Taj sputtered, and then a full-on laugh burst through. Travis looked on with a mix of chagrin and bemusement before reluctantly cracking a grin and laughing along.

“So-sorr-sorry,” Taj gasped.

Travis shook his head and unlocked the Honda.

“Jeez, I’ve done most of the talking; tell me about you, your family.”

“Well, d’you know that old Temptations’ song, ‘Papa was a Rolling Stone’?”

Travis grimaced. “I grew up in the Central Valley, remember? Because there’s no canyons like around here, you get decent radio reception. But your choices are only *banda*, Country & Western, whack-job bible thumpers, and oldies. Yes, I know it.”

“That was my dad. Is I should say, darling, he’s not dead. Knocked my mum up when she was fifteen. She threw him out of the apartment Dad was paying the rent on when she found out he had a wife in Canberra.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, spirited, that’s my mum. The wife divorced him when she found out about his girlfriend in Sydney. He works as a sales rep for an American medical devices company. What we call a flash black. Traveling is part of his job, women and making babies are his hobby, you could say.

“My mum did nails while she put herself through school. She was so mad at him for not showing up in time for my birth, she had me in a taxi and named me after the driver! Dad claims my ‘early exposure’ to gay men at her salon made me gay.” He arched an eyebrow and looked sideways at Travis. “She got



married when I was about thirteen, and I have a younger sister. Dad's been married three times, and I have seven more brothers and sisters, thanks to him.

“That woman back at your work?”

“Cappadocia?”

“Hard woman to work with?”

Travis turned into his parking lot. “She’s a pain, but they’ve both been really good to me. When my dad died, there were lots of bills. His insurance from the plant had run out, and there was a worldwide glut of almonds on the market, so there wasn’t much money. Cap and Rigo gave me a summer job, and I kept coming back until I graduated.”

He started to say, “But now they want me to go to school like everyone else planned”, but he didn’t. He hated whining.

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As soon as Travis shut the door, Taj had him up against it.

“What do you like?”

Travis swallowed. *You can’t get what you want unless you ask.* “I’d really like you in me.”

Taj smiled. “I’d like that too, but first—”

He plunged his hand into Travis’s hair as he began to kiss him. The other arm went around Travis’s waist, hand palming his ass.

Taj tasted of the hard blue mints they’d both grabbed at the restaurant’s door. Travis stabbed his fingers into Taj’s silky hair. Even his hair was minty smelling. His lips were perfectly sized to mesh with Travis’s.

Without stopping the kiss, Travis began unbuttoning Taj’s shirt, damn, an undershirt. They came up for air, nuzzling their scratchy, bristly, cheeks, both breathing hard. Travis pressed his fingers into his back as they rode down Taj’s tee and pulled it up and out of his pants.

Taj ran his hands up from Travis’s waist to the opening in his henley. “You’re so beautiful, I want desperately to feel your skin, and I’m nervous.”

“Why?” He knew that taekwondo kept him looking good, but Travis was sure he was nothing special. Taj was stop traffic, open your mouth and drool perfect.

“’Cause I’ve seen your muscles, and I, I’m...”

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“Perfect,” said Travis. “You are absolutely to spec.”

Taj giggled, “Perfect, huh?”

“Mmhm, maybe I need to perform,” he pulled the undershirt over Taj’s head, “an inspection.”

Travis stepped back and looked Taj over. His arms were, not sculpted—he surely wasn’t a gym rat—not running to flab either. Twin flat, burnt sugar nipples stood up upon a nicely defined chest. A tiny bit of a belly, which was the only spot with hair, even his arms were bare, how did that happen? He ran his hands down then up to Taj’s jaw, kissing him with all the surging anticipation and nerves rushing through him. His finger slid into the belt, freeing it. Their kisses became wilder, Taj broke away long enough to yank on Travis’s shirt, tossing it behind them somewhere. He stroked his fingers along all the muscles.

He managed to open Taj’s pants. Smiled at the pink, plaid, Hugo Boss boyshort boxers, and the thick golden cock sticking up. He knelt, slid the clothes out his way, and sucked that meaty pole in. Nice, sweeter than precum usually tasted. He could feel Taj’s fingers grasping and releasing his hair. Travis wrapped his arm tightly around Taj’s waist.

Taj made gasping, cawing sounds. Travis swallowed him down, tongue stroking the underside of Taj’s cock, pressing it against the roof of his mouth. Suddenly, Taj grabbed Travis’s face and wrenched his cock out of his mouth.

“Bed,” he panted, “over here?”

Travis opened his eyes. Taj was pointing at the futon. “No.” He got up, kicked his shoes off while Taj did the same. “Here,” he gasped out and jerked them down the hallway, both of them wriggling out of their remaining clothes.

Taj kissed Travis with one more hard kiss, then thrust him onto the bed. “*Ooof!*”

“Where d’ya keep your supplies?” Taj’s voice was harsher, now. Less Nicole Kidman and more Hugh Jackman.

“Drawer—” Travis pulled his hand out from under his own body.

“Gotcha.” Taj settled over Travis. Travis prepared for clumsy, painful, fumbling, but he was surprised when Taj urged his thighs up, then lovingly stroked his ass. He breathed softly across Travis’s hole, then licked, softly at first, thumbs massaging the tender muscle. “How long’s it been?”

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“What?”

“How long since you last bottomed?”

Travis thought about it. “Five years, maybe?”

“Oh, good to know, better late than never. I wondered why you tensed up so much. You sure?”

“Yes.” He didn’t like to explain, it always came out wrong. Having someone else in charge was almost more euphoric than the actual orgasm, depending on the man topping him. He’d had one good experience and one bad, as well as countless rejections of, “But I thought you were a top.” Travis liked Taj very much, but if he could do this right, he’d be a keeper.

“Okay.” Taj settled back atop Travis’s thighs. He kissed his neck, licked and nipped his ear, the top of his spine. His hands kneaded Travis’s back, fussing over a bruise from yesterday. When he reached his coccyx, he sucked the thin skin, then blew some air across the divot. His tongue traveled down to Travis’s anus, and then a lubed finger probed him.

Travis’s last complete thought was, *Thank fuck, Taj didn’t make prep a big deal*, and then he was on top of Travis. From the corner of his eye, he saw the blue metallic condom wrapper flutter to the floor. And then, pressure, a burning. Someone, maybe both of them sucked in a breath. He could feel Taj trembling. “Now,” said Travis, “now.”

Taj moved in a leisurely, smooth fashion. He grasped Travis’s upper thighs, urging him up. Taj moved faster. “Sorry,” he breathed.

“S’alright.” Because who was Travis to complain? Taj grabbed Travis’s dick, pumping it. “Fuck!” He let go, moved his body closer. “Sorry, I’m gonna—”

“Yeah,” said Travis as he grabbed his own dick, loving the feel of Taj’s body moving above him and inside.

Faster, faster, all systems *go!*

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*Mmmmm.* Travis awoke to a warm body spooning him, when was the last time that happened? Once or twice, a long time ago. Usually he was the big spoon.

He stretched, his hand finding the cold, damp, washcloth from last night. As many times as they’d needed it last night, the only surprise was that it didn’t

stick to his hand. He used the bathroom and glanced at his alarm clock. Taj never said what time he needed to be back, but Travis had to be at work by seven thirty.

*Such a beautiful man*, he thought. Most incredible legs on a man, ever. Funny, and smart, and proud. Maybe a little too proud? Not about the Aboriginal part, but being gay. One moment Taj was the confident, exotic professor and the next he was barely restrained camp. Travis couldn't put his finger on it; he thought something was odd during dinner, too.

But last night? Last night had been wonderful, abso-fucking-lutely *ne plus ultra*, as his English teacher would have said. Although discussing the best sex of his life with Mr. Madison, buzzkill.

Taj rolled over, so Travis walked back to the bed. "Hey."

"Mmm, hello." Taj blinked up at him. "'Time is it?'"

"Five thirty. I thought we could—"

"Shit!" Taj threw off the covers and looked around wildly. "I've got an eight o'clock class!"

"Okay, I'll get you there. Hey, there's a cool diner I know of in Solana Beach, how about—"

"No, no, no. I've got to take a shower and get my lecture notes, and—oh, please, just drop me off at Buena Creek station."

"You sure I can't drive you somewhere closer?" he asked. "The city has lots of rehab facilities near there. Some of those guys might not be too tolerant of a gay man if they see you alone."

"I'm tougher than I look."

"So, how about Saturday?"

"Sorry?"

Taj would look real good on the back of the Goose, that wonderful body behind his...

"Ah, I've got a thing Saturday."

"Oh. Okay, what about Sunday or next week sometime? I figure your schedule is more restrictive than mine."

"Um, well... ah, this has been nice and all, but I don't really have any spare time right now."

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Well, this was awkward. Travis got dressed and drove Taj to the station. He hadn't been there since he and Woody had been teens. Watching Taj walk to the Compass reader, swipe his card and board the westbound platform didn't make him like the station any better now.

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What had he done wrong? Not only did he not have Taj's number, he was itchy. He'd forgotten the leave-in conditioner, again, so his hair was all over.

Cap wanted to go to a storage auction all the way in Glendora, one hundred miles each way. He drove the box truck with one of the cousins, a skinny kid of about fifteen, known as Gordo, along at shotgun, while Cap and Rigo rode in their SUV.

It was hot for early March, seventy-two degrees by the time they arrived. Some disagreement between the auctioneer and the storage lot's manager resulted in the auction beginning an hour late. Cap talked smack with the other bidders, and Rigo played with his phone. When bidding began, Cap was beaten by a newbie on the first unit she wanted. She ratcheted up her A-game and bought a total of four units that day.

The first two were trash—someone's old clothes, picnic gear, gardening tools. Travis and Gordo cleaned and hauled away the crap. The other two had sellable stuff, but Gordo was looking at a pretty African American girl instead of watching where he was going, tripped, and dropped the 1920s German table they were carrying.

“Oh fuck!” wailed Gordo.

Travis bent to check on the damage, a scuff and a small crack on one leg, he could—

“What. The. Fuck.” Cap's voice was low and harsh.

“Hey, Cap, I don't think—”

“No, you don't think, *pendejos*. Pay attention. I'm beginning to—”

Rigo put away his phone and slipped his arm around her waist. “*Mi amor*, come and look at this lot.” Nevertheless, as he steered her away, his eyes looked out from above the sunglasses that had slipped down and seemed to say, “What the fuck, indeed.”

Travis made vague plans for a repair as he and Gordo moved the table to the truck. If nothing else, he could buy it.

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The rest of the week went no better. Travis was surly and grumpy with everyone. Sleeping was difficult.

By Friday, everyone was fed up with him. Woody was exasperated. "Did you go on one of those all tuna diets again?" Anyone else, who wasn't a lifelong friend, would've decked Travis by now.

Travis didn't answer, just shifted the pallet on top of the stack they were working on.

"Fuck Trav, if you faint again, your mother is going to pound my face."

Why couldn't people stay out of his business? He hadn't fainted since eighth grade.

"My mom wouldn't do that," he mumbled, "get you to do something ugly like clean out a combine, maybe."

"What's wrong with you, man?"

"Yeah, man, what's wrong?"

Rufus. Great, just what he needed.

"He went on a date, finally! I thought he'd be happy, but he's been a jerk all week."

"With who?"

"Some guy, came into the shop. He was here the same day you were."

"Oh, the pretty one. He looked familiar to me."

Okay, that was it. Travis did not want to hear anything Rufus had to say about Taj. He grabbed the push broom and thrust it into Woody's hand.

Rufus stepped into Travis's space. "I know. In Hillcrest, I've seen him around there."

Despite himself, Travis felt his heart lurch. "Big deal, sooner or later, every gay man in this county hits the clubs in Hillcrest."

"Come on, sweets, when was the last time you went out clubbing? There's nowhere around here. Your mind will rot hanging out with straights all the time. Do you some good."

Travis opened his mouth to refuse, but then he thought about it. "Why not?"

"'Atta boy, you'll see."

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Woody let out a whoop as Travis ground out, "I'm not your boy."

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Rigo and Cap were going to Sacramento for a wedding that weekend, so Friday night Bask came home with Travis. The scrawny, half-starved stray that Travis had nursed to a giant furry beast refused to spend weekends alone. Saturday morning Travis did laundry, washed the Goose, and bought a new shirt. He considered dress pants, but he'd already made up his mind to take the Goose, so jeans and his leather jacket would have to be good enough.

Ville au Carré hadn't changed from the last time Travis visited it. Woody and Brenda had wanted to take him out for his birthday, so he suggested a drag club, thinking they would say no and leave him alone. Brenda had loved the idea and Woody loved the well drink prices. Travis endured a very uncomfortable two hours before they agreed, mercifully, to leave.

Rufus was waiting at a table close to the stage. No surprise, there. Rufus was one of those people who always "knew a guy" able to fix him up with anything he wanted. *Except me.*

"I didn't know you like drag, thought you like things wilder."

"Ah, Travis, just stow it already, would ya? I ain't apologizing again, *capiche?*"

"Fine, I don't see what we're doing here."

"Hush, it's about to start."

The lights dimmed, a drum rolled. The emcee boomed, "Gentlemen, and others." The audience tittered. "Ville au Carré is proud to present, Laydee JaJa!"

AVICII's "Addicted to You" blasted from the speakers. The queen strutted out, the crowd cheered. Dancing on very high, rainbow-patterned pumps, shimmying in a tight, gold, sparkly dress, big hair, a crazy hat, full makeup was Taj. His Taj. The music segued into something Travis didn't recognize; Taj or JaJa, quickly changed into a new outfit.

"You knew!" he yelled at Rufus.

"Not exactly, no. But I guessed, and I guessed right didn't I?"

Travis got up from the table.

"Where are you going?"

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“I’m going backstage to catch my man.”

“You can’t just go back there, Travis.”

“He can’t leave without letting me talk to him. I’ve got to know what I did wrong.”

Rufus leaned back in his chair. “Pinky is on tonight, let me smooth the way.”

“Who’s Pinky?”

“Follow me.”

Travis followed Rufus to the side stage door. A tall man, hair shaved close, stood at parade rest. He straightened as Rufus approached.

“Pinky, my man!”

“What do you want, Rufus?”

“My friend Travis here wants to see, uh, what’s his name again?”

Travis shoved Rufus aside. “Taj, I need to see Taj. Please.”

Pinky scrutinized Travis, made a twirling motion, and Travis, frantic and exasperated, held his arms up and turned around.

“What did you say your name is?”

“Travis. Garamond.”

Pinky checked something on his cell phone. “Well, you’re not on the list of people who need to be kept out.” Travis’s heart had lurched when he heard “not on the list” before he realized that was a good thing.

Taj/JaJa had finished his number. “Please,” pleaded Travis, “I’ve got to speak to him.”

Pinky made a call and Travis heard him say his name. He hung up and nodded to Travis. “You can go back.”

Rufus started to follow Travis when Pinky put out his paw to stop him. “Just him, you’ve got no business back there, Rufus.”

Travis stopped and turned around. “Thanks, Rufus.”

Rufus clapped him on the shoulder. “We even now, kid?”

“Sure, Rufus, see you around.”



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*Taj*

Taj started to hurry his cleanup routine after Pinky called. He had known he would have to face Travis again; he needed the photo and any information about where it came from, after all. *God, you are such a bogan. A smart, beautiful, young man comes into your life and you treated him like shit!* He reached for his bag with his trackie daks and the door opened.

Take all the guys in DMA, on tumblr, anywhere, anyone. Nobody could hold a candle to Travis. The lights from the club framed his head, his golden almond-shaped eyes were luminous. Ultra cool, I'm-a-bad-boy-so-I-don't-have-to-give-a-fuck hair. Leather motorcycle jacket that screamed it was his own not bought for effect. *What am I thinking, everything about this man is for real; he does nothing for effect.*

At the same time, the other half of Taj's brain was screaming: He's here, he's here. In. The. Club.

Travis cleared his throat. "You're all I've thought about, I-I don't want you to leave without talking to me. Whatever I did wrong, if I said something stupid, tell me. Please, even if you really never want to see me again, I'd like to know why."

*There's the high road and the low road, dearie. And you fucked up; you've got to make this right.*

Taj turned back to his mirror. "Come in and close the door." Travis moved to the old avocado crate, upended it, and sat down. Taj ripped his wig off and set it aside. Watching Travis's reflection, he used more vehemence than he felt. "This is me, okay? I like soft, shiny clothes on me. Wearing big wigs and bigger hats! To pack myself in tight and become glamorous, to not be the 'good but gay boy', just me!"

Travis opened his mouth to speak, but Taj wasn't through, yet. "And before you ask, no, I'm not transgender, I'm a dude you might remember!"

"May I have a turn now?"

Taj sniffed and went back to the mirror.

"I know the difference between drag and transgender, Taj. I went to my first drag show when I was eighteen. My workplace makes a significant income off drag related items, and I'm no small part of that success."

"Who are you and what have you done with Travis?"

Travis affected a long, drawn out sigh. "I hope you have something else to wear, that outfit is going to be a bitch on the Goose."

"The Goose?"

"My bike, that's what I call her."

"Is there room for my caboose, on your Goose?"

A full range of looks passed over Travis's face, and then, "Yes, there's room for your caboose on my Goose, so go get loose."

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Taj removed most of his makeup, keeping the lipstick and eyeliner. He changed as rapidly as he could, feeling a little gauche that he wouldn't be as cool as Travis. Travis walked around the cramped dressing room, picking up sponges and puffs, and brushes. He followed instructions on how to fold up the costumes. "I think there's a problem here."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I want you hanging on to me not your clothes. Is there any way you can leave them here and pick them up tomorrow? We'll come back in my car."

One of the other drag queens, Sasha Sashay, came in. She squealed when she saw Travis. "Back off," snarled Taj, "he's taken."

"Like that, is it? You could show your manners and introduce us."

"Travis, Sasha Sashay, Sasha, Travis."

Travis took Sasha's hand, looked deeply into his eyes, and asked, "Would you do us a favor?"

"For you, honey, just ask."

"Hey—" began Taj.

"I wasn't thinking and brought my bike tonight, would you hold on to Taj's stuff until tomorrow? Pretty please?"

"You undeserving bitch," Sasha hissed in a far too loud stage whisper. "So toppy and a bike, some girls have all the luck!" Turning back to Travis, she said, "For you, of course!" She made a grand sweep with her hands, and Travis obediently picked up the garment bags, backpack, and wig cases, and followed her out to the parking lot. It was not until after he deposited them into Sasha's "I'm a drummer on Sundays" Camry station wagon, that Travis realized Taj was not with them.

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They were retracing their steps when they heard “No means no! I told you before, I’m not interested!” Taj was up against the wall closest to the stage door, a man leaning over him, hands to either side of his shoulders.

Travis didn’t think. He raced to Taj, grabbed the other man, whipping him around and up against the chain link fence. “I believe the gentleman asked you to leave.”

“Look man, I just wanted a dance with JaJa, she thinks—” Travis knocked him down, then got tight and close into his personal space.

“One word of advice, asshole. You don’t call a drag queen by her queen name when she’s back to being a dude. More importantly,” he stepped back and threw an arm around Taj, “*he* is mine, and if you bother him again, I’ll be forced to hurt you.”

“Now you think you’re taking over,” demanded Taj.

Travis smiled at him. “Should have known you’re high maintenance.” Then he knelt, heaved Taj over his shoulder, nodded to Sasha, and headed for his bike.

“Was that truly necessary?”

“I think so.” Travis stopped at his CX100 Moto Guzzi, glowing lustrously under the street lamps. He set Taj on his feet and unhooked the extra helmet he had brought optimistically.

Taj knew nothing about motorcycles, although he’d had a Kymco scooter for a while, back in Melbourne. He eyed the straight, slim, passenger “seat” dubiously.

“You’ll be perfectly fine.”

Taj huffed but made no other movement.

“Come on, Taj, give me your address, put on the helmet, and get on the bike.” When Taj still didn’t move, Travis grew threatening. “Don’t make me have to tie you onto it.”

“Bossy, much?” But he followed orders and settled down to soon discover the feel of a powerful engine between his legs and a familiar warm man in front. It was exhilarating until they reached the overpass sections and the merges to the other freeways. Travis was as good a driver on his bike as he was in the car, and thankfully, they met with little traffic. Taj didn’t think he’d survive lane-splitting. Finally, they exited onto Genesee Avenue. Taj directed him from there to the townhouse.

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Travis parked and they went inside the apartment. The televisions were off, the apartment dark. "I think my roommates are out," he told Travis. He opened the door to his room and felt Travis startle behind him. *Oh, fuck.*

"Wow, I thought I was having some kind of strange déjà vu! It was like being in Woody's mom's house."

Taj's nerves were frayed to bits, *again with Woody!* "What, his mother is into drag?"

"Naw, she has all these crazy doll vacuum cleaner covers. There's one on every floor of the house. When I stayed overnight, I'd get up to use the bathroom and there'd be this creepy doll's head floating over the couch."

Taj straightened himself up and gestured around his room. "These are not dolls."

"Nope." Travis looked at the mannequins, the wig stands, the jewelry boxes, and the accessory holders, laden with scarves, boas, and stoles. "And I'm no little boy getting up for a drink of water. But I feel like I need you, like water."

Oh, man, Taj was a goner. He swept aside an emerald sequined Hular gown and sat down on his bed. Travis dropped down beside him. "I met my first boyfriend at the Greyhound. It's a drag club in Melbourne, so he knew what I did. Once we started going out, he became controlling, and he didn't want me to do drag." He lay back, kicked off his Top Siders, and spread his arms. "I tried, but I'm just not right without drag."

Travis moved over, lifting Taj's head so that he was on his thigh. Taj continued, "The next bloke, I met in a different club. Same story, I'm cute enough, but why can't I stop once I've got someone? That just isn't me. We had a big fight, and I saw the poster for the fellowship, I didn't let myself think or procrastinate, I applied. Then, when they accepted me, I had to hurry up and find a university that would take me."

Travis shimmied himself about until he could put his arms around Taj. "Let me get this straight. You know what it's like for someone to assume something about you and be wrong? Yet you decided I wasn't good enough to speak for myself?"

Taj tried squirming away. "It wasn't like that exactly. I liked you fine, but at dinner, your face got all squinchy when you talked about that impersonator. I thought that meant you don't like drag. That you're just another one of those fellahs who talk gay pride but don't have any pride beyond the contents of their

knickers. You're the first guy I've been with since I got to America, but I couldn't bear it if you were like all the others."

Looming over Taj, Travis looked taller, a little tougher. "If you saw something in my face when I was talking about the Eltinge piece, it's because of Lou and his cancer. Lou reminds me of when my dad was sick and some days, I'm not a big boy, I don't want to think about stuff that hurts. Having you run out on me, telling me you're too busy? That hurt. Are you going to be like that with me again?"

*Ooh, I could so get used to having toppy Travis around. Although bottoming Travis was quite nice, too.*

"No, I want you, I want to be with you, and if you won't make fun of drag, even come to a show some—"

"I'm coming to all of your shows! What kind of boyfriend do you think I am?" growled Travis.

"Oh."

The next thing Taj knew, Travis rolled them over so that Taj was on top. They didn't have time for more than frothing that first go round, but they made up for it during rounds two and three, so much in fact, that Ian pounded on their shared wall.

Later, Taj woke up to find Travis staring absently at him. "Do I have a booger hanging from my nose?"

"Nah, I was just thinking that Woody was right, and I hate when Wood is right."

"Right about what?" What was it with this bloody straight boy?

"You and me, we're zippadacious, Mr. Linguist, zippadacious."

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"So, you never explained, who is Reynard and why is he important?"

They were lying on Travis's bed, Travis on Taj's shoulder, his foot rubbing along Travis's calf. "What do you know about Australian history?"

"Um, what most people do? The English sent their convicts there and everybody went hunting Aborigines?" He chanced a look at Taj, who was looking at him indulgently.

"Hey, I wanted to be a math teacher!"

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Taj turned, shifting Travis onto a pillow. He licked a line from one of those magnificent pecs to his collarbone, giving it a quick nip. "You did, huh? Why didn't you go to college, I'd think you'd have got a scholarship?"

"I got As and Bs in all of my A-G classes, but I made good money working for Cap and Rigo and there were bills to pay." He gasped as Taj sucked in some skin.

"You're young, you can still go."

"Everybody wants me to, but I don't want charity."

Taj paused, brows furrowed. "Grants and scholarships aren't charity."

"No, I know that. It's just that, at work, Cap and Rigo have joined forces with my mom. They've offered, no, ordered me to go to college and work part time at my current salary. That feels like charity to me. Can you get back to the Aborigines?"

Shaking his head, Taj said, "We'll straighten the school stuff out later. We like to be called Aboriginals not Aborigines. Indigenous or First People is preferred if you are political. Depending on who's talking, a quarter million to a million Aboriginals were organized into 250 nations with something like 300 languages. Then the Europeans came with guns, and diseases, and their certainty they could put the land to better use than we savages could. We call that dispossession, and it happened over and over."

Taj paused to drink some water. Travis smoothed his hand down Taj's neck. "Kind of like what happened to Native Americans, without the reservations," he offered.

"No, they didn't call them reservations, but settlements. Moreover, like here, no sooner had land been set aside and settled, then someone decided they wanted that land and the inhabitants were dispossessed again. And then they started taking their children away, as many as 100,000 or as few," Taj made air quotes with his fingers, "as 20,000 kids. People lost their kinship and heritage. Truthfully, some people gave up their kids so they could get an education, especially those who were mixed or half-castes, quadroons, or octoroons, as they called them. It was supposed to make them better, integrated Australians. They could not see their families or speak their own language. Girls were made to work as maids and boys as laborers.

"All Aboriginals were prevented from using facilities reserved for whites, there were separate entrances and so forth, similar to Jim Crow laws. During

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the Depression, some Aboriginals organized conferences, demanding civil rights and an apology for the government's treatment. One conference turned into a kind of labor union, and they targeted a shipping company owned by a man named Angus Rafferty. He had made a fortune in opals, before diversifying. He sold most of his opals but he kept a matched set, a ring, and a brooch. Reynard Perouse was the leader of the union that demanded better pay and better jobs for Aboriginals. Things got heated, many white Australians were out of work, and higher paying jobs were reserved for them.

“Rafferty and his fiancé held a party to celebrate their engagement. It was at a fancy Sydney hotel near where the union would congregate. Police were brought in to keep the partygoers from seeing the savage Abos. A riot ensued and men were beaten. Rafferty went out into the throng to confront Perouse, try to get him to call his men off and promising to meet with him the next day.

“After the riot, Reynard went missing. So did Angus Rafferty and the Rafferty opals. The press blamed Reynard, but then the war or something started and neither was ever heard from again.

“My gran wanted me to do something significant for our people, so I went into linguistics. However, neither side of my family is from any particular Aboriginal nation, I know several languages, but I don't know that I'm doing anything useful. Then I saw that photo on the telly, a photo of a man who I knew came to a mysterious end, and more importantly, a beautiful man with it, I just had to check it out.”

Travis rolled over and blew a raspberry on Taj's stomach. Taj scrunched up his nose, *overdid the history lesson*.

“How did Reynard's picture end up in Laguna, California?”

“I don't know, do you know where it came from?”

Travis smiled. “I can do better than that. The piece I found it in?” Taj nodded. “It's still in the warehouse in Oceanside.”

Taj caught his breath, a new excitement running through his veins.

“And you know what else is still there?” Taj shook his head, he had no idea.

“The valet box.”

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The warehouse turned out to be a former cold storage building—wall-to-wall dressers, old refrigerators, propellers, hubcaps, jukeboxes, pachinko and

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arcade quality video games—a man cave on steroids. Travis walked along checking QR codes on his phone, muttering every now and again. He stopped at a utility cabinet and thumbed through his keys until he found the right one.

When the doors were open, he switched on the flashlight. That cabinet was chock full of items—cufflink cases, curio boxes, and fancy dishes for cleaning out your pocket contents—and jewelry boxes. A rainbow of carved or sculpted wood, alabaster, malachite and Taj didn't know what else. He looked over at Travis, his face concentrated like it did when prepping for sex or when Taj blew him. He must have felt Taj looking; he turned and grinned, kissed him lightly on the nose, then carefully drew out a black lacquer box.

“I always meant to look this over more carefully, but never got around to it.” There was a crate labeled “1935 Panther” and he carefully placed the box on top. He made a flourishing motion at Taj. “You do the honors.”

The box lid had an Art Deco design. It unfolded on two hinges like a piano. Lifting the lid revealed four drawers. Taj's hands trembled. “I'm afraid of damaging it.”

“Nonsense.” But Travis took over, pulling each drawer out, turning them over before placing them aside. Nothing. Then he picked each one up, looking at them more closely. Taj took out his cell phone and used the flashlight on the empty box interior. Something didn't look right.

“What'd you find?”

“I don't know, nothing?”

Travis nudged his long, lean frame firmly along Taj. He picked up the box, held it towards the light, angling it this way and that. Poked at the back edge with his long index finger, *ah memories. Need to focus, Taj.*

There was a *ping*, and a panel popped out of the back. A piece of paper fluttered loose and started to fall. They nearly bonked heads as both of them dove for it. Travis's long hand got it first.

Not a piece of paper, a photo.

Two men, in old-fashioned evening dress, Reynard Perouse and Angus Rafferty. The corner was stamped with a photographer's mark, and on the back was handwritten, “Café Gala, April 1938.”

“They left together,” whispered Travis. “That was a well-known, gay supper club in Depression-era Hollywood.”



Taj was speechless.

Travis frowned, pulled out a loupe, and examined the pair in the picture. "Look!"

Taj leaned in to see what he was so excited about. They weren't just holding hands; they wore matching rings and matching cufflinks. Opals.

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### *Epilogue*

The August sunshine was just burning off the morning marine layer as Taj tipped the barista and headed back to the table where his boyfriend was none too subtly ogling the surfers as they came in from their morning rides.

"I thought you said coffee was the chief attraction here."

"The scenery is good, too. Nothing like at this table, though."

Placated, Taj set down their coffees. "You promised to make it up to me for waking with a cat on my head."

They had moved in together, to a place inherited by one of the professors Taj knew from UCSD. A once-beautiful house, two blocks from the state beach. It was small, only two bedrooms, but they used the second room as a giant wardrobe for JaJa. Travis had enrolled at MiraCosta College, working towards a transfer to Cal State San Marcos and a math teaching degree. He did only restoration work for Cap and Rigo and he was happy to avoid the auction runs. Bask had missed him, so Cap had nagged him until Travis brought the cat home. Taj only went to the club every other Saturday, and once, Travis had even tried out on amateur night.

"Ya know," began Taj, "I went poking around in the Ladies of Oz Club the other day."

Travis took a big sip of his coffee. "Oh, why?"

In his best news presenter style, Taj replied, "The founder of the Ladies of Oz was from Sydney."

Travis made a noise, sipped some more coffee.

"She was married to a lumber executive and came over here with him bringing all the comforts of home."

Travis looked up suddenly. "Oh no Taj, no more old hats, you promised!"

"Have I got your full attention now?"

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“Taj...”

“The comforts she brought included *Schmidt's Weekly*, a long defunct, and little missed Sydney tabloid. The club was having a rummage sale—um—”

Travis's lips moved soundlessly, “No more hats.”

“Anyway, I went pawing through and guess what I found?”

“Can it be worn?”

“No.” Taj fixed Travis with a stare. Then he grinned and pulled out his iPad. “Look.”

It was an image of a newspaper article. “You see, I didn't even bring it home so you could bitch.”

“I do not bitch.”

Over a grainy photo of two men, one clearly darker-skinned than the other, Travis read, “Last shot of millionaire and Abo unionist?” The copy under the photo read, “Could this indecent act be a clue to missing mining millionaire Angus Rafferty and unionist Reynard Prouse?” The two men in the photo were standing very close to each other, hands near their groins, surprised looks on their faces.

“Is this really what it looks like?”

Taj shrugged and reached into the paper bag.

“Why didn't the police follow this up?”

“Well,” said Taj as he delicately split his carrot-raisin bran muffin, “this paper, Schmidt's, went out of business soon afterwards. I think the Rafferty family probably shushed them and the police, too.”

They decided to walk breakfast off with a stroll down Coast Highway. In front of a fair-exchange boutique stood three men, one of them with an over-groomed beard, too much product in his hair, leather jacket so new it squeaked, kind of a hipster, the other two in jeans and tees. The men in jeans and tees stood at opposite sides around a clothes rack, both of them examining shorts. They each reached for a pair, but the price tag for one pair had become entangled with the zipper teeth of the other pair. They exchanged awkward moves and glances back and forth.

Taj and Travis watched as the hipster yelled, “Are you even listening to me?”

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And the man in the animal rights tee flicked him a glance. "I heard you, but you never hear me."

The man on the other side, the one wearing a Surfrider tee, finally released the shorts in his hands. He cast about awkwardly, gave an uncertain smile and began to walk away. Animal rights man shouted, "Hey, wait up," and hurried after him.

The hipster frowned then brightened.

"Shall we tell them?" asked Taj.

"That when you've got the 'Z' it's inevitable?"

"Yeah."

Travis took Taj's hand and piloted him back to the street and the house they had moved to. "They'll find out."

"Hey," said Taj.

Travis stopped, looking over at Taj. "I love you, even if you switch to 501s."

With a laugh, Travis kissed him. "I love you, too, even if you switch to Chemin de Fers."

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*AR Noble is the nom de guerre of a housework-hating mom of teenagers.*

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