



Sing Me Your  
Love Song

*Raine O'Tierney*

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## SING ME YOUR LOVE SONG

By Raine O'Tierney

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

### Words of Caution

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

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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

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# SING ME YOUR LOVE SONG

By Raine O'Tierney

## Photo Description

In the first picture, a man leans back in an empty, white claw-foot bathtub. He's wearing a white ruffled skirt with stockings and heavy black boots. His eye makeup is vivid, and he's holding a cigarette. The second picture is of a man wearing an incredible amount of jewelry and a scowl on his face. He has dramatic cheekbones and a shock of white in his hair. He wears couture fashion.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*These men are on their wedding night. They are wearing traditional attire according to their social/military/royal/world status. I want to know their story, and why is one of them hiding in a wash chamber. Is that a tattoo on his chest or did his husband brand him during the wedding ceremony? Why is the other so serious? Maybe he doesn't like all the jewelry?*

*I wonder about their world, time, professions, etc. Did they marry for love, or convenience? Maybe it was arranged, or were they drunk?*

*I want their love to grow, as well as their need for each other. I just want them to be happy, but you can tell their first time together will be passionate. You can see it in their eyes.*

*I'm giving them to you, dear author. Anything and everything will be good for them. If any non-con is involved, I'll prefer it happens off page. You can use any genre you prefer. And don't be shy, these boys can take anything from BDSM to mpreg—your imagination is the limit.*

*Thanks for loving them,*

*Lila Leigh Hunter*

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy

**Tags:** bisexual, magical realism, first time, virgin, fate, soulmates/bonded, cross cultural, gypsy/traveler, family drama, in the closet

**Word Count:** 14,362

# **SING ME YOUR LOVE SONG**

**By Raine O'Tierney**

## WE LEAVE AT DAWN...

The irritation was constant now, like a niggling pain in Kennick's nerve endings that never quite subsided.

At first it had only been mildly annoying. He'd catch sight of it out of the corner of his eye, drifting gently in the breeze—a flash of red that distracted him. Then it began to itch at his wrist, all the time, itching, and no amount of digging his fingers in would satisfy that itch. Quickly, the itch became tightening, pulling, tugging, and now yanking. He was being yanked, constantly, so that he physically had to fight to keep his arm steady at his side.

Oh, she'd cursed him well this time.

As if to prove his point, the thread pulled hard, and Kennick's arm jerked out. He overcorrected and ended up smacking his own chest like some primitive show of maleness. Damn it all. Only Day could fix this now, but she refused, sitting in her opulent tent by the road, offering readings to any who passed. He'd gone to her, apologized for embarrassing the family, pleaded, tried to reason, but she simply looked at him through hazy, tired eyes that often saw more than he was willing to give her credit for.

"Great-nephew," she'd greeted pleasantly, her gnarled hands stroking the upturned palm of a customer. The woman on Day's stool looked over her shoulder at Kennick and blushed. Earlier days, he might have stopped and flirted with her, attempted to seduce her back to his wagon. But earlier days had seen him straight into this mess, hadn't they? Damn Rose and her big mouth.

"I want it gone."

"What gone?" Day had replied patiently. She dropped her gaze back to the woman's hand, pulling it close to her eyes. She didn't need to *see* the lines. In fact, the lines meant nothing. The "palm reading" was a show she put on. Simply being near the stranger was enough for Day to know things—things she shouldn't. "When is she due? Your baby?"

"Sh-she?" the woman said, gulping. "I... you can see that? I haven't told anyone. I—"

As the customer grappled with the fact that a roadside fortune-teller had known she was pregnant when apparently no one else had, Kennick snapped, "Your 'blessing' for me. This!"



He held up his wrist. The thread was tight now—so tight it cut into his skin, no longer dancing and moving as if on a breeze, but instead pulled taut. Day's smile pushed her face back into a valley of wrinkles.

"It's time then. We'll leave at dawn."

"*We'll* do nothing. You've done quite enough for me, Day. I just want the damn thing off."

The startled customer looked up and frowned, her eyes on Kennick's wrist. He knew what she saw because he'd asked many people in the days since Day had "blessed" him with the ability to see his own Thread of Fate. Nothing. In her eyes, there was nothing there, and Kennick surely seemed like a madman.

"Maybe I should go..." the customer said with an uncomfortable titter. She started to rise awkwardly from the silk-covered stool but hesitated when she realized she'd have to pass Kennick to get through the flap of the tent.

"Ah, but the thread will only get you there, Great-nephew. You'll still need guidance once the two of you meet."

"Once we *meet*, I'm taking a pair of scissors and snapping the line."

"Because this has worked for you so well in the past."

She wasn't wrong. Kennick had tried everything he could think of to cut the thread, even, in one desperate attempt, resorting to gnawing at it with his teeth. But despite being able to see it and despite its causing him immeasurable torment—he could not *feel* it with his fingertips.

"There's more than one way to cut a cord. When I meet the woman on the other end of this string, I will simply make her loathe me."

Day threw back her head and laughed for a very long time. He'd thought she might topple over; she laughed so long and hard. And when she finally controlled herself again, wiping tears from her old eyes, the smile she gave him was knowing.

"We leave at dawn."

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## FOLLOWING THE THREAD

She clung to his arm, not because she was in any danger of falling or because she needed his strength to supplement her own, but because she wanted to help him slow down, just a little. Just for tonight. Without her gnarled fingers clinging to the fine fabric of his shirt, he'd have disappeared into the city proper—perhaps forever. After all, the foolish boy still thought he could outrun that which was written in the stars and tied around his wrist.

She wanted to give him a chance to change his mind voluntarily.

She wanted to give him a chance at happiness.

“Interesting place, isn't it?” She laughed. “But our home is so much more. Don't you think?”

“Yes.”

He was barely listening to her now; his eyes scanned the street for the answer to his “problem.” Ah, to have her gift thrown back as a curse. He had railed at her and shouted and stormed, but his protestations had led him nowhere. The thread could not be *argued* with. But as they followed its path, traveling all morning, a clever look had come into his eyes. He truly believed he could outsmart her gift. This, she was certain of.

For a while they had played a game together, a back-and-forth dance of high-stakes questions and answers.

“I could detach my hand.”

“The thread would bind itself around your neck, Kennick. Would you decapitate yourself as well?”

He seemed to contemplate this a moment too long for her liking. Death over love? What a stubborn boy she'd brought up.

“What if I choose someone else? What if I deny this ‘fate’?”

“You'll cause immeasurable pain to yourself and the person you choose. And in the end, the thread will bring you home. It always brings you home.”

“You could take this away if you wanted, couldn't you?”

“The thread? No.”

“But my awareness of it.” It wasn't a question but a stark accusation.

“Why would I take back a gift I have freely given?”

“And what if I wish it gifted to someone else?”

Wicked boy. Perhaps his wickedness was why she loved him so—why he had always been her favorite. She squeezed his arm, and he relented just a little, offering her a small smile. He looked so much like his mother when he smiled. Such bittersweet nostalgia.

“What if I end the other person tied to my thread?”

Day was not shocked by the question. Rather, she was surprised he had not asked it before. It was such an obvious thing.

“You will not.”

“But what if I do?”

“Well, I suppose you would break the connection then.” She continued to walk steadily, and he kept pace with her. “Or not. What is to be has already been. But I imagine that if you ended your fated other, you would in turn end yourself.”

“What if she will not have me? My ‘fated other.’ Will you use love charms to guarantee my success? Is this part of your ‘blessing’?”

“If there were such a thing, do you think I would have spent my life performing palm readings? I’d have settled somewhere fine. Somewhere fine indeed.”

“So I’ll need alcohol then.”

“You’ll need your smile, m’boy—that wicked grin you only show when you want something. It’s what got you into this mess in the first place, if you remember.”

Ah, young Kennick. He’d brought so many of the girls in their caravan to his bed, and always the result was the same—by morning, he’d forgotten their names. Though she supposed he remembered Rose’s now.

As if someone had grabbed him by the hand, his arm flew forward and Kennick stumbled. Day let go of his arm and let him fall to his knees, his heavy jewelry clinking.

“So it’s here then,” she said, indicating a two-story drinking establishment on the corner. The neon sign read Skinny’s. She grinned and let the sounds of the city wash over her. Fate was—and always had been—exciting. Even now, two fated souls so close in proximity made the hairs on her arms stand up.

“I’ll wait out here for you to find your other.”

He considered this for a moment, trying to decide if he could cajole the old woman into joining him inside. “I won’t be long,” he promised instead, and kissed her cheek.

As he left her leaning against the warm brick wall, she thought to herself, *No, m’boy, I suppose you won’t.*

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## COMING HOME

It had been a long time since Reed had been back to his parents' house, longer still since it actually belonged to his parents. After Mike inherited it, he'd stripped the fading wallpaper, pulled up the carpet and put down cherry hardwood floors, and refinished the kitchen and the bathrooms. But underneath the new sheen his brother laid over their memories there was still Reed's childhood home.

Over the threshold, everything was both familiar and unfamiliar to him.

His old room was now a craft room for his sister-in-law, Heather, so he and his other brother, Freddy, had to share the guest room when they happened to be in town at the same time. The guest room had been Mike's when they were kids: where the Nintendo was kept, where all the CDs were, where Mike went with his girlfriends to make out.

They hadn't been allowed in as kids. Now it felt like they weren't allowed out.

Sure, Heather made them dinner and invited the brothers to all sit at the table and eat her food, but her expression—Freddy called it a bad case of “bitch face”—made it clear she'd prefer if they would stay confined and not influence her children with their “lackadaisical” lifestyles.

But Freddy was the one who couldn't hold a job, who did more weed than he could afford, and who never failed to disappoint. He'd been married twice, divorced the same, had a slew of kids he never saw, and rarely paid child support.

Reed... Well, he didn't have any of those issues.

He figured Heather's issues with him were of a different sort all together. She knew the one thing everyone else in his family did not.

He threw his bag down on the queen-size mattress and, after a moment's consideration—*shower after the plane ride, or dive on the mattress?*—let himself fall face-first into the warm spread of covers. God, it felt good to not be sitting crammed between two strangers, one who elbowed him the entire flight, and the other who wanted to talk, but never really said anything.

He knew Freddy would be there soon, reeking of pot, and Reed wouldn't be so excited about the bed once he had to share it. But for the moment the entire

thing was his, and the comforter smelled like lilac detergent. God, he wished he had someone who would come and expertly launder his comforters.

But if it were between expertly laundered comforters and the peace of his own space? He'd never have chosen Mike and Heather's home.

Reed loved his family grudgingly, the way one loves an old street because they've driven down it a thousand times before. The potholes were simply part of the morning commute. Sometimes he remembered to avoid them; sometimes he drove right into them. Sometimes new ones cropped up out of nowhere.

There was a sound from downstairs—chatter. Freddy must have arrived. Reed took another long, slow “drag” off the sweet smell of the comforter, cherishing the last minute it would have this fresh fragrance.

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“You sure you don't want to come with us, Mike?” Freddy asked with that shit-eating grin on his face. Heather was standing in the doorway, clutching the frame. There was something about Reed's sister-in-law's demeanor, like she was always right on the verge of a meltdown.

It was Reed's belief that Freddy wanted more than anything to see that meltdown happen.

“There's going to be lots of drinking, lots of strippers, lots of screwing around... Gonna be a good time.”

Heather's tight, lemon-mouthed expression turned into a horrible scowl. Mike laughed awkwardly and shook his head.

“I'm good, thanks. I think Heather and I are going to have a quiet night in.”

“And when you get home,” Heather said tightly, “could you please try not to wake the kids up? Or destroy anything?”

Freddy laughed as if it were a joke, but the last time he'd been in town, he'd come in so shitfaced that he'd run his car up on the lawn, stumbled into the house, and passed out half-in and half-out of the kids' bedroom. Reed had to wonder again why Heather lumped *him* in with his brother.

“It'll be fine,” Reed promised. “I'll keep an eye on him. Nothing bad will happen.”

Her disbelieving look did not change.

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## IN WHICH NOTHING BAD HAPPENS

“Here comes the bride! All dressed ’n’ wide! Dun nun nun nun... Can’t remember the words!” Adam sloshed his beer as he dragged it off the bar and hoisted it high in the air. “Lookit everyone, Bill’s lovely Daisy approacheth. Isn’t she gorgeous?”

Bill—the groom-to-be—blushed. He’d told all of them, *ad nauseum*, that he loved Daisy and didn’t want them making fun of her, but this wasn’t really at *her* expense, was it? It was more at Reed’s expense... He was, after all, the one who had just trudged out of the men’s room, dressed in a thrift-store wedding gown and makeup he’d smeared on after a succession of quick shots of whisky.

“You’re looking different tonight... Daisy.” Bill snorted.

Reed twirled slightly, his black combat boots catching the hem of the dress and sending him sprawling, hard, onto the floor. With a cheer, the members of the bachelor party helped him up—after checking out his bloomers.

“Happy Wedding Day Eve, Billy Boy!” “Daisy” said and gave him a sloppy kiss on the cheek, complete with lipstick smear. Bill quickly wiped it away, probably afraid he’d have to explain it to the real Daisy. “I drew the short straw and that means I’m playing Daisy tonight. I’m here to remind you not to put your dick in any of the strippers.”

“Well, your ugly mug in drag pretty much turns me off to the point that I don’t know if I could even get it up if I wanted to,” Bill said. “Not that I want to. So, good job so far.”

Freddy, who’d been playing darts until he spotted Reed, abandoned his game and came running over with a wicked grin on his face. He grabbed Reed around the waist and hoisted him in the air so that his misplaced kicks sent the fabric of the skirt flying.

“Hey now!” Reed protested loudly. “Get off!”

“Not until you say it, little brother.”

“No-o-o-o-o-o...”

“But you look so *pretty*. Say it!”

“Hey,” the bartender stomped over to the end of the bar they’d claimed as their not-so-private party domain. She was tall with sharp features. *Like a bird*

*of prey*, Reed thought drunkenly as his brother slowly let him slide to the ground. “Y’all need to keep it down or pay up and rent the back room. Because when *I* think you’re getting rowdy, it’s ridiculous.”

Freddy whispered, “Say it. Say it to *her*.”

“Shuddup.”

“*Say it*, or I’m going to tell Bill you made a play for Daisy in high school.”

Reed sighed dramatically, not liking the idea of Bill crying at his own bachelor party. Especially over something that wasn’t true. Reed *hadn’t* made a play for Daisy, but she’d covered for him when he had made a play for her brother and...

With flair and the lisp he’d had when he was five, he told the severe-looking, but beautiful bartender, “I’m Printheeth Cattail—”

She raised a pierced eyebrow in disbelief.

“What?” He shrugged. “It’s a nickname.”

“Princess Cattail?”

“It was because of a *kilt*,” Reed said plainly. “Kilt, plus a brute of a big brother pushing your face in the dirt can make you admit to gender confusion you’re not really feeling.” The bartender let her eyes rove down the front of his ill-fitting wedding gown and back up to his clown makeup. “You’re just going to have to trust me. I don’t generally dress this way.”

“So now you’re Princess Cat—”

Reed shook his head.

“*Printheeth Catta*—”

“Just Cattail. And not really, my name’s Reed.”

“Those aren’t the same thing, you know,” the bartender informed him with a raised eyebrow. “Cattails and reeds. They’re two different plants.”

“Yep, more of this idiot.” He thumbed at Freddy, who shoved him hard with his shoulder.

“They both grow by the water, *Printheeth*.”

“Popes and bears both shit in the woods, but only one of them can save your soul...”



“Hey, bartenderess!” Adam called loudly. “We need more shots. Bill’s still thinking about getting married!”

She rolled her eyes at the lot of them, but poured. Reed grabbed two shot glasses and downed them, one after the other. He was feeling fine.

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## YEP, NOTHING BAD

“Oh, toilet, I love you...” Reed groaned, laying his head down on the cool seat. This was the third stop on their bar crawl and even as shitfaced as he was, there was a blurry little voice in the back of his head telling him, *Think ya had enough?*

*Never!* came the stubborn, drunken reply. There was still another bar Freddy insisted they try and then, of course, Lace and Leather, which would be their *second* girlie club of the evening. Yippie. Followed by...? A dance club or something, he thought. *Oh shit, more vomit—*

“Are you all right in there?”

Why did people always ask that? Wasn't it obvious from the puking noises that he wasn't all right in the least? Reed grabbed a wad of toilet paper, wiped his mouth, and flushed the commode, trying not to watch the mess circle the drain so he didn't have another episode of puking. Puke begets puke, didn't the Bible say so?

“I'm fine, man,” he muttered.

Maybe he could beg off—drag Freddy's ass home before they were so wasted that they not only drove up onto Heather's perfectly manicured lawn, but drove *through* the house? Besides, did he really want to have to pretend he was interested in another pair of bare tits tonight? It was hard enough playing straight when the boobs weren't right in his face. And even if they all skipped the girlie club (as if Freddy or Adam would ever let that happen), Reed didn't think he could stand, much less dance.

Reed turned so that the toilet was to his back and was startled to see a pair of booted feet underneath the stall door. They were facing him.

“Uh... *you* okay?” Reed slurred.

“I was curious what sort of person you would be. I wasn't expecting demure, so the retching? I'm not really bothered at all. However, I wasn't expecting a *cock*. You can imagine I'm surprised.”

*Huh?* Nothing the man was saying made much sense, and not only that, his words were sliding and slurring in Reed's brain, which made it incredibly hard to hold onto them and try and give them the proper attention needed to... Ugh, Reed's stomach did another horrid flip.

“The wedding dress was a surprise, too. You cross-dress.”

“Only when I draw the short straw.” Reed groaned and closed his eyes. “Who the hell are you? And how the hell can you see my dress?”

“Your fated. And I saw you making a scene in the bar.”

“Oh, that’s cool, so you *followed* me in here.”

“Are you going to come out of there so we can meet face-to-face?”

“Nah,” Reed said reasonably. “I’m pretty drunk, and you’re sort of creeping me out.” And then, as an added thought, he said, “Plus, you didn’t introduce yourself.”

“My name is Kennick, and the red Thread of Fate has brought me to you. I’ll wait for you at the bar.”

\*\*\*\*

## IN FRONT OF THE BAR

Reed's entire life had been a series of bad decisions. Given two brilliant options, he'd always pick the secret, disastrous third. Dates, career paths, he'd even changed his major four times before settling on the glamorous, underpaid world of accounting. And what was he doing with that degree? Writing puzzles for *Puzzlestravaganza*—three-dollar puzzle books sold in the checkout lines at grocery stores.

So when he stumbled, drunk, out of the bar after having snuck away from a crazy person who told him they were *fated*, and found himself instead face-to-face with an elaborately dressed woman, he did not fail to stop and insert his foot directly into his mouth.

"Are you a *gypsy*?" Reed asked heavily, putting his face against the brick wall, fumbling a cigarette from his pocket and lighting it. He took an awkward drag. He *should* be hailing a cab back to Mike and Heather's, not asking rude questions when creepy stalkers still lurked nearby.

The old woman laughed. "Oh my."

"Sorry. Was that insulting? What d'ya call yourselves? Something else? Something with an *R*?"

"We're not gypsies. We're not Romany. We just... travel."

"In wagons?" Reed hinted, not able to help himself.

"Yes. Sometimes."

"Do you know any old, er, *not-gypsy* curses?" God, he was drunk.

The old woman's laughter split and cracked like she was a witch, and Reed was too far-gone to be concerned by this. "I know many, *many* curses. But I tend to use blessings more than curses."

"Can be the same thing sometimes," Reed mused.

"You are *very* perceptive, young man. What's your name?"

Should he give her his real name? Could she use it against him in one of her curses? He said, too slowly, so that it came out incredibly conspicuous, "Uh, Cattail."

"I am Day."

He nodded, the brick rubbing rough against his cheek. "What are you doing out here, Day?"

"Waiting for my great-nephew to find"—her grin widened—"a very drunk young man to bring back to me as his mate."

"Oh."

*Progressive. And weird.*

"He thinks he can outrun fate or manipulate it. I know all his plans. Who saw the wicked child through his formative years?"

"I'm guessing you, Day."

"You're right, Cattail." She tilted her head. "You're also quite drunk, aren't you?"

"I think that's a fair assessment."

"Drunk, and dressed for a wedding."

Reed looked down at his dress and then took another drag off his cigarette. "Yes ma'am, I am. You want me to marry your nephew then? I've already been propositioned once tonight. A dude in the bathroom said the red Thread of Fate brought him to me. That's oddly specific. Why not green?"

Her smile widened.

"My old bones are quite tired and all this waiting has put a mighty ache in them. If you would be so kind as to retrieve my nephew from the bar for me, I'd be grateful."

Reed chuckled. "You're awesome, Day."

"I appreciate that you think so."

"But how will I know who he is?"

"You've already met him. Your fated person."

*Oh, of course.* Why wouldn't the weird gypsy lady in the alley and the weird disembodied voice in the bathroom be related?

"Maybe I should go," Reed said reluctantly. This was definitely the most interesting thing that had happened to him all night. But there was the whole preservation of life thing to worry about. He turned, stumbled, heading toward the street to catch that cab, and knocked into a very tall, very hard man dressed

as oddly as Day. One foot caught the other, and for a moment it seemed like he might do a creative little ballet step. Then reality came flooding in; he was going to fall. It was going to be awful.

“Gonna crash. Shit beans.”

But he didn't crash. Instead, he only fell half a foot backward before he realized someone was holding him up from behind with incredibly strong arms. The man in front of him just raised an eyebrow, his arms at his sides.

“Is Day pushing me up?” Reed asked, drunkenly delighted. The old woman had superstrength!

“My great-aunt is full of surprises.”

“I'm supposed to marry you.”

Was that a hint of a grin on that ridiculously attractive face?

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## LACE AND LEATHER

“You’re acting hella weird,” Freddy accused as they walked through the door into the pounding sound of Lace and Leather. There were half-naked women everywhere, and when they saw fresh meat, they descended on them *en masse*. Adam pushed Bill out in front and declared him the man of the evening, paying two women to give him a joint lap dance.

“I’m fine,” Reed lied to his brother, looking over his shoulder.

He’d been fine until He Of The Gorgeous Cheekbones had followed him back into the bar. Except, instead of talking with Reed further, he’d sat at a table across the way and stared him down with sexy eyes all evening. How was he supposed to ignore that?

And when Freddy decided Skinny’s was played out and they were heading to The Hole in the Wall, Reed had found the old woman and her great-nephew following behind his party. They didn’t hide or anything—just kept pace with the party, following a good ten steps behind. Kennick didn’t say anything at The Hole, either. Nothing about fate or threads or anything. The guy didn’t hit on Reed or even offer to buy him a drink.

He just... *stared*.

It was unnerving.

And dangerous.

And Reed couldn’t stop staring back.

Now that they were in Lace and Leather, he was almost *hoping* to see Kennick again.

A dancer had flounced up to him. She was giggling at his outfit, trying to flirt with him. Dressed only in her green G-string, she danced nearby and offered him her hip to drop his single.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I’ve got *beyond* no interest.”

She frowned at him, shrugged a bare shoulder, and gyrated away.

“See, like that!” Freddy snapped as he watched the girl leave. “Second girlie club we’ve gone to where you’ve just pushed ’em away from you. If you can’t afford the ladies, just let your big brother buy. I’ll get you a lap dance.”

“You never have cash.”

“I do tonight.”

Reed laughed and looked over his shoulder again. Still no Kennick.

“Who the hell are you looking for?”

Reed blushed and looked back. “No one...”

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## THE RAFTERS

Reed had never *ever* enjoyed the club scene—even when he was younger. For one, he couldn't dance. He'd even had lessons and follow-ups to those lessons, all to no avail. Sometimes he would still get on YouTube and look up the newest dances and try to imitate them, which *always* led to very private embarrassment and more than once, a broken toe.

So when they ended up at The Rafters, some club meant to top off the night, Reed wasn't too thrilled. Kennick hadn't shown up at the second strip club, and Reed doubted he was going to see him here. His brief flirtation and "fated" interaction were over.

At least he hadn't had to explain to Freddy why he'd be knocking off early to go home with a total stranger. A *male* stranger. His brother wasn't high enough to miss that little fact.

Reed laughed at himself as he moved through the crowded club. *Going home with...* Yeah, right. 'Cause that had ever happened.

But it was true he'd been looking for Kennick every fifteen minutes since they bumped into each other outside of Skinny's.

Sure, he was a little unconventional with the whole get-up, silks and fifty pounds of jewelry and all that... But, tall? Check. Dark? Check. Handsome? God, yes, double check. The clothes could be stripped off. All that sexiness would still remain.

*Did remain.*

He felt the gaze on him before he saw Kennick, but as he looked up Reed knew he would find him there. And there he was. Sitting at the bar. Kennick tilted his head just slightly. *Come over and join me. Let's make this serious,* that small motion said.

Reed walked over, a thrill igniting. He forgot about the bachelor party, about his brother, about everyone except Kennick.

"Thought I wasn't going to see you again after you didn't show at Lace and Leather." He took his seat next to Kennick and ordered a drink from the bartender. "Was a little disappointed," Reed admitted.

He felt Kennick move closer, felt the hair over his ear being brushed away, and Kennick's warm breath as he spoke. "I was there," he murmured. "The

woman with the red hair and the emerald skirt kept trying to get you into the back. And your brother abandoned you at the bar.”

Reed’s face burst into hot color. He could see their reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Reed’s face turned forward, Kennick’s toward him. “I didn’t see you.”

“I didn’t want to be seen.”

God, that was hot. Or creepy. Or creepy hot. Fuck, he couldn’t tell.

“My great-aunt tells me your name is Cattail.”

“It’s actually... Reed. Cattail’s just a... a nickname. Sort of a joke nickname.”

“I’m still surprised you’re a man.”

“Sorry?”

“I’ve been following you all evening. Can’t really help it.” He held up his arm and pointed to his wrist. “The thread has been pulling me along, see. Where you go, I go. It’s given me a chance to observe you.”

“I noticed. Well, mostly.”

“We’re fated to be bound.”

“Because... of the thread.”

“Correct.”

“That I can’t see?”

“Whether you can see it matters not. It’s there.”

“Okay, so what does that mean? You’re just going to follow me to work and home and down to Professor Smart Chicken’s to watch me grab a two-piece meal?”

“If I can’t break the thread, then yes.”

“Do you want to?”

“Of course I want to.”

“You could try embracing it instead.” Reed turned and was pleased by the surprised expression that took over Kennick’s features. He was so stoic; the smallest change was monumental. “Grab a drink, chat me up, take me home.”

"I didn't realize you'd be so amenable."

"Hell, maybe for the sake of being amenable, we should do what the thread wants. What did you say? Get bound? Get married," Reed said with a wicked grin, spreading out the skirts of his wedding dress. The idea that Kennick might say yes to this insanity gave him a bit of a thrill. It was like playing chicken, but with vows. "If your little bracelet is right, you know? If we're fated lovers, and all that. Then, why not?"

"It's not a bracelet, it's a—"

"I know, I know. A *string*. A *thread*. Whatever. But it's a fate thing. It means one of two things, either we're fated or..."

"Or?"

"Or you're an absolute nutcase who's going to murder me once I pass out."

"I'm sure there's a third option."

"Probably, but those seem the most likely."

"For someone who believes he might get murdered, you sure don't seem worried."

Slowly, Reed leaned forward on his barstool until there was almost no space left between them. If Freddy saw him now, then Heather wasn't going to be the only one who knew his secret. The heat of their bodies in that close space began to intertwine. It was definitely far more erotic than anything Reed had seen at either of the girlie clubs.

"I *really* want to get laid," Reed admitted.

"There's a whole bar full of people here who—"

"You don't get it. I've wanted to before, and it's never... *worked*."

"What do you mean, it's never worked?" Kennick asked. "Like your cock is broken? I doubt I'll be able to help with that."

Reed snorted with laughter and reached for the place where Kennick insisted this magical, mystical string was tied. He touched the skin there, felt a little shock. It was probably nothing. Static buildup, most likely—discharged when his fingertip met Kennick's wrist. Or maybe he'd touched the string. *God*, this was fun.

"Like every time I've tried to get into a situation where I might have ended up getting laid, something would happen."

“I don't understand.”

“Let's see.” Reed began to tick off on his fingers all the failed attempts to ask out another guy or, if he had been asked out, successfully complete the first date. “Car accident, car accident, didn't click, stalker, there was a fire once, elephant, traffic, weather, also didn't click, flood, didn't click, left me with the bill, and about ten times I was stood up.”

Kennick stared at him for a long time, his jaw set, his eyes searching. Finally, he said, “Elephant?”

“Just seeing if you're listening.”

Except, not really. That had been the zoo date and the Incident With The Elephant.

“Every single time I've tried to go out with someone it's ended in disaster. Like a weird romantic comedy, minus the romance. So, maybe I'd like to believe in your thread, or whatever. Might explain what's twisted up my love life.”

“If I'm understanding you right, you're telling me you're a virgin.”

“You heard me,” Reed said. “And I blame your thread!”

Kennick laughed. “If that were true, I'd have had trouble with my sex life as well.”

“Oh, you're saying you haven't?”

“Definitely not.”

“So a condom is in order then.”

“Just so you know what you're getting into, we don't *marry*. We *bind* ourselves to each other in my culture. And surely you don't wish to be bound to me.”

Reed leaned back on his stool and let the thought of it all wash over him. The man was insane; there was no denying it. But just then, Reed longed for a bit of insanity. Give Heather something to *really* have “bitch face” about.

“You're the one who's been following me all night, man. I didn't come to you, and now you're trying to talk me out of it. Look, I don't want to go back to my brother's house. My sister-in-law and I don't exactly see eye to eye. For instance, I like doing puzzles, she'd rather I wasn't gay—you know how it goes.”

There it was again, the change in Kennick's expression. His eyes danced with humor.

"It's sad. She's the only one in my life that knows. Well, now you. She only found out 'cause she caught me a few years back with a magazine and a box of tissues, if you get my drift."

"Understood."

"So, are you taking me back to your place?"

"You'd really bind yourself to me?"

"Sure, insane guy who's been following me around all night, why the hell not? I'm just sober enough to pretend and blame it on the alcohol. Where do we go to get a 'binding' license?"

"Nowhere. We just step outside with Day."

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## DAY BINDS THEM

“You’re sure you want this?” Day asked. Her milky gaze was heavy on her great-nephew, but Reed felt strongly the question was directed at both of them. He’d sobered significantly. This was no drunken Vegas wedding now. He had agreed to some crazy things in his days, but this was by far the craziest.

Still, he didn’t really want to take it back. He wanted to be reckless. Reckless and romantic and get his rocks off. And if these two people were after his money, then they were out of luck. He didn’t have any. If they were going to leave him without a kidney, well...

“Am I still going to have all my organs tomorrow?”

Day laughed that great laugh of hers, and Reed felt comforted.

“Kneel before me,” she commanded and motioned to the pair of them. Kennick immediately went down on one knee. Reed was a bit slower, studying the handsome man who seemed unconcerned that his silks were being dirtied in the alleyway. With a *now or never* sigh, Reed knelt beside Kennick who took Reed’s hand and presented it to Day. She turned the palm over and studied it. A smile cracked her face, and she laughed again.

“Oh, there’s no denying you are the one.”

“Can you see how many babies I’m going to have?” he teased.

“Yes,” she agreed.

She returned his hand to Kennick.

“Once you are bound to my nephew, you can never be unbound. Your life will forever be tangled in his. I tell you this only to comfort you—to make you believe you can back out now. In truth, your lives are already tangled.”

Reed nodded. The pavement was hurting his knee.

“Kennick? Expose his shoulder to me.”

With surprisingly gentle fingers, Kennick pushed down the sleeve of Reed’s wedding dress, leaving a patch of bare skin exposed. The feel of his fingertips made Reed shudder with an anticipatory sort of pleasure.

“This rune marks you, Cattail, as Kennick’s fated person. As you come from outside our culture, the ceremony gives him rights over you.”

“He’ll... own me?”

“Yes.”

Jesus... that was so wrong and hot. “All right. Rune me up, I can—*Shit!*”

Where her old clawed hand pressed the heavy rune into his shoulder, it began to burn. A terrible searing pain that ripped through every nerve ending and set him to howling. He tried to pull away, but Kennick held him in place as Day continued to press the stone hard into his shoulder.

“Stop, stop, stop!” Reed cried in agony.

“Almost done,” she grunted. “Can’t leave you half-bound.”

His vision became blurred as the pain overtook him. He was certain his skeleton was going to bolt through his skin and run out of the alley. When she finally pulled her hand away, his whole body went limp. If not for Kennick’s strong arms, he would have collapsed face-first onto the pavement.

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## HIDING IN THE BATHROOM

“This is like the worst tattoo ever,” Reed muttered against Kennick’s lips, as they stumbled into the bedroom of the hotel room Kennick had rented. They’d parted ways with Day after the ceremony, Kennick practically pulling Reed through the streets toward the first hotel he could find. Turned out it was a damn fancy one.

“You seem rushed,” Reed half joked.

“Aren’t you?” Kennick responded.

Reed’s brand was throbbing, but the pain was good—wild—a reminder of the absolutely insane thing he had done. And he thought about what Day had said, that Kennick *owned* him now. Oh, he was sure as shit going to regret that, but for the moment it made his cock twitch. He pressed hard against his... husband? Master? There was a special delight when Kennick pressed back into him.

“The wicked things I’m going to do to your body,” Kennick promised. “You’ll be begging me to stop before the night’s over.”

His hands had begun to move, searching in Reed’s pants, delving, and finding what he sought. It was intense, the feeling of Kennick’s rough hands on Reed’s most sensitive parts. Arousing, but nerve-racking. His gut clenched.

“Slow down,” he insisted, still kissing Kennick but becoming more uncertain by the second. Was this his own curse acting up? The universe had conspired against him so many times—what was one more? Except he’d sort of come to, well, not *believe* in the whole thread thing, that was nuts... but he was playing into the fantasy. That part was fun.

“You don’t like this?” Kennick asked.

“I do. I just...” His gut twisted again, harder this time. Jesus. What was this? Virgin panic? No, no, no! “Um, bathroom. Give me a second.”

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Reed wasn’t supposed to be smoking in the bathroom, but it was the only way he could think to calm his jangling nerves. *Idiot*. He’d wanted this. He’d initiated this. Hell, he *still* wanted this. But now that it was actually happening it seemed really intense. He wished he were still buzzed.



Reed took a drag off his cigarette and climbed into the empty claw-foot bathtub.

“This is idiotic,” Reed muttered, glaring hard at his hands. “I don’t want to have to add ‘Got too scared to do it’ to my list of epic fails.”

He looked over the edge of the tub, down at the pattern of black-and-white octagonal floor tiles. The grout was scrubbed spotless. Another thing he needed someone to do around the house. Scrub the grout. He wondered if his new husband could do things like that: launder the comforter, scrub the grout...

“You aren’t the first ‘bride’ to get nervous on their wedding night.” Kennick’s voice was gentle through the closed door. Reed hadn’t locked it, but he was grateful that Kennick hadn’t tried the knob. He just needed another moment to collect his thoughts.

“You know I want to, right?”

“I’m pretty sure I remember you mentioning wanting ‘to get laid,’” Kennick agreed.

Instead of pulling himself out of the dry tub and going to Kennick like he wanted to do, Reed sank further down. The porcelain was cool on his back. He was the drunken idiot who had propositioned Kennick. He was the one who insisted they get married. Though... was that legally binding—*ha! Pun*—what Day had done? The whole searing his flesh thing? He didn’t think it would hold up in court.

“Come out here and sing me your love song, Cattail.”

Reed’s face burned at the words and the nickname.

“Sing me your love song?”

“It’s something we traditionally say on our first night together.”

“Does it translate roughly to ‘Spread your legs, Reed, and take it’?”

“Not at all. It’s a storytelling ritual.”

“Go on.”

“Typically, one partner will ask the other to sing them a love song—an erotic story meant to seduce and get them both in the mood.”

“You want me to sing you an erotic song?”

“I want you to come out of the bathroom, let me undress you, and *I* will tell you a story to get you in the mood.”

“You aren’t going to sing it?” Reed joked weakly.

“I could, but the only songs I know are in my language, and you wouldn’t understand them.”

“I suppose not,” he said quietly, letting his head fall back. *Remember, Printheth Cattail, you wanted this.* “What’s the story about?”

“Not until you’re out here with me.”

“Where did you learn it?”

“It came to me after we were bound.”

Reed’s eyebrows went up, and he exhaled the last of the cigarette smoke. Reaching out and dropping the butt in the open toilet, he listened to the quick hiss as the embers died out.

“You’ve been thinking up a story this whole time?”

“Something like that,” Kennick said. “More like remembering. Are you coming out, or do you want me to come to you?”

With a nervous sort of excitement, Reed pushed himself out of the tub. He stopped at the sink, ran the warm water, and washed away the remnants of his smeared makeup. For a second, he wondered if Bill had managed to keep his dick out of the strippers without Reed there to scare them off, and then figured he was the only idiot being crazy tonight.

Maybe Heather had been right to lump him in with Freddy.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Kennick took him by the shoulders and slowly pushed the dress down. It caught on his biceps.

“Let me know if you’re frightened, and I will move slower.”

Reed blushed.

“Let’s move to the bed, and I’ll start the story.”

“Call it a song again. Even if you don’t sing it, I... liked that.”

Kennick leaned in like he might kiss Reed then, but instead he only reached around and unbuttoned the back of his dress, letting it slide from Reed’s slender frame.

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## EMBER AND BEAR

*Ember and his small party crouched behind the cover of a large, craggy rock, waiting, watching the others as they hurled their weapons down into the hole. A massive trunk snaked out, whipping through the air, and the men from the hunting party leapt back momentarily before pushing forward with spears and slings to beat it down again. The rest of the herd had fled in panic, leaving their fallen elder to the mercy of the hunters.*

*Nearby, one of Ember's men began to creep forward, blood boiling, ready to attack the hunting party, but Ember raised a hand and shook his head. They would let the others finish the great beast off before springing an attack of their own.*

*The mammoth trumpeted and wailed as the men rained blows down into the hole, and slowly the noises began to strain and then died away to nothing. Even in the stillness Ember held his men back. He waited for the threat to clear.*

*Ember intimately knew the hunting party that had successfully brought down the mammoth, for he'd been born into their nomadic tribe. The leader, he called Bear, because he was built like a cave bear and had the same unyielding aggression and bravery. Bear was the real threat, and so while Ember's men lusted to fight, he held them fast, waiting for the perfect moment. It came quickly. Bear leapt down into the hole, his furs fluttering, his weapon drawn, ready to fight the animal single-handed should it have even an ounce of strength left in its massive, crippled body.*

*In a second, Bear cried out in triumph—it was dead! This was Ember's sign. He signaled the waiting party, and he and his men surged from behind the rock, screaming and throwing stones at the other warriors. They would use their own techniques to drive the other mammoth hunters down into the hole just as they'd done with the elderly beast. And once they were dead, the prize was theirs.*

*The first hunting party braced for battle, bare fists and lesser weapons raised. They were unprepared for a skirmish, having used all their best weapons on the mammoth. But they were fierce, battle-tested warriors with fire burning in their hearts. They would stand and fight.*

*For a moment, Ember's men had the advantage, flinging their weapons and throwing themselves into battle with bloodthirsty fervor. A boomerang hit one*

*of the mammoth hunters in the skull, and blood sprayed across the ground, bright red against the pure white of the snow.*

*In his youth, Ember never would have wanted these men harmed. But he had lived twenty hard freezes and had been betrayed by them and turned out of the tribe. Now, if it meant he could feast on mammoth flesh, he would send every one of them to their deaths.*

*A tall man, whom Ember knew to be the lesser son of one of the tribe's elders, leapt upon him and locked him within his arms. But Ember was well tested and well armed, and he first jabbed his elbow up into the man's stomach and then, when the grip was loosened a fraction, Ember grasped his bone knife and stabbed it into the hard flesh of the man's side, twisting it mercifully. Either way he would die, but this way he would expire quickly. The man fell away from Ember who rounded on the field with his knife raised, anticipating the next blow.*

*There was no one upon him. His men, swinging and jabbing spears, wielding knives, throwing rocks, and struggling in barefisted brawls, struggled in their individual battles. Ember crouched low, grabbing his spear and ivory spear launcher from the snow. His attacker was gurgling up blood, but Ember's eyes did not linger on him. He stood, raising his spear, taking careful aim. He did not want to hit one of the valuable members of his party.*

*Then, suddenly, the world veered, and he was flying, body twisting, windmilling through the air as someone, or something, hit him across the head. His weapon flew from his hand, and he landed, hard, against the frozen tundra. Struggling to catch his breath, he saw far above him in sinking tunnel vision, Bear. He blocked out the sun with his massive bulk, and his shoulders heaved. He growled at Ember, low and guttural, like a wild animal about to go for the kill.*

*Ember struggled against the earth, crawling backward as best he could manage, but still Bear stalked forward. Recognition entered Bear's eyes, and his expression almost softened for the moment of a single breath. Then anger took hold, and Bear hammered down another blow. Ember's arms gave out, and he collapsed, losing consciousness fast. He was not ready for the afterlife. He was not ready to die. But if he must, at least it was at Bear's hands.*

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“This is . . . weird.” Reed sighed contentedly as Kennick rubbed circles in the tight muscles at his lower back.

“My hands? Or the story?”

“The whole thing. But don't stop. I didn't say *bad*.”

“Just a love song.”

“Just a love song about prehistoric hunter-gatherers.”

Kennick shifted, and Reed's breath caught as he placed his lips at the last bit of skin that could still be called “safe”—before they were in ass territory.

“Shall I ‘sing’ more for you?”

“Definitely. A-and you can keep doing *that* as well.”

“You'll have to ask for it if you want it.”

“Didn't I just do that?”

“You know what you need to say.”

*Oh God...* Kennick's strong hands had come to mold both of Reed's cheeks. He'd say *anything* to keep feeling that.

“Sing me your love song,” Reed begged. “*Please*.”

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## **MORE EMBER, MORE BEAR**

*Ember awoke to a cacophony of sounds and the delicious, tempting smell of mammoth flesh. His party was gone—fled or defeated—and he was tied to a mammoth's tusk in the heart of the tribe. He struggled desperately against his restraints, twisting and grunting and fighting them. They were tied tight by practiced hands, and he could not escape them. So he fought with his feet, digging shallow trenches in the hard, frozen earth with his heels. Futile, pathetic efforts. Bitter winds whipped across the open tundra, and he drew his legs to his chest for warmth. His furs were matted and caked with blood. His own or his enemy's, he could not be sure. Every once in a while, someone would come by and stare at him from a distance. They would crouch down and watch him with cold eyes. All recognized him, but none showed him compassion.*

*Nearby, two groups worked, singing and shouting and grunting as they did. The women and children prepared the bodies of the fallen warriors. He thought of the man he'd killed; had he already been sent along? Or was he amongst the dead they now tended?*

*They covered one body in furs as if laying them upon a newborn baby. Yet they put upon him all the things a grown warrior would need for the afterlife. Ember tried to look away as one of the children placed the man's spear in his hand and curled his fingers around it with deliberate effort. He could remember clutching cold fingers as a boy, as he and his mother prepared his father's tusk-gored body for the Green Place.*

*A stern, age-lined woman tied a shell necklace around his neck and in his other hand, closed a small pouch of ochre pigment. The tribe honored his bravery, for because of it, the whole tribe would feast on mammoth meat by sundown. A younger woman, heavy with child, brought him a thick slice of meat wrapped in a dried animal skin. She did not cry, but her face was set into a hard mask, and Ember knew that she must have been joined with him.*

*Together, they dragged him off far away from the camp. They would leave him in a cave or perhaps atop a rock or, if they could manage, in the branches of a tree. Animals would pick him clean within days, but it was no matter. His spirit had already gone where perfect game roamed as far as the eye could see, and where there was no ice or snow.*

*A group of children had come to Ember now, their faces curious and mischievous. One of them had a fistful of frozen pebbles that he pelted at Ember before falling back. The pebbles stung, and he kicked at the younglings who hollered and scattered at his battle cry. The children would be the least of it. Others would come with heavier weapons. He would be beaten to death at the tribe's hand or, if his captors had any mercy at all, they would finish him in one swift blow. He thought them merciless. After all, Bear had his opportunity on the battlefield and still took him prisoner.*

*The thought of being stoned to death was nothing compared to the way his hungry belly growled and clawed at his insides. The hunting party cut and hacked at the great mammoth nearby, sending blood and flesh bits flying up into the air. They worked to carefully skin its thick precious hide and then cut away great strips of the delicious meat. He tried not to look at them, tortured by the food that was waiting so close to him. They roasted some of the meat, ate some of it raw, and Ember groaned as the smells of mammoth flesh and blood filled his nose. Two men argued over a bone full of fatty marrow. It was a favorite amongst all the members of the tribe and the right to consume it might lead to blows.*

*All pieces of this mammoth would be utilized in some way, down to its enormous eyeballs.*

*Every time that Ember was about to lose consciousness, he was roused by the cruelly delicious smells of their meal and the shouts of delight as they feasted.*

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## AN INTERLUDE

“Oh my *God...*” Reed groaned as Kennick gently rolled him onto his back and leaned down to place a lingering kiss on the head of his cock. He could have come just from that. Like a teenager and his first time. Hell, like *Reed* and his first time! “More!”

Kennick obliged with a flicker of his tongue down the side of Reed’s shaft, lingering at the base, swirling back up, and then taking the whole cock in his mouth.

“*Uhn—!*” *Ohgodohgodohgod!* He *was* going to lose it—! Reed shoved Kennick off of him, determined to last more than three seconds.

Kennick grinned at him, a knowing, wicked glint in his eyes. “Stop then?”

“Love song,” Reed panted. “Sing it. Fucking *sing it.*”

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## FINISHING BEAR AND EMBER

*The moon was high overhead when someone finally came for Ember. He looked up through the shadows, sure it was time to die. He'd be dragged before the tribe.*

*He grunted in surprise as he saw Bear approach. The hulking warrior crouched down in front of him and stared hard, assessing his face and his condition. He grabbed Ember's blood-matted hair and twisted his head so he could examine his wounds. And then with a nod of satisfaction, he produced a chunk of mammoth meat that he fed to Ember. The smell alone was almost too much, and Ember gulped it down greedily, weak from hunger.*

*As his teeth ripped each bite, he remembered the last time he had been this close to Bear. It was the night the tribe turned him out to freeze, alone, in the tundra.*

*He stared at Bear who stared back at him, and gnawed on a tough bit of flesh. He could remember from the youngest age, following Bear with his eyes. When Ember was a youngling, Bear was already a man, taking women into his tent and filling them with child. Ember would trip around the camp after him, imitating his great walk and the way he carried his weapons. When it came to be Ember's season to lie with the women in their tribe, he only wanted to go to Bear, and be taken by Bear. And so, on the night before his Choosing Ceremony, he crept into Bear's tent. He had only ever before sat at the flap and listened to the groaning, grunting sounds that emerged when a man and a woman joined. He could not fathom what they did in there, only that he wanted to do it with Bear.*

*Bear was inside, on his furs, alone, when Ember crawled through the tent flap. He cocked his head curiously to one side. Ember, letting the flap close, raised his coverings the way the tribal women did when they were ready to be taken. Bear grunted and turned from him, but Ember crawled to him on his hands and knees. He would need Bear's lead because he knew nothing of joining. He knew only that when he thought of Bear his body ached in ways that were both pleasurable and painful. He touched Bear's chest, and when the warrior knocked his hand away, he boldly replaced it and lifted his furs again. He did not even know if he was performing the ritual correctly, only that Bear was not responding to him. And then he saw it, the way the fur that covered*

*Bear's sensitive regions had tented slightly, and Ember knew from his own body that this meant Bear was experiencing that pleasure and pain as well. He dove upon the place where Bear had grown hard, and pawed at it to make Bear understand. At that, Bear roared and grabbed him by the shoulders, hauling him up in the tent so that they were both standing. Rather, Bear stood while Ember's feet dangled. He twisted and fought for release, but Bear simply shook him. Violent thrusts that sent his head flying backward and forward. Then he dropped him and kicked at him with increasing force until he fled the tent, straight into the legs of the waiting elder. Ember saw what the angry old man saw—their bravest warrior, snarling and panting at the flap of his tent, and Ember on the ground, weapon at his side. He did not see the wanton lust of a young man, he saw a jealous boy who had crept into Bear's tent to kill him. At dawn's light, Ember was forcibly evicted from the tribe and sent out on the plains to die.*

*Except he hadn't died.*

*Until now.*

*At his last bite of mammoth, Bear raised his great bone knife, and Ember inhaled with a warrior's grace, knowing his time had finally come. He would die at the hands of the man he had loved since he was a child. He kept his eyes open and turned to the sky.*

*But when he expected to feel the blade slicing his throat, instead Bear cut his bonds, and Ember's torso fell forward, tingling from hours of restraint. He tried to reach for Bear, but his sore arms would not obey his command.*

*When Bear turned to go, Ember shouted out after him. He had little to lose. Captured by the tribe, he was unable to return to his own party as their leader, assuming any of them remained alive. Alone on the tundra, he would die anyway. He forced his hands to work, pushing through the pain, and, standing, he grabbed Bear's huge, hard arm and pulled. He could no more will the man to move than he could move a mammoth through sheer force. But Bear looked back and paused. It was enough.*

*Ember circled around the great hulking man, and then bravely he took Bear's hand and placed it up under his furs.*

*Bear grunted, but this time he did not pull his hand away from where Ember grew hard and hot. When Ember pressed further into Bear's hand, the warrior's lips twitched. With the speed of a practiced hunter and an even more*

*practiced lover, he lifted Ember's long, hard body fully over his shoulder and carried him off to the tent. Once inside, he deposited him heavily on the ground.*

*Bear stalked around Ember slowly as Ember worked his way out of his thick furs. Even after being forced from the tribe, when his thoughts were not consumed with hatred and revenge, Ember had lain, dreaming of this.*

*The act was more painful and violent than he could have ever imagined. He thought he'd be able to lie on his back on the animal skins and accommodate Bear inside of him with a gentle grace. But once Bear forced entry, the pain was too great, and Ember clawed and struggled and struck his shoulders and face. Though when Bear stilled curiously, Ember hit him harder. He did not want Bear to stop.*

*The deep thrusting went on for many long minutes, and Ember discovered if he focused on his own pleasure, the whole experience was far less painful. When Bear howled out, gripping Ember's shoulders tightly, he knew it was over, and Ember finished quickly, smearing his juices on Bear's great chest.*

*After their joining, as Ember grew drowsy in the dry warmth of the tent, Bear watched him with an animal's interest. He would at intervals reach out and touch his bruised face with surprisingly gentle hands, and sometimes he explored the place where he had taken Ember, pulling back slick and bloody fingers. But it was his eyes, dark and heavy and contemplative on Ember, that pleased him. It was almost as if he'd finally noticed the infatuated young man who had followed him around for all those years.*

*As Ember gave in to his exhaustion, Bear continued to stare at him and stroke his hair and face and shoulder from time to time.*

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*When Ember opened his eyes the next morning, he was warm and comfortable, and covered with piles of animal fur. Sitting up, the warm coverings slipped away, and Ember's eyes widened. All over his hands and arms and chest were intricate, detailed patterns in ochre pigment. They danced along his naked flesh, curving up and down and inward toward his heart. Standing, bared, he realized they traced all the way to his toes. Beautiful painted patterns with an even more beautiful meaning.*

*Emerging from the tent into the bright white morning, flushed, bewildered, and completely naked, he saw that the whole tribe had gathered around. They watched him with unmasked curiosity as he looked for Bear and found him near*

*the Great Fire. Bear nodded at Ember as he walked, barefooted, across the frozen ground.*

*The ochre patterns Bear had so carefully drawn symbolized love and permanence. Standing before the entire tribe, Bear joined their hands and lifted them above their heads. A joyous sound of community filled the air. Their mightiest warrior, who had given their tribe so many strong children, had chosen for himself a mate. And in doing so, he'd brought a lost member back to them. It was cause for celebration.*

*The patterns told all who saw him that he was Bear's.*

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## GETTING RIGHT DOWN TO IT

Reed had barely been able to contain himself as he listened to the story of Bear and Ember's joining. Kennick's voice was like a drug flowing through his veins, and he wanted more, *needed* more. But at the same time, Reed wanted to smother all the sound coming from Kennick's gorgeous mouth with his tongue.

"You're not so shy now, are you?" Kennick growled.

Shy? Who had ever been shy? Kennick lay back against the covers. Naked, fully wanting, and with a hint of a smile on his face.

"I'm not shy."

"*Prove it.*"

Reed crawled up onto Kennick, naked, hungry, and he tangled his hands up in Kennick's hair. He leaned over and kissed him. Kennick's mouth yielded, and Reed let his tongue slip inside. He could feel Kennick's hard manhood rubbing against his backside, loved the way it teased what was to come.

"What should I do to you?" Kennick mused, running a finger up the side of Reed's quivering cock.

God, his body was on fire.

"Hey, man, I'm up here."

Still smoothing with his finger, Kennick lazily lifted his head and looked Reed in the eye. "What should I do to *you*?" he repeated with a smirk.

Reed shivered at the hungry look in Kennick's eyes. "Any damn thing you want. We're bound, right?"

"So I believe."

"Which makes me your property. So you... own me."

"It's not quite as literal as the love song." Kennick paused from the stroking and frowned. "I don't think. However"—he gripped Reed hard around the waist, lifted and dropped him—"it would seem..."

"Hey, no!" Reed cried and shot up, putting distance between his asshole and Kennick's *damn big dick*. "I'm pretty sober now, you know, and owned or not, and horny or not, I'd appreciate a bit of prep. You know, like when you bake a cake, you grease the pan first?"

Kennick's eyebrows rose in seeming approval. "Forgive me," he said, pausing to lick his fingers. "I may have bedded many women, but this is new to me." With fingers moistened, he slid his hand past Reed's balls and went straight for the target.

"Oh... my... fuck, yes. There." Reed's legs shook with the effort of staying upright while Kennick performed some kind of crazy seek-and-destroy inside his body. *That spot*, there. "Stick another one in," he suggested.

"Another...?"

"Finger. You know? Mother Fist and her five... well, not daughters. But you get it. Send another in to play."

Kennick duly obliged, the finger sliding inside, making Reed insane with pleasure. "Are you ready for the joining now?"

"Uh." Reed's hips were totally on their own now, and there was not a thing he could do but bob along with the rhythm. "Another," he panted desperately.

"If we continue, your body will devour my entire hand and soon after, my arm. I wonder. Would it break the thread? Maybe we should try it."

"No way, José. If I wasn't willing to add 'got too scared to do it' to my list of sex fails, I'm sure as fuck not adding 'let him fist me and ended up in the hospital instead.'"

Kennick laughed and rewarded Reed with a long, deep kiss.

"All right." Reed nodded resolutely. "I think I'm good to go."

Kennick withdrew his fingers at the same time as Reed lowered his ass, working down onto Kennick's seemingly way-larger-than-before penis. The sensation was unlike anything he'd felt in his life, and he gasped, keeping his eyes locked with Kennick's. Reed pushed back a little harder. It hurt, but was tolerable. A little more. Okay, not quite so tolerable but still doing it for him. And then, with one swift thrust, Kennick shoved upwards.

"Oh, fuck, oh, fuck. Going to die in a hotel room sitting on a crazy man's cock."

"Reed," Kennick said patiently.

"Internal bleeding, ruptured spleen. Ruptured everything."

"Fated One," Kennick said, more sternly now. Reed tried not to listen, like when he was in the room next door to Mike and Heather when they were doing

that god-awful thing they did where they whinnied like ponies with new hay. Except, he couldn't tune Kennick out.

"Listen to me, Reed."

"Listening."

"Look." Kennick nodded to where they were joined, or, in fact, as Reed now discovered, were part joined. Kennick was more out than in.

"Okay. I'm going for it," Reed said, and on those words, held his breath, closed his eyes, and bore down. "Fuck me!" he gasped.

A laugh so dirty it had a color all of its own—and that color was mud-brown—rumbled from Kennick, whose hands were locked firmly on Reed's hips, lifting and dropping him, lift, drop, lift, drop.

Reed fell forward, gnawing more than kissing, each bounce of his ass against Kennick's thighs jolting the cries of... he didn't know, but *hell* if this was being owned, he was putting himself fully out to tender. And, oh, God, would he be tender.

"Is this working for you?" Kennick asked very seriously.

"Ye-e-e-s-s-s." Reed's voice modulated with the thrust action. Too much alcohol, he figured. Or not. When he was drunk he could jerk off for hours and get nowhere fast. This? He was ready to shoot his load without touching! He was no longer embarrassed about it. Coming hands free? That, he decided, would be epic fun.

"Are you s—" was as far as Kennick's confirmation request got before Reed's orgasm was upon him, his own jet-propelled semen hitting him in the face. He jerked back, and the second wave arced before landing on Kennick's chest. A third pooled in Kennick's belly button, and Reed, like a deflating balloon, slithered bonelessly into a heap. With a push, he slid to Kennick's side, and then that cock was right in front of his face, a full-force hit of cum coating his lips and his teeth. He opened wide, eager to drink every last drop, smoothing the spill into his mouth with his fingertip as he would the finest of desserts.

Only when he was done did he recall the part where they talked about... "Condoms."

"Do not worry, beloved. Used and disposed of."

“Gypsy magic?”

“Slightly drunk lover.”

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## AFTERGLOW

“Fuck...”

“Right?”

“*Fuck*. That was... I...” Reed stared up at the ceiling, totally wrecked, destroyed by what had just transpired between them. “Been thinking about that for a long time.”

“What?”

“Giving in to a man.” It was better than fantasy, better than magazines, better than Internet porn, and the few times he’d been brave enough to try fingering himself while masturbating. It was expansion—physically and of the soul—and *fuck* it felt good. Every goddamn part of it, from Kennick’s tongue dominating his mouth to the unrelenting force of his cock, had been *so* goddamned good.

“You want to go again?”

“There’s no ‘going again’ right now, man. I’ve got nothing left.”

“Interesting the lengths my aunt will go to in order to be proven right.” He produced a small vial of green liquid. “If you want it, Reed, I can make it happen.”

“What the hell is that?”

“Who knows? Day made it. She makes potions and things all the time.”

“What, like... love potions?”

Kennick shook his head slowly. “Maybe ‘potion’ is the wrong word. It’s more like holistic medicine.”

“Something natural... to help me get it up again?”

“An aphrodisiac. If you want.”

“Christ, to feel *that* again? I want.”

Kennick uncorked the vial with his teeth and gently pressed the cool glass to Reed’s lips. The liquid tasted bitter on his tongue, not unlike the cum he’d greedily lapped up minutes before. He drank deeply and let heat wash over him. Almost immediately his cock pulsed as if he hadn’t had relief in days... weeks... months...

“Jesus,” he moaned. “Jesus, Kennick, I need you. *Please*. I need you.”

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## LEAVING HIM BEHIND

“It’s done,” Kennick said tightly as they walked side by side in the cool morning. He tried to ignore the thread at his wrist that was pulling so tight he thought it might sever his hand. Somehow, it was even harder to ignore the thoughts rattling around in his brain. The thoughts of Reed’s smile, his laugh, how he had looked in that ridiculous dress, and then spread naked in the bed.

“Ah, is it?” Day asked in that infuriatingly patient way of hers. A faint grin traced her lips, a girlish knowledge on her face. “Because I still see the thread.”

“Right, but I left him alone in our marriage bed after taking him thoroughly. Like all the girls before him. He will come to hate me when he wakes.”

“Just like that!” She cackled. “But wait. You also bound yourself to those girls, right? And sang to them? Or no? Was that only him?”

His head whipped toward her before he could catch and control himself. How had she known? How did she *always* know? He looked quickly away, not about to give her the pleasure of admitting aloud that she was right about the love song, not even to correct her on the *singing* part.

“Did you enjoy your time with him, my Kennick?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s over.”

“Oh, Great-nephew, you’re not so stupid that you believe that, surely.” With a heavy hand she patted his shoulder. “Who says you didn’t seal your own fate? And who says you aren’t the one who keeps the thread tied tight?”

After Kennick had bedded Rose—the daughter of their leader—he was brought before the council and subjected to a lengthy debate in which he had no say: should he, or should he not, be bound to her?

Through the entire process he’d resented the raven-haired beauty who had willingly gone to bed with him knowing full well theirs was not to be a binding and then cried crocodile tears to her mother when he refused to marry her. And he’d had to sit and wait for their decision, for the men and women of his caravan to decide if he would take her as wife.

It was Day who had spoken on his behalf—that he should not be bound to Rose. She would instead, handle it, she’d said. This was all she offered the council and apparently all they needed.

The next day, Kennick had been able to see his thread.

He'd never wanted to be bound to Rose.

He'd never wanted the Thread of Fate.

And he'd been so certain of his plan to get rid of it.

But Kennick had voluntarily performed the ceremony with that odd, beautiful creature, "Cattail," on a gut-twist of a whim... And he had not regretted a single moment of their joining. It was only now, walking away, that he felt... disquieted.

*Who said he wasn't the one who kept the thread tied tight?*

Kennick stopped walking, and Day stopped beside him. Very slowly he turned, back toward the city, back toward the bed where he had left Reed sleeping.

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## FOLLOWING THE RED THREAD

Reed awoke in the hotel bed alone. The covers were gone, kicked off in the night, and he lay exposed to the cool air. Spreading his arms wide, he felt for the place where Kennick had been, not mistaking for a second that the other man had just stepped out for coffee.

Kennick was gone.

It was a shame, really. They were *bound* after all. And the sex... Fuck, the sex had been incredible. Maybe all sex was incredible. Maybe Reed could have a million random hookups and they would all be as mind-blowing as his first time with Kennick.

Somehow he doubted it.

With a sigh, Reed reluctantly pushed himself up.

He'd need a shower and a whole bottle of aspirin and...

Something tugged hard at his wrist, and he looked down. The second he did, a great laugh bubbled past his lips. There was a red thread tied there.

"Nice," Reed muttered. "Leave a guy with the reminder of—"

The thread tugged so hard that Reed was yanked forward onto his knees. The force of it almost pulled him right off the bed.

"What the hell?"

He scrambled with his free hand to try and get at the thread, to break it loose. So Kennick *wasn't* gone. So he was on the other side of the door, tugging this little reminder of their night before! That was awesome, unless he pulled Reed right off the bed, and he broke his face. That might put a damper on their future sexy time.

As he sought to find the knot to untie his leash, Reed's skin began to prickle. He was *touching* the thread, but he couldn't *feel* it. No matter how he tried to grasp it, he couldn't get a hold of it. The yanking came again and this time Reed was pulled off the mattress. He toppled right onto the floor, naked.

There were a million things he could have said or done in that moment, a million ways he could have argued with what was happening to him. *This isn't right... This isn't real... This isn't happening... I'm crazy... I'm dreaming...*

*There must be some explanation...* Every line from every movie ever. But as he struggled to get into the wedding dress—the only clothing he had—he realized none of the rationalizations fit.

Kennick said there was a red thread around his wrist that had brought him to Reed. Why wouldn't Reed be able to see his own thread after they were bound?

But just for good measure, so he didn't look like a total ass, he tried to use his teeth on the thread. This ended with him biting himself and feeling like a fool.

"All right then, Kennick," Reed said aloud, as he righted the sleeves on the dress. "Seems like fate isn't going to let you just leave me behind."

He just barely managed to get the door open before he was yanked into the hallway. He pulled back on his wrist, hoping wherever Kennick was it had made him stumble.

Thoughts tumbled through his mind as he was pulled down the hallway. Where was he being led? Should he call his family? And... *oh*. Memories came to him, rich and full. Not the sort of colorized thoughts one creates when they've heard a story—painting a face over a character—but *real* memories.

He could remember *every* part of Bear and Ember's story from the evening before, and more. It was the new parts—the parts Kennick hadn't told—that convinced Reed it was real. He wasn't a writer in the least; the most creative thing he'd ever done was the crossword for the April edition of *Puzzlestravaganza* when his coworker was out sick. So Reed knew *he* wasn't creating them.

"Sonofabitch," Reed laughed as he was pulled toward the stairwell. It was a *memory*. The "love song" was a memory from a past life! And, Jesus, did Bear and Ember get it on a lot...

He wondered how many other love songs bubbled just under the surface. How many other lives he and Kennick had lived? If he could remember one, he'd sing it to Kennick next time.

The receptionist eyed him uncertainly as Reed stopped to pay the bill for the evening, but it seemed Kennick had done one gentlemanly thing at least. Or perhaps it was Day. Good thing, too, because the thread yanked on him hard.

Reed ran out into the street.

A beautiful, sunny morning. The perfect temperature for a slight jaunt across the city. He started to jog along the sidewalk, waving at every passing

cab, and whispering to his wrist to slow the hell down so they could get into a car. Finally, realizing he was going to have to take the reins, Reed grabbed a light pole, held on tight, and raised his bound arm.

Lovely, indiscriminating cabs. The crazy guy in the wedding dress? His money smelled as good as everyone else's.

"Where to?" the driver grunted as Reed gathered his skirts and planted himself inside of the taxi.

"Ah." He looked down at his wrist and grinned at the string that was tugging against his skin, pulling him toward the northwest, toward Kennick. He had to force his hand down as it continued to guide him, but he no longer felt like he was in danger of being yanked right through the cab door. Fate, and her red thread, must know he was doing her bidding.

"Let's just see how far this takes us."

**FIN**

## **Author Bio**

*Known as “The Queen of the Sweetness” (well, two or three people said it anyway!) Raine O’Tierney loves writing sweet, character-driven stories about first loves, first times, fidelity, forever-endings and... friskiness?*

*Raine lives in Kansas City, Missouri, with her husband, fellow M/M author, Siôn O’Tierney. When she’s not writing, she’s either playing video games or fighting the good fight for intellectual freedom at her library day job. Raine believes the best thing we can do in life is be kind to one another, and she enjoys encouraging fellow writers.*

*Writing for twenty plus years (with the last ten spent on M/M), Raine changes subgenres to suit her mood and believes all good stories end sweetly. Contact her if you’re interested in talking about point-and-click adventure games or about which dachshunds are the best kinds of dachshunds!*

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