



Cari Z

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

RECLAMATION

By Cari Z

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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Photo Description

In the series of GIFs, we see a man from his shoulders down, shirtless, clad only in a pair of sinful denim jeans and moving in a way that makes you think warm and happy thoughts (it's getting hot in here, whoo!). The still picture, on the other hand, depicts a naked man crouched on the ground, his hands behind his head, in a shower of water against a dark background.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am a cop newly promoted to detective. I've been asked to go undercover as a stripper at a strip club to investigate (kidnappings, drugs, sex trade... I'll leave that up to you). While working there I meet the man who will become my lover.

He is in a law enforcement type job (fireman, FBI, search and rescue, military, take your pick). Is he just there because he likes strip clubs? Is he undercover as well, working a different angle and we get together... in more ways than one?

I have to admit striptease movements really get the blood going, but are these pictures of me working out for the job itself, a private viewing, or am I fantasizing about his hands, his mouth, his body?

I thought I could handle this assignment, but that was before the bad guys figured out why I was actually there.

I'd love a couple of sex scenes with him. A long, slow, sensual one, or even a hard, hot, heart-pounding scene. I'll leave that up to you.

Tags. Angst, no homophobia please... the angst should come from the case, not his coworkers. Striptease, no BDSM.

Sincerely,

Kelly

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, dystopian

Tags: law enforcement, cartels/criminals, exotic dancing, hurt/comfort, undercover, grief, HFN

Content Warnings: graphic violence, mental illness, secondary character death

Word Count: 34,322

Dedication

For Kelly, who just had to include those gifs in her prompt. I wish I'd had time to give this the novel treatment, but I hope you enjoy it.

Acknowledgements

Also, I have to confess: without my betas, this would have been almost impossible to finish. Samantha and Tiffany, you are the household goddesses of my mind's hearth. Or, if that doesn't do it for you, you're total fucking rock stars. Thank you so much for your help.

Cover by Caitlin Ricci, who also rocks.

Additional Content

Yep, this story's got a playlist! Check it out [here](#).

RECLAMATION

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Chapter One

Matt could tell by the way Jojo sashayed over to him that he wasn't bringing news he thought Matt wanted to hear. He leaned in close, suffocating Matt with the scent of his favorite floral perfume, and purred, "You're up, Cali-boy. Your favorite patron got here five minutes ago, and he's getting impatient."

"Well, fuck." The reluctance was all part of the act but genuine enough that Matt didn't have to try too hard to sell it, either.

His reply got the expected laugh. "He might be a dog, honey, but he's more bark than bite when it comes to you." Jojo reached around and smacked Matt firmly on the ass. "Lucky you, huh? At least you know you're gonna make the rent on nights like these."

Matt rolled his eyes. He'd put on so much mascara that his eyelids felt weighed down by it, but there were certain expectations when it came to the look that Johnny Rock's went for with its strippers. That meant his personal opinion was meaningless. It also meant Johnny, the owner and manager of the place, had taken one look at Matt three weeks ago when he first hired him and said, "You're going to be California, you got it, boy?"

"California?" Matt didn't follow. They lived in the sprawling urban center of Phoenix, Arizona. "Why?"

"'Cause you're tan and you'll look good as a bleach blond," he'd said. Johnny was probably in his seventies, with a head full of white hair covered by a cowboy hat and his hand never far from a glass of whiskey, but the folksy affectations were nothing more than a costume for Johnny. Matt had seen more genuine emotion in roadkill. "Everybody's got a schtick, kid, and that's going to be yours. I lost my last California a week ago."

"To what?"

In retrospect, it had been a dumb question. "Death," Johnny had replied simply. "You in, boy?"

"Yeah," Matt had said, because he really didn't have any choice. This was his job, after all. His part of the case, the mission. He was going to do whatever it took to make it work. "Sure, I can be Cali."

Three weeks later, Matt had his routine down pat. Cali was a sweet, slightly vulnerable West Coast transplant with a big, wide smile and a slightly goofy

personality. Cali liked to be admired, and Cali wanted to be loved. Cali particularly liked the attentions of the youngest son of the head of the Jimenez cartel in Phoenix, a frustrated gay boy who flouted the disapproval of his family by frequenting the only all-male strip club in the city.

The Jimenez cartel ran a smuggling ring that trafficked drugs through the heart of the sunburnt West, sneaking cocaine and heroin up into Canada and bringing high-tech mod chips that could enhance a person's mental and physical traits when installed by a decent neurosurgeon. Mods were all the rage for people who could afford them, a way to keep yourself alive longer in the mess that had been left after the bullshit of the Second Secession thirty years ago. They were illegal to transport without some heavy-duty permits, but they could be smuggled easily enough inside of people.

Federal law enforcement had been happy enough to leave the Jimenez cartel to their work as long as the scope stayed small. They had bigger things to worry about than a few hundred pounds of heroin or a couple dozen mod chips making it over the southern border every few weeks. But the Jimenez patriarch wanted to expand his business, and he needed manpower to do it. Not the armed kind, either, or adding chips to girls who were trafficked north as part of the sex trade. They needed people who could blend in, carry dozens of chips in their bodies without rousing suspicions. That meant kidnapping locals and "persuading" them to work for the cartel. And while the easiest ones to press into service were the runaways who made their home along the cancerous edges of a dangerous city, there were some high-profile exceptions who had caught the attention of the feds.

All of which meant that Matt, recently promoted to detective out of Phoenix PD's vast rank and file, was sent undercover in an attempt to gather enough evidence against the Jimenez cartel to give law enforcement an idea of how to put a stop to the kidnappings without resulting in unacceptable levels of violence. No one wanted a repeat of the Meth Wars, after all, and while the Jimenez cartel was as tight as any mafia family, there was always a way in. In this case, the feds thought that one way might be Tito Jimenez. And Matt was just his type. For now, at least.

Tito of the clammy hands, Tito of the bulldog set to his jaw, Tito who was too young to have that permanent frown line between his eyebrows. Tito was a regular at Johnny Rock's, but who he spent his money on was fluid, ever-changing. He'd go as far as he could without getting rebuffed by either the stripper or Johnny, or however far his family would let him go before reeling

him and his spending back in. Tito was a man desperate for something he couldn't even put a name on, and it was Matt's job to give it to him.

Behind the curtain, Matt stretched his back and shoulders, listening to his intro begin on the stage. He still wasn't used to the way his new implants had left his body so freakishly flexible. He'd lost his strength mods during prep for the mission—there was no way a young, unemployed drifter like he was posing as could have afforded police-standard modification chips. The force's doctors had even removed Matt's generic forearm implant for connecting to the web, to help emphasize his needy, destitute state. So it was bye-bye enhanced fast-twitch muscle development, hello black-market insert that somehow turned his hips into a lazy Susan.

"You're up," Jojo reminded him, and Matt nodded. "Don't forget your sunglasses."

Matt groaned but took the shades, complete with bright orange frames. "These look fucking ridiculous."

"But they're so California!" Jojo mocked, grinning around his fake teeth. "Maybe Johnny would let you switch them out for a surfboard or something, if you're really—"

Matt shot Jojo a horrified look. "Don't even *think* about suggesting that to him!"

"I won't if you buy me a drink after your show." Jojo pressed a sparkly kiss to Matt's cheek and then wiped it off with his thumb. "Go and impress your admiring hordes, Cali."

"I got it." One more quick inspection in the mirror, and then he headed out on stage, ready for another round of seducing Tito Jimenez.

It was a game of catch and release, working at Johnny Rock's. When you were onstage, you played the field, heading for whoever waved the most money. Johnny ran a cash-only club, a throwback to the last century, but his acts were exclusive enough that people complied, bringing precious bills in with them in order to get a taste. There was a bounty on paper money, the government trying hard to transfer over to a card-only system that could be more easily tracked, and so that made cash even more desirable.

An old club remix of "West Coast" came on, and Matt headed out onto the stage. He didn't affect a sexy strut like Jojo used, not for Cali. As Matt became Cali, he toed off his sandals and walked out barefoot, wearing nothing but a

pair of ripped jeans so thin now they were almost translucent and that stupid pair of sunglasses. The rhythm of his hips and shoulders was an enticing wave, sliding up and down the line of his body in time to the beat. This was a sensual song, even sped up to its current pulsing beat, and Matt elongated every murmur of the singer's voice with a soft, subtle movement. He kept his smile small and secretive as he paced out to the pole in the center of the stage, spread his legs, and leaned his shoulders back against the cool metal.

The stage wasn't raised very high, making it easy for Matt to jump down and work individuals depending on who earned his personal attention for a measure or two. He tilted his head down toward the floor but kept his eyes moving beneath the dark lenses, surveying the crowd. About thirty people sat around scratched wooden tables on uncomfortable chairs, some of them drinking or checking the screens on the backs of their forearms, but most were looking at him.

No one was looking harder than Tito Jimenez, his dark eyes wide and focused in his foxy face, a stack of bills on the table in front of him. He wore diamonds in his ears that glittered in the low light and a gold cross on a chain around his neck that seemed to drag him forward. The two men sitting with him were less intent, one of them looking actively uncomfortable—bodyguards then, or rather, babysitters. Tito ignored them and shifted the top bill into his hand, waving it back and forth like a flag to a bull.

Well, Matt couldn't be *that* easy. He grabbed the pole above his head and arched forward, hips leading the way, turning his upper body into a perfect \cap -shape. He pushed up onto his toes, bowing bare skin and toned muscle toward the crowd and then swiveling back to standing so smoothly he got a few gasps from the audience.

Tito had two bills held up now, rubbing them against each other like he was imagining them as flesh. Matt smiled and slid his free hand down his chest, absently tracing the cut plane of his abs as he picked his first target. There, two tables deep: Ball Cap. He came in a couple times a week and always had a leer for Matt. He smelled like day-old chewing tobacco, but he was a decent place to start. Matt sidled to the edge of the stage and dropped off the end like a leaf falling through the air, lilted and tilted but landing as softly as if he'd floated down. He ignored Tito's small, shocked exhale as he turned away from him, hips swaying, to bend over the table in front of Ball Cap.

There was no grabbing, no pulling and no touching under the clothes or across the crotch. Johnny Rock's was a surprisingly chaste place, all things

considered, but that was part of the appeal. There were plenty of high-end clubs where enough credit would put a naked girl in your lap to play with for all the world to see. Johnny's strippers were desired in part because there was still an element of mystery, something that made mental fingers itch to uncover them.

Matt rolled over so that only the base of his spine and the tops of his shoulders touched the table, his head dangling off the far side just inches over Ball Cap's lap, and grinned lazily. Rough fingers roamed over his bare chest, settling fast on his nipples and pinching them hard before Matt pulled away with a gentle *tsk*.

"Oh, c'mon," Ball Cap whined, sticking two hundreds into Matt's waistline and letting his hands linger there. "Come back, I'll be nice!" He slipped his hand around to Matt's crotch and palmed his dick through the smooth denim. Matt slipped gracefully away, ignoring the way his skin seemed to crawl. *Keep it together. Put on a show.*

"Not nice enough," Matt drawled. "Maybe next time, baby." The song was getting close to the halfway point, and he needed to draw Tito's anxiety out a little more. A guy at the bar... there.

Matt had seen him in here several times before, always drinking just one beer at the bar before he left again. He'd never paid for any company, never catcalled or even made a gesture in Matt's direction, but Matt's thirst for lowbrow was at an ebb for the moment. He needed a chance to breathe a little, get his composure back, and this guy seemed like just the way to do that.

It didn't hurt that he was handsome in that sweet boy-next-door way and obviously dead tired. Matt wondered what brought this guy in so late and then pushed his curiosity back as he set his palms down on the edge of the bar, encircling his mark, and rolled his hips in a figure eight that just barely brought their pants into contact. The man wore the plain, sand-colored cargo pants of a city worker and a T-shirt with a faded circular logo, oversized for his frame, but Matt could see the firm muscles in his arms and the definition in his shoulders. The frisson of desire that followed was surprising.

Matt wrapped his arms around the man's shoulders and swayed gently into the protective curl of the man's body. He didn't smell too sweet, probably just off a shift somewhere, but his tentative hands rested like petals against Matt's waist, barely brushing him. His palms were rough too, but warm and dry.

"I can't..." The guy cleared his throat. "I can't afford you," he said quietly.

“It’s okay,” Matt whispered, pushing his sunglasses up. He glanced over his shoulder at Tito, who looked livid, a whole fistful of bills raised in Matt’s direction. “I’m just catching my breath.” When he looked back into the man’s eyes, though, he felt like he was losing air instead, his lungs going still for a moment under the weight of that considering amber gaze. “Thank you,” he finished, and then pulled away and headed for Tito, still swaying, carelessly undoing the top button of his jeans as he went. A few other men and one determined woman thrust bills at him, but Matt ignored them, trying to focus on his target and forget about the way the pockets of his hips still tingled from the man’s touch.

Tito pushed back his chair as Matt approached, and Matt took the hint, settling gracefully into his lap and undulating forward so their chests were almost touching. The fistful of hundreds went into his back pocket, but Tito wasn’t done with him. Where he touched Matt, his hands were soft, his grip strangely gentle, almost worshipful. It was at complete odds with the tone of his voice. “You know I don’t like you going to other men, Cali,” he snapped, the hard line of his erection pressing against the seam of Matt’s jeans. “When I’m here, you dance for me.”

Matt shrugged, making the move look deliberate as the music swelled over the word *love*. “I have to work the crowd, Tito,” he murmured. “I’ll get in trouble if I don’t.” *I’m a victim of circumstance; I need to be taken care of.* “You know I’d prefer to spend all my time with you.”

Tito had brown eyes, the same general category as the man at the bar, but the word didn’t do either of them justice. Tito’s brown was dark and burnt through with red, glinting strangely in the low light of the club. “How can I know that when you go around feeling up every *pendejo* who shakes a little cash in your direction?” He sounded genuinely hurt, like Matt had been cheating on him somehow.

“It’s my *job*, baby,” Matt said, letting a little hurt of his own enter his voice. “We can’t all be important like you. Some of us just get by.” The music was drawing to a close. He let the shades fall down again, covering his eyes. “I have to go.”

“How much do I have to offer to get you to stay?” Tito’s fingers danced over the stack of money on the table. “Is this enough to make me the only one you spend time with?”

“Tito—”

“That’s all you get for the week,” one of his bodyguards said. “Don’t waste it on a whore, Tito.”

“You don’t tell me what the fuck to do!” Tito shouted, the fragility of the composure he’d kept with Matt breaking. The man pulled up his arm screen as Tito looked beseechingly at Matt again. He was sweaty, his slick black hair falling out of its carefully applied gel. “What do I have to do to keep you?” he demanded. “You tell me, and I’ll find a way. I’m sick of seeing other people put their hands on you.” Pure possessiveness darkened his voice. “Not when you should be *mine*.”

The music had changed over to a different song, but no one else was on stage. Matt saw Jojo heading his way and groaned internally. He wanted Tito jealous, desperate even, but he didn’t want to start something that was going to get either of them kicked out of the club. “We can’t talk like this. Not here.”

“Where, then?” Tito’s thick lips parted, his tongue darting out to slick them. “Where?”

“*Ah-ah*,” Jojo said, taking Matt by the shoulders and gently pulling him back. “No personal business on the floor, gentlemen.”

“Back off, bitch,” one of the bodyguards grunted.

“Rude,” Jojo chided him and slammed his foot into one of the legs of the man’s chair. It snapped with a loud *crack* and sent the bodyguard toppling to the floor. “R-E-S-P-E-C-T, boys,” Jojo said, backing up with Matt in tow as the bodyguard climbed to his feet, looking livid.

Matt let himself be led, keeping his face turned toward Tito while using the shades’ camouflage to look around. The man at the bar was still there, his half-finished beer on the counter behind him as he took in the scene. He looked... concerned, which was sweet. Matt might have taken a moment to bask in it if he hadn’t also seen the far door open and Fernando Jimenez, Tito’s older brother, push his way into the club.

Matt assumed that was who Tito’s bodyguard had contacted, but how had he gotten here so fast? The mood in the club turned from amused to cautious in an instant, patrons leaving their tables and heading for the door as Fernando and two of his own men stalked across the floor.

“*That’s* what you’re spending all your money on?” he demanded loudly, gesturing at Matt as he got to Tito’s table. Tito glared at one of his bodyguards, who just shrugged. “No, don’t blame Paulie; blame yourself, you idiot! This is

why you keep our mama up at night, wondering where you are, worrying that you're dying in a gutter somewhere?"

"I'm not a baby, Nando, don't treat me like one!"

"No, not a baby," Fernando sneered. "A runaway puppy at best. It's lucky for you I had business nearby tonight, otherwise you'd be explaining to Papi in the morning what you wasted all your allowance on in a single night—"

"It's my money," Tito hissed, "and I'll spend it however I want!" He got up and walked right over to Matt, the stack of bills in his hand, and defiantly shoved it down the side of Matt's jeans, so hard he almost pushed the pants right off Matt's hips. His hand trembled for a moment where it rested against Matt's bare thigh, the look in his eyes wild. He turned back to his brother before either Jojo or Matt could react.

"And what, you're buying his love with that?" Fernando laughed derisively. "Puppy has to buy love from a whore because no man will touch him otherwise?"

"You *know* Papi won't let me bring someone—"

"Won't let you bring them back to despoil your mother's home, no, of course he fucking won't, Tito! Why not go to his place? What, he hasn't even told you where he lives yet?" Fernando grinned darkly. "Or you just haven't been smart enough to look? Because I found this whore's home pretty easy. Your slut probably stinks of curry."

Oh, fuck. It wasn't that Matt didn't have confidence in his persona, it was solid, and he knew it. There was nothing in the tiny apartment above the Indian restaurant to give him away; he didn't connect to headquarters there, but still, it would only make being undercover harder if the Jimenez cartel was watching him. He needed to get Tito to let *him* in, not the other way around.

The sound of a shotgun cocking brought every other noise to a stop. It was hard to make out Johnny's silhouette in the dark corner of the club, but Matt could see the shiny barrel of the sawed-off shotgun easily enough. Matt had never seen one before, and he could tell he wasn't the only person who was impressed. A gun like that was highly illegal, and also incredibly rare. People's privately owned firearms had been systematically collected and destroyed by the winning side after the War of the Second Secession, and the only new ones that got manufactured today went straight into the hands of the government. They were some of the hottest items on the black market, more valuable than mod chips to some buyers. "You boys need to leave," Johnny said.

“Do you have any idea the hell that would come your way if you shot me?” Fernando demanded. “My family would *crush* you.”

“Sure they would,” Johnny agreed. “But that wouldn’t concern you, because you’d be dead.”

“We could—”

“Out.”

“My *father*—”

“Out. You get five more seconds to decide.”

Jojo retreated with Matt back behind the stage, his glittering lips terse. “You’d better go, Cali,” he said. “I think Johnny’s going to close things up early, just in case.”

“Fuck.” Matt swore viciously, contemplating the loss of weeks’ worth of this stupid mating dance. “Is that whole family crazy?”

“Crazy enough that I wouldn’t go home, if I were you,” Jojo said, handing over his bag. Matt pulled on a shirt and light jacket—things got a little cool around four a.m., even in Phoenix. “You have another place? And don’t look at me,” Jojo added. “I’ve got three under-fives at home; there’s no room for more.”

“I’ll figure something out.” Matt slid his feet into the sandals and dislodged the roll of bills down his pants, transferring it to a pocket. “You really think they’ll follow me home?”

Jojo shrugged. “Maybe not, but there’s no telling since it doesn’t sound like Johnny’s shot any of them. Be careful, Cali-boy.”

“You too.” Matt slipped out the back door and took another moment to curse quietly.

“Hey.”

Matt whirled toward the source of the greeting, his hands automatically coming up into a defensive position. He might not have the strength mods anymore, but he still had close to a decade of training in the police program. When he saw who it was, though, he relaxed a little bit. “Hi,” he said, a little breathless.

The guy stood about ten feet from him, at the entrance to the alley behind Johnny Rock’s. He kept his hands down and his voice calm, soothing. “I didn’t

mean to startle you. I was just heading out and thought someone sounded upset back here.”

“Yeah.” Matt ruefully ran a hand through his bleached hair, pushing the pale strands out of his face. “Sorry, I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Apart from starting a fight in my place of employment and definitely gaining a stalker? Yeah, totally.”

The man frowned. “You didn’t start that fight.”

“Doesn’t matter. My boss isn’t going to like having to shut down early.” Matt sighed. “And now I need to go and find a hotel, so...”

“You don’t think it’s safe to go home? Why not call the police?”

Oh, for so many reasons. “They’ve got better things to do than stand watch over a stripper who can’t even prove he’s in danger,” Matt said. “I’ll work something out.”

“You could crash at my place for the rest of the night, if you need.” The guy looked as surprised to make the offer as Matt was to hear it. “Shit. Sorry, I don’t mean to be creepy,” he immediately apologized.

Matt laughed a little. He should shut this conversation down, he really should, but something about the guy made him want to keep talking. “It would be less creepy if I knew your name,” he hinted.

“Right.” The guy shut his eyes and rolled his neck in a circle, wincing as something cracked. “I’m not firing on all cylinders tonight, sorry.” He walked over and held out his hand. “I’m Grayson Corbett. Just Grayson, really.”

Matt shook his hand. “Matthew Vieira. Or just Matt.” It was close enough to his real name that he didn’t have to worry about not responding and generic enough that he could be just one of many in Phoenix. “And I really appreciate the offer, Grayson, but I’ll be okay. There are plenty of motels around.”

Matt could tell Grayson wanted to say something, maybe about the state of those motels, but after a few seconds, he just nodded his head. “Okay, then. Be safe, Matt.”

Matt opened his mouth to reply, but he suddenly heard the front door of Johnny Rock’s bang open and loud voices emerge, shouting at each other in a virulent mixture of Spanish and English that meant he needed to get moving.

“Yeah, definitely time for you to go.” Grayson turned and headed back to the mouth of the alley, looking both ways. “There aren’t any cars on this side—I think you can make it to the next street without being seen.”

Well, that was oddly considerate. But then, that could have been Grayson’s middle name as far as Matt was concerned. He stopped beside him and briefly touched Grayson’s shoulder. “Thanks,” he said and then headed off at a fast pace down the sidewalk. When Matt reached the street corner, he paused to look behind him for a moment. Grayson was still there, hands in his pockets, keeping an eye out for an angry Jimenez.

It wasn’t that Matt needed the help that made him suddenly feel warm inside. It was that Grayson wanted to offer it to him anyway. He waved, just once, and then turned the corner and walked away from the clusterfuck that his evening had become.

He needed to forget about Grayson and get in touch with Carmen as soon as possible.

Chapter Two

The only reason to go into Johnny Rock's, in Grayson's mind, was the beer.

The era of craft brewing had come and gone, and so had most of the higher-end, mass-produced stuff. These days beer tended to come in two varieties: light or dark. Both were pretty bad, the sort of thing you had to drink chilled to the absolute limit because otherwise the aroma of formaldehyde was just too much. The rest of Grayson's Reclamation team had no problem with it; they'd drink anything alcoholic after a bad shift, even if it was warm and tasted like fermented piss. But Grayson had been spoiled by his uncle, ruined by small-batch IPAs and chocolate porters brewed in the spare room. When he'd found out from a friend that Johnny Rock's carried an honest-to-God stout, he'd been sold.

They were good, too. Poured cold with a creamy head to soften the bitterness of the first sip, that beer was just what Grayson needed sometimes. Johnny Rock's was only seven blocks from his condo and directly between his place and his team's home base. It was also just about the only bar open at two in the morning, when Grayson typically got off work. Basically, perfect.

Sure, there was a cover charge, but it was worth it for a decent beer. Plus, the acts were always a pleasant distraction. Or at least they'd been pleasant until the new California showed up. After that, they'd become downright addictive. And *after* tonight...

Grayson ran a hand over his face, wishing for maybe the hundredth time in seven blocks that he'd been smoother back there. For fuck's sake, the guy—Matt—had just been run out of his own workplace after being threatened by some jackoff who hadn't even come there for him, but to put the fear of God into his younger brother. Grayson knew cartel when he saw it; you couldn't work in Reclamation without getting a handle on the different power players in the city, and the Jimenez cartel had its fingers in plenty of pies. The whole thing had concerned Grayson enough that when he left Johnny Rock's, he'd gone around back, just to make sure there was no one waiting there. No cartel, but it hadn't been empty either, and before he could help himself, Grayson had gone and run his mouth.

Matt had been nice about it, but it had been plain as day that he wasn't going to be taking Grayson up on his offer even before he said no. And why

should he? If some random guy Grayson had flirted with had come up to him at oh-dark-thirty and asked him if he'd like to come home with him, Grayson would have said no too.

It didn't stop him from wishing Matt had taken Grayson up on his offer, though. Hotels were expensive, and the ones that weren't tended to be in bad parts of town. Grayson spent every day working in those parts of town: he'd seen it all at this point. He didn't want Matt to be one of those foundlings, dragging through the filth of the city's edge, or worse: just a body, robbed of organs or burnt down to the bones or torn apart by dogs.

Every city grew after the Second Secession, when the countryside basically became unlivable after being stripped of all its resources. The big cities hadn't been left unscathed, though, and while Phoenix had a healthy enough heart, its periphery was overrun with the lowest of parasites, those who were less like the people they'd once been every day, clinging to abandoned highways and condemned buildings like rust. Reclamation was supposed to take care of those crawl spaces, those *edges*, reducing the places gangs could hide, but these days the work was less about reclaiming anything and more about working as paramedics on the good nights and undertakers on the bad ones.

Tonight's shift had been a mixed bag that ended on a low note. One of the buildings his team was searching had been booby trapped with an explosive compound that brought the brittle second floor crashing down on two of their people. The heavy-duty robotic exoskeletons that all Reclamation agents wore had saved their lives, but it had taken hours to dig them out. Drini had ended up having a panic attack that almost left him unconscious, and Grayson had talked on and on, slow and steady, in an effort to soothe him through the radio as they were uncovered. It had been tense, and he'd really wanted that beer by the end of it, and then what happened with Matt to top it all off...

Grayson blankly opened the door to his condominium, its single window heavily barred and door keyed to his thumbprint. He let himself in, shut the door and leaned back against it, letting his head hit the steel with a *thunk*. He was tired. Exhausted, really, and that had to be why he was reading anything at all into that little moment in the club, when Matt—California—had wrapped his arms around Grayson's shoulders, curled in close to him and paused there, like he really had wanted to catch his breath like he'd said. He'd been warm, smelled faintly of flowers, and that smile, that little smile... it almost felt like Grayson's heart had skipped a beat at the sight of that little smile.

“It’s no wonder you can’t get a date,” he said into the darkness of his living room. “You’ve forgotten how to act normal.” That and the fact that he worked ten-hour shifts and was usually asleep when most people were going about their days. It worried his team’s designated counselor.

“You’ve been in Reclamation for the past three years,” she’d said gently at their last meeting. “That’s over twice the amount of time most workers put in.” Burnout was a real problem in their job, one of the reasons Grayson had to spend so much time talking to a counselor. “You could easily transfer to Fire and Rescue, or Emergency Services. Even the police would love to have you, I’m sure.”

“I like what I do,” Grayson had replied honestly, but on nights like tonight, he wasn’t so sure. It didn’t matter, though. Reclamation paid the best, and Grayson needed every credit he could get.

He knew he should shower and brush his teeth, but fuck it. He’d get up early and take care of it before he went in to work. Grayson pushed off the door and wandered back to his room, pulling off his shirt and throwing it toward the hamper as he headed for his bed. He sat on the edge of it and went to work on his shoes, fingers feeling thick and uncoordinated... just like his fucking mouth, good God, *I don’t mean to be creepy, except I can clearly tell that I am being creepy...*

Grayson’s wrist comm flashed red. Emergency call. He put his foot down, settled his head between his knees for a moment and took a deep breath, battling back the yell he longed to let free. Then he straightened up and tapped the back of his wrist. “Corbett here.”

“Grayson? It’s Nurse Shyalma at Veteran’s Hospice House. I’m sorry to be calling you so late.”

Grayson sighed. “Dad got out again, didn’t he.”

Nurse Shyalma made a noise of assent. “He used the edge of another resident’s oxygen tank to unscrew the security casing on one of the greenhouse windows. I don’t know how he got out of his room without tripping the alarm there, but we estimate he’s been gone about thirty minutes. Mario’s gone after him in the van, but there’s nighttime construction between us and Hawthorne Heights that have forced him to divert. At this point, I think you might get to him faster.”

Thirty minutes. Shit, that was almost enough time for his dad to make it back to the old house. The last time he’d gotten that far, the new owners had

called the cops on him when his dad wouldn't stop banging on their front door, demanding that they either release his wife, Carole, or he'd blow their garage open with C4. He hadn't had any C4, but the man could be one scary son of a bitch when he put his mind to it. It had taken all of Grayson's clout and a call to his dad's doctor to keep him out of jail overnight.

What good was the extra five thousand a month Grayson paid to the VA, straight out of his hazard pay, if they couldn't actually ensure that Zachary Corbett stayed *secure* in their secure fucking hospice center?

"I'll go get him."

"Call me when you've got him. I'm sure Mario will be right behind you."

Too little, too late. "Thanks." Grayson tapped his wrist, groaned, and then got to his feet. So much for getting a solid eight hours of sleep before his next shift. He put on a new T-shirt and grabbed his flashlight and a length of securing cord, just in case his dad tried to take his head off like last time, and then pulled his trainers back on and headed out into the night.

Grayson was running from an okay part of town toward a better one, at least. Phoenix was enormous, spread out and sprawling, but Grayson had centered his work around his family home back when his dad first got sick, and the Hospice House was only a mile away. He knew the route his dad liked to take; this wasn't the second or even the sixth time the old man had escaped from his supposedly fortified quarters. Grayson jogged briskly, keeping his flashlight on as he made his way along the cracked sidewalk. There weren't a lot of people out at four thirty in the morning, and fortunately his dad restricted his sneakiness to actually getting out of the Hospice House. Once he was on the roads, he tended to move in straight lines.

Sure enough, ten minutes later Grayson caught sight of a familiar, slightly stooped figure stalking into the Hawthorn Hills subdivision. Grayson sighed with relief. He'd caught the man just in time.

"Dad!"

His father took one look behind him, made eye contact with Grayson, and then broke into a run. In the opposite direction.

"Fuck," Grayson muttered and picked up the pace to intercept his dad before he made it to #313. It was harder than he'd anticipated; he got within five feet before his dad turned and swung a cane—someone's cane, he must have stolen it from another resident, because he clearly didn't need the thing—

at Grayson's head. He startled and skidded to a stop so fast that he almost fell down, and his dad pressed on. Grayson finally had to tackle him onto the lawn—more packed dirt than grass now—two houses down.

“Dad,” he gritted, trying hard to secure the older man without putting too much pressure on him. Zachary was in good shape for a man in his seventies, but he still bruised with frightening ease. “Dad!”

“Go to hell, you Secessionist bastard!”

Ah. This wasn't a new delusion, but it had been a while since it had kicked up in Grayson's presence. He hauled his father's writhing body back against his chest and shouted in his ear, “Sergeant Corbett! Stand down!”

An instant change came over the man, all the fight giving way to tentative obedience. Grayson didn't loosen his grip yet, though. “Password?” his father demanded.

“*Fidelis et constans.*” Faithful and constant. It was the motto of his dad's infantry unit during the war, not much of a password, but Zachary, formerly First Sergeant Zachary Corbett, accepted it.

“They're here,” he said hoarsely, trying to turn over in Grayson's grip. “They're here, sir! Goddamn Secessionists in our city, going after our families! They made a deal with the cartels; they're getting heavy ammunition from the South, they're *in our homes*—”

Grayson's eyes burned, but he held his voice steady. “Those targets have been intercepted, Sergeant. All clear, understand me? It's all clear.”

His father stopped struggling. “Are you sure, sir? I've got a wife and a boy at home; I have to make sure they're protected.”

“They're fine,” Grayson assured his father. “They've been evacuated to the Safe Zone, they're all right.”

His dad let out a shuddering sigh and relaxed into the dirt. “Thank God, sir. Thank God.”

“Yes,” Grayson agreed. “Sit up with me now, Sergeant. Our ride is coming.” He tapped in a quick message to Nurse Shyalma, and then eased off his grip on his dad. They sat up together, and as his dad turned to look at him, Grayson held his breath, wondering if this time would be different, if his father would finally see him and recognize him, if he'd understand—

“Thank you for coming after me, sir.”

Grayson sighed internally. “You’re welcome, Sergeant.”

Zachary shook his head, the tense set of his mouth showing that he was expecting worse than a dressing down. “I left base without orders, sir, went AWOL. I know I don’t deserve your understanding, but my family... they’re everything to me, sir. I had to make sure they’re all right.”

“It’s fine, Sergeant.” Grayson always felt uncomfortably voyeuristic when he did this, but it made his dad so happy to talk about who he used to be that Grayson had to say, “Tell me about them.”

His father’s expression brightened like the full moon coming out from behind a cloud. “My wife is amazing. Carole Elizabeth, but she goes by Caz. She was a combat medic before we decided to start a family; she’s taking some time off now while he’s still small. Our boy’s five now. When he goes to grade school next year, she’ll restart in the military.”

It hurt now, to hear him recount the life Grayson had very briefly lived, but he had to ask. “What’s his name?”

“Grayson, sir! After my father, who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan from two thousand four to two thousand eight. He died fighting for his country, sir. I couldn’t have named my boy for a better man.”

Grayson forced a smile. “That sounds like a good reason to me, Sergeant.”

His father beamed at him. “We thought so too, sir.”

Fortunately Mario arrived then, sparing Grayson from interrogating his father any further. The big white van with the words *Veteran’s Hospice House* all crammed under a line drawing of a home stopped a few feet away from the curb, and Mario exited the driver’s seat a moment later. “Sergeant Corbett! It looks like your son found you safe and sound.”

Grayson shook his head warningly as he stood up and helped his dad to his feet. Mario caught on immediately. “I mean, you *found* your son safe and sound back here, huh?” he asked.

“My commander told me he’s taken care of,” Zach said. He waved one gnarled hand at the van. “What’s this, then? Camouflage?”

“Yes, sir,” Mario assured him. “Easy way to get through the city. We’ll be back to headquarters before you know it.” He opened the sliding back door and motioned to him. “Come on, Sergeant Corbett, we’re expected.”

Grayson met his dad’s concerned gaze. “You’re not coming back with us, sir?”

“Soon,” Grayson told him. “In the next convoy. I’ve got a few things to settle out here first.”

“Thank you for coming for me, sir.”

“You’re welcome, Sergeant.” Grayson was hoping for a handshake—he knew a hug wasn’t going to happen at this point—but he got a firm salute instead, and then his dad headed placidly into the back of the van. Mario shut the door and turned to Grayson questioningly.

“You sure you don’t want to come with?”

“He should be okay for another hour or so,” Grayson said tiredly. “Just sign him in and let Nurse Shyalma know that the orderly needs to check not just him but his whole room, okay? I’m paying for a private orderly at night, this should be standard procedure.”

“Got it, Mr. Corbett. Thanks.”

“Sure.” Grayson stood there and watched Mario drive off with his dad, and he felt his weariness sink so deep into his bones that the hard dirt beneath his feet was starting to look comfortable. Fuck. *Fuck.*

Grayson had made it from his condo to here in ten minutes, but it took him almost forty to trudge back home, long after all his frantic energy had dissipated. He met Rosaria coming out on his way in and winced as her anxious eyes met his.

“Oh, Grayson, any news?” she asked, like she had every time they met over the past month and a half. A month and a half: that was how long his neighbor’s daughter, Tima, had been missing. She’d gone off with a boyfriend Rosaria hadn’t liked, with plans she hadn’t shared. She hadn’t packed like she was leaving the city, though. Rosaria was convinced her daughter was hiding somewhere in the edge and was worried sick that she’d get hurt. Grayson was worried about that too, but after a month and a half, he’d be surprised if Tima wasn’t already hurt, or worse. The edge wasn’t kind to the unprepared, the desperate or the gentle.

“Nothing yet,” he told her regretfully. “I’m sorry, Rosa. I’ll keep you updated, you know I will.”

She put on a brave little smile, hardly quivering at all. “I know, Grayson. Sorry to bother you so often.”

Grayson shook his head. “I don’t mind. Of course you want to know about your kid.” Even his dad wanted to know about him. Not *him* him, but the

Grayson he remembered. Grayson couldn't begrudge that, no matter how much he wanted to sometimes. "I'll check in with the other teams later today, see if they've found any clues. Okay?"

Rosaria patted him on the shoulder. "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome." He watched her head for the transit stop, where he knew she'd hop the six a.m. bus to Phoenix's central station and start her own twelve-hour shift with the city's janitorial staff, and then unlocked his door and went inside. No stopping this time: Grayson headed straight back to his room and toppled onto his bed, not even bothering to remove his shoes. He kept his eyes open just long enough to change his alarm from two in the afternoon to three and then rolled onto his side and pulled his pillow in close to his body. It was no substitute for holding an actual person, but it was clearly the best he was going to get right now.

And when he finally fell asleep, Matt's pale-blue eyes haunted his dreams, the smooth feel of his skin so briefly savored a tangible memory.

Chapter Three

Matt walked into the Arroyo's bodega and café at noon sharp. The smell of roasting chilis and chicken made his mouth start to water almost instantly. Arroyo's was on North Sixteenth Street, the reincarnation of an older café that had been destroyed thirty years ago. There was no menu, not anymore: the owners made whatever they had ingredients for each day, and patrons could either eat it or not. Everything was a set price, though, and that made it really popular with people who worked in the nearby government offices. At noon, Matt was lucky to find a seat, but he couldn't have come in any earlier. The message wouldn't get passed along if he didn't follow procedure.

"*Hola, amigo.*" Juan Pablo, the youngest son of the owners, walked up and handed him a glass of water. "Welcome to Arroyo's. Today's meal is *pollo poblano.*"

"Sounds good."

"You want anything else to drink?" he asked as he reached to the shelf behind him for a little basket of chips.

"No, but I will need a second serving for my friend Carmelita."

Juan Pablo's hands froze for a moment before he set the chips down on the table. "Oh yeah? She meeting you here?"

"No, I'll need it to go."

"Ah." He nodded once. "I can do that. Wait here." He walked into the back, and Matt slouched a little in his chair, letting the fatigue of a long night and an even longer morning have its way with his posture. He hadn't had a chance to rest since he left the club, first heading back to check on his apartment and then making his way here to arrange a meeting with his lead detective. His feet ached in the trainers, not enough support left in the ratty shoes to keep them comfortable. Matt smiled without humor. When had he become so soft that he even *thought* to complain about shoes? When had shoes stopped being a luxury?

Probably around the time he'd been adopted into the police academy. Sixteen years old, about to get kicked out of the latest shitty group home he'd been siphoned into, the arrival of the state's academy recruiter had been nothing short of a godsend. It had taken less than fifteen minutes of

conversation for Matt to be completely sold. He might owe twenty years of service now, a number that had been boosted from its original thirteen twice since Matt had joined, but he'd get food, a place to live, training, an education and *community*. He got a chance to belong somewhere, with people like him, and as far as Matt was concerned, that was priceless. What was his time worth, anyway? He didn't have anyone left outside of the force.

Matt had people now who wouldn't run out on him, and he appreciated it. All he had to do was his job, which... was considerably more complicated at the moment, but he'd figure it out. Carmen would help.

Matt jolted as a plate clunked down in front of him. The pottery was chipped, most of the glaze stripped away by time and use, but the food more than made up for any issues with appearances. It smelled like spicy heaven, and Matt's stomach growled audibly. Juan Pablo grinned at him. "Your to-go portion is being made now. I'll bring it out when it's ready."

"*Gracias.*"

"*De nada, amigo.*" He left and Matt dug into the food, chicken covered with roasted poblano peppers, caramelized onions and tomatillo sauce, with a little bit of melted cheese, even. It made his tongue curl in ecstasy, and Matt made sure to bite back the groan that wanted to emerge as he swallowed the first bite down. It had been a while since he'd had something this flavorful. The academy provided food, but it was uniformly, institutionally bland, and since getting this assignment, Matt had mostly been eating sandwiches and cereal, anything he didn't have to cook.

He was done in record time, just as the to-go portion came out, wrapped in Styrofoam paper and complete with a plastic fork. On the top of the neat little package was a note written in pale-green ink, evaporating already as Matt caught sight of it. He had just enough time to read *Virginia Park, 15* before it was gone altogether.

"All good, *amigo*?"

"Very good," Matt said. "Thanks." He pulled a fifty out of his pocket and laid it down and then polished off the water. "Have a good one."

"I hope your friend enjoys the meal."

Matt smiled. "I'm sure she will."

Virginia Park was close enough that he could walk it in fifteen minutes if he hurried. Matt tucked the food into the top of his backpack and then set off on

the main streets, pressing his way through the midday crowd as they darted from store to store, making the most of the daylight hours. Phoenix was a relatively safe city as long as you kept away from the edges, but even then, few people wanted to be out at night.

Personally, Matt preferred the night. There were very few ways you could miscommunicate with someone at night. Most of the people prowling the streets after dark were just that: prowlers, pimps, muggers. They were easy to deal with. When he'd been a beat cop—Jesus, just last month, five years of it before his promotion—Matt had always asked for the night shifts. He liked clean-cut, he liked simple.

“Congratulations, Detective March,” Carmen had told him the day of his promotion as she'd pinned the detective's badge to his uniform. “Your life is about to get a whole lot more complicated.”

Matt snorted. Biggest understatement ever. Speaking of Carmen, though, there she was, sitting on a low concrete wall and playing with the screen on her forearm, dark hair making a curly barrier around her downturned face. Matt came over, sat down next to her, and listened with satisfaction as she suddenly inhaled.

“Oh my God, give it to me,” she snapped, turning her screen off and holding a hand out impatiently. “Give it, give it!”

“You're like a five-year-old,” Matt informed her, but he handed over the food. Carmen unfastened the paper and steam poured out, and even though Matt had just eaten, he felt hungry again as he watched her dig into it. “Don't you eat this all the time?”

“This? No, *this* is my *abuela's pollo poblano*, and Ricardo almost never makes it because he's usually too lazy to and it's hard to get poblanos these days. Oh my *God*.” She moaned around a mouthful. “I've died and gone to heaven.”

“I had the same reaction.”

“You are a wise, wise man,” she said, forking up the next bite. “You talk, I'll listen.”

Matt explained what had happened with Tito last night, how interest had suddenly blossomed into action, which had rapidly become a clusterfuck between Tito and his brother. Carmen hummed thoughtfully as he recounted the scene at Johnny Rock's, the threat over where Matt was staying and the way Grayson had tried to help him out afterward.

“Hmm.” Carmen licked the fork, then crumpled the whole of it up and tossed it in the nearest trash bin. It went in perfectly, of course. Carmen had fine motor control mods that assisted in all her targeting. It was an upgrade that Matt looked forward to earning. “You did the right thing, moving out of the place you were sharing with the Sikanders.” They were the owners of the Indian restaurant Matt had rented his tiny apartment from. “You don’t want to bring any trouble down on them if it can be helped. They don’t suspect?”

“I asked them to look out for people coming to the apartment, but no, they don’t think I’m anything other than what I say.” Mrs. Sikander had been so concerned, offering to let him stay in the family house behind the restaurant instead of by himself upstairs if that would make him feel better. The kindness was staggering, but no. Matt wasn’t going to risk them like that. “I’ll go by periodically to check on the place, though. If Fernando knows where it is, Tito’s probably pulled it out of him by now. He’ll be by, I’m sure of it.”

“You’re that confident in your angle with him?”

“Yeah.” Matt recalled the reddish light in Tito’s eyes as he stared, transfixed. He had him on the hook, for now at least. “I am.”

“Good. You work that angle as hard as you can, because our other people on the inside haven’t turned up any new leads yet, and two more girls were abducted yesterday.”

“Oh, shit.” Matt’s stomach suddenly felt too full, sinking down into his gut. “Where?”

“Walking home from school. Good girls, no problems or priors, and their parents are raising hell.” Carmen grimaced. “Surveillance shows an unmarked van, masked men, and them booking it for the edge. They’re going to a warehouse.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. But the commissioner’s not gonna authorize more manpower for the case when we’re this thin on officers, not without a ‘clear path forward.’” She included the air quotes with a sarcastic frown. It was an open secret in the force that the police commissioner had cartel connections through his wife’s very Catholic family, not to mention his own brother, a state congressman who had been indicted on fraud and conspiracy charges but somehow wriggled out of both. The commissioner was more than willing to look the other way when it came to “mild cartel activity not worth the allocation of resources.”

“Regardless, we can’t afford to push into the edge unless we’re confident it’ll be worth the risk.” Carmen shook her head. “Reclamation’s willing to let us borrow a few of their teams, which’ll help a lot, but same song. We’ve gotta know where we’re going. We need intel, Matt. We need to know wheres and whens and hows, and we need it soon, or we’re gonna lose a lot more people to the cartel.”

“I’ll get it.” Matt would do whatever he had to. There was a reason he’d been assigned to this case: he was intimately familiar with using his body to get what he wanted. He hadn’t needed to since he was in and out of group homes, close to eight years now, but he could do it. “Reclamation, huh?” Something stirred in the back of his mind. “What’s their symbol again?”

“Uh...” Carmen’s lips pursed as she thought. “A blue globe with white wings on top, and... oh, what is it... *Erepiac Ac Repetere* in an arch around it.”

“Yeah, that’s it.” That was the faded symbol he’d seen on Grayson’s shirt. “Can you do a quick search in the state’s employee database for me? For Grayson Corbett?”

“What am I, your personal computer?” Carmen muttered, but she pulled it up on her forearm.

“Yeah, since you took mine away.” Matt looked over her shoulder. “Two t’s, I think.”

“I can spell,” Carmen said, but she added another t. “Ah, yeah, he’s in here. And he’s been with Reclamation for...” She whistled. “Three years, wow. Team leader for two. Tough guy.”

Matt thought back to Grayson, who’d been so earnest and so nice to him. Then he remembered his muscles. “I could believe it.”

“Long time for that kind of work. He was a paramedic before that, looks like. Some commendations, one merit of valor award. And this guy offered you a place to stay?”

“He did.”

“You think it’s too late to take him up on it?” Matt frowned but Carmen pressed on. “No, look, he lives close to the epicenter of all this shit, but he’s got a fairly secure condo. He’s got the skills to be useful if it comes down to it, and we need all the Reclamation guys on our side that we can get if we get permission to go into the edge. His team is highly rated. You get him on your side, and it’ll make interdepartmental politics a little easier to swallow. Not to mention, he could be useful for inspiring some jealousy in Baby Jimenez.”

“I don’t want to get him involved in something that could bring him trouble.”

“He wouldn’t be in Reclamation if he wasn’t an adrenaline junkie, Matt. He probably *loves* trouble.”

Matt shook his head. “I didn’t get that feeling from him.”

“Well, he’s your best bet right now, Detective.” Carmen’s voice had taken on a crisp note that made Matt automatically sit up straighter. “Unless you want to wait out the three days it’ll take to set up a safe house for you in the back of someone’s car.”

“Three *days*?”

“The other one we had prepped on this side of the city was condemned last week—too many roaches in the walls. We don’t have the budget to conjure up decent places to stash undercover cops on a couple hours’ notice, after all.”

God, Matt remembered living in places like that, with fosterers who were only in it for the cash taking care of wards of the state brought, not with any intention of looking after the kids themselves. He remembered five of them in a room the size of a walk-in closet, sleeping on top of boxes because the floor was alive with roaches when the lights went out. They climbed the boxes, of course, but you could catnap for a while before something scuttling across your face or the back of your hand woke you. It wasn’t as bad as the time he’d spent in a warehouse as a kid, but then he couldn’t even really remember that. Which, Matt reasoned, was the worst part about it.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Matt didn’t want to get Grayson into trouble, but he was pretty confident he could keep his trouble from the man’s door if he was careful. And after all, he’d already offered. “If he doesn’t go for it, though, I’m not going back to the Sikanders’. I’d sooner sleep in a car.”

“I’m sure it won’t get that bad.” Carmen shut down her screen. “We want to wrap this up as soon as possible. The longer the missing are in cartel hands, the likelier it is that they’ve been moved to new locations, chock full of mod chips. Not to mention, the cadets’ graduation has been moved up to the beginning of September, and your juniors are gonna want you there.”

“That’s... shit, that’s almost six months early.” Matt frowned. “They aren’t even completely modded yet; they need more training.”

“Well, it’s going to be on-the-job training, because the brass wants warm bodies in the streets helping to keep our presence up.” Carmen didn’t sound any happier about it, though. “You’ve sponsored three this year, right?”

“Right.” Almost half of Matt’s pay went to keeping his cadets in good shape, with higher-protein meals and newer equipment. Sponsoring cadets was an optional system and something that no one had ever done for Matt, but as soon as he’d been sworn in, he’d taken on a trainee. It took four years to get through the system: they needed all the help they could get.

“Such a nice guy,” Carmen teased him. “Well, graduation is coming up fast now, so consider that extra motivation to get Tito to give it up.”

“Like I needed any more.”

“I know.” She clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re making headway, Matt. Don’t stop pushing.”

“I won’t.”

“Good man. I have to get back.” She rolled her eyes as she stood up. “I don’t trust Octavian at the helm for longer than a coffee break.”

Matt smiled. “Have fun with that.”

“Be safe.” She walked away, and Matt didn’t let himself watch her go. He checked the time: a little after one. And his shift at Johnny Rock’s didn’t start until midnight, great. He needed to sleep before then, though, somehow. Maybe Jojo would be there early and could let him in. It was worth a shot.

It took a few busses to get back, and Matt felt like he was wilting under the afternoon sun. His feet hurt, his head hurt, everything was hot—how did normal people get around without mods to help control vascular dilation? He’d spent too many years on the night shift—he’d forgotten how to live with temperatures in the hundred-and-teens.

The back door to Johnny Rock’s was closed, but the front door was, surprisingly, open. Matt walked carefully down the hall into the main room. There was no music playing and most of the lights were off, except for a little overhead lamp in Johnny’s corner. Which meant... Matt swallowed.

“Cali.” Johnny’s voice was as rough as the whiskey he drank, his hair and a pair of half-moon spectacles glowing under the neon light. “What’re you doing here at this time?”

“I...” Matt decided on honesty. “I was hoping to catch a nap.”

“Gave up your place, then?”

“Yeah.”

“Family bullshit.” Johnny couldn’t have sounded more disdainful if he’d been the police commissioner turning down a plea for an increase in funding. “Fucking Jimenez boys. Tito’s always been a loose cannon, but he’s gotten worse with you. You encouraging that?” Matt didn’t say anything, and after a moment, Johnny shrugged. “Not my business as long as you don’t bring it to my door again. Otherwise, the next person I’m prepared to shoot is *you*. I can always find another California, you got that?”

Matt nodded jerkily. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. You head on back, *but*—this is for today only, Cali. Try to sneak in here again and I’ll take it out of your pay.”

“I understand.” Matt didn’t quite run back behind the stage but there was no denying it was a retreat, and that was just as much him as it was Cali. He couldn’t help it; Johnny fucked with Matt’s head. He was like every intimidating parent figure and drill sergeant rolled into one gravelly package.

Well, Matt wouldn’t waste his opportunity now, at least. He took off his backpack and set it on the floor in the changing room, stretched out on the rug and resolutely shut his eyes. He needed to sleep. Everything else could wait until tonight.

The best scenario, Matt decided, was if Grayson came back tonight. Odds were good, given the guy’s interest, so Matt paid the bartender up front to give Grayson a beer when he came in and tell him Matt wanted to talk to him.

He started dancing at midnight and did three more sets over the next three hours. The first one was a little tense, the patrons who remembered things from yesterday looking around nervously and declining to signal him over, *just in case* a sociopathic Jimenez suddenly jumped out from behind a pillar or something. By the second set, they’d relaxed some, and by the third, Matt was making even more money than he usually did, regulars taking advantage of the fact that his status as “spoken for” seemed to be over. Cali smiled coyly for them, arched his back until his head was beside his feet, flipped around the pole and spun around on tables and gyrated so hard he could have been used to stabilize a spaceship, but inside Matt was getting worried.

What would he do if Grayson didn’t show up? He could wing it for another day and try again tomorrow, or cave and request a car to sleep in, but Matt hated the insecurity of that. Cars that ran in this part of the city had to be locked

up or they were stolen. Cars that didn't run were usually torched by thrill seekers. Either way, it wouldn't be restful.

Just as Matt was getting ready to throw in the towel, though, Grayson walked through the front door. He moved slowly, hands in his pockets, and didn't actually head over to the bar until the bartender's wave got his attention. Matt's song was just finishing, so he didn't get a chance to see more than Grayson pick up the beer with a questioning frown before he had to give the stage up to Jersey.

He pulled his clothes back on, ignored Jojo's arch, "You got someplace to be, Cali?" and jogged back out front, keeping to the periphery of the room so he wouldn't attract too much attention. Fortunately, Jersey was better than good at keeping all eyes on him, smooth brown limbs knotted around the pole like he'd get a merit badge for it. Grayson was still there, and Matt smiled when he saw him.

"Hey!" he said a little breathlessly.

"Hey." Grayson held up the beer questioningly. "What's this for?"

"It's to say thank you, for yesterday."

Grayson looked a little uncomfortable. "You don't need to thank me. I didn't actually do anything. And honestly," he sighed, "I'm too tired to drink tonight. I just came by to..."

"To check on me." Matt could see the truth in Grayson's face, and it was satisfying to be proven right.

"To make sure you were okay." Grayson passed Matt the beer. "I'm glad you are."

"Thank you, me too. And..." Matt took a drink and made a face—he preferred tequila. He let Grayson laugh a little at him as he set the beer aside, though. "And I wanted to ask you if the offer of crashing at your place is still open? Because mine isn't safe, and it turns out the motels are a little more expensive than I thought. I can pay you some, though!" he assured the other man. "I'd like to, actually."

Grayson's eyes widened a little. "You want to come with me? Really?"

"Yes?" Matt felt unaccountably nervous. "As long as the offer was genuine. If not, that's fine. I'll figure something else out."

He shook his head. “No, I definitely meant it. I’d be happy to help out for a while. It’s not huge, but if you don’t mind sleeping on the couch then we’re good.”

“It beats the back of a car,” Matt said, and Grayson’s mouth tightened a little at the corners.

“It definitely does. When can you leave?” *When can I go to sleep*, his eyes seemed to say. Matt could commiserate; he’d been there not so long ago, before the smell of Jojo’s hairspray woke him up.

“I’m done for the night; just let me get my bag. Meet you out back?”

Grayson smiled. “It’s kind of our spot, isn’t it?” He headed for the door, and Matt darted back behind the stage.

“Moving on already,” Jojo said with a tut. “You’re just a big old heartbreaker, aren’t you, Cali-boy?”

Matt shrugged. “What can I say? Being threatened gets me all hot and bothered, but in the bad way.”

“Am I gonna find you sleeping it off on the floor again tomorrow?”

“Nope.”

Jojo uncrossed his arms. “Well, good.” He leaned in and laid a smacking kiss on Matt’s cheek. “Go get ’im, baby.”

“Jojo, come *on*.” Matt rubbed at the lipstick mark he knew was there as Jojo cackled with delight.

“It’ll motivate him! Make him a little jealous.”

“I’m just crashing with him; I’m not fucking him.”

“Then you’re wasting your damn time, Cali. Man like that? He is too fine not to be fucked.”

Matt shouldered his backpack. “I’m leaving now,” he said with as much dignity as he could muster.

Jojo winked. “Have fun *crashing* with him.”

Matt exited through the back door of Johnny Rock’s with a deep exhale, purging his lungs as best he could of sweat and makeup and the pungent scent of Jojo’s perfume. He almost didn’t spot Grayson leaning against the wall a bit farther down; the guy looked dead on his feet. Matt walked over to him and touched his shoulder. “You okay?”

“Mm, yeah.” Grayson opened his eyes and pushed himself upright. “I’m good. Is that all you have?” he asked, glancing at the backpack.

“I don’t need much.” That was one thing that hadn’t changed a lot since Matt had gone from fostering into the academy. Possessions were just something that could be taken away from you. Nothing was sacred now, not even his badge. He couldn’t wear it when he was undercover anyhow.

“All right. I’m this way.” The silence as they walked was slightly uncomfortable, Matt unsure of how to break it. It was a relief when they turned down Southern Street and walked toward a block’s worth of condominiums.

“Wow, close,” Matt remarked like he hadn’t already seen the address on Carmen’s arm.

“It’s got that going for it,” Grayson agreed. He led them to a bottom story door, pressed his thumb to the reader, and led Matt inside as the door clicked open. He flicked on the light as he banged the door shut hard with his shoulder, illuminating a small living room with a standard entertainment projection unit, a god-awful aquamarine rug that matched absolutely nothing, two end tables with built-in lamps and a long, beat-up brown couch. The walls were a familiarly awful shade of gray, but decorated here and there with family pictures and a plaque just over the projection surface. There was a bookshelf too, with real paperbacks on it that made Matt’s fingers itch.

“So.” Grayson blinked slowly, like he was trying to remember what he was doing. “Right. You can have the couch—it’s comfier than it looks. I’ll bring you some sheets and a pillow. My room’s at the end of the hall, the bathroom is to the left, and the kitchen is on the right. I’ve got a washer and dryer too, so feel free to use them.”

“Is that a hint?” Matt teased and was gratified to get a little chuckle.

“No, not at all, just... Man.” Grayson ran one hand through his short caramel-brown hair. “I’m sorry I’m being a total zombie. I haven’t had much sleep in the past forty-eight hours.”

“Then you should go to sleep.”

“Let me set you up first.” The sheets he pulled out from a small closet over the washer and dryer combo were so worn and soft they felt like silk, even though Matt knew there was no way they were. Grayson handed over a pillow with a smile just as soft as the sheets. “I don’t have much in the fridge, but you’re welcome to whatever’s in there.”

“Thank you.” Matt pulled the pillow a little tighter to his chest. “For the offer and for following through. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” Grayson turned away, and Matt squeezed the pillow hard so he wouldn’t be tempted to reach out and touch him again, just a tiny touch, anything to make the man look less exhausted. He shut his bedroom door, and Matt retreated to the couch, which was indeed comfier than it looked.

Of course, now that he had a place to sleep, he wasn’t tired. Matt made up the couch and wandered over to the bookshelf. At the beginning of the second row, a creased spine read *Casino Royale* by Ian Fleming. It felt like it had been forever since he’d read something just for fun.

Matt grabbed the novel, stretched out on the couch, and opened to page one.

Chapter Four

If there was one thing that could be said to be sacred in Reclamation, it was time off. The work was more than hard, it was grueling, and the psych unit was clear: unless there was an emergency that consisted of open warfare or an edge burn, no agent was to be called in on their off days. It wasn't like they got that many of them to begin with, anyway.

Edge burns happened more often during the summer, usually deliberately set to destroy evidence left on black-market goods or corpses. They used to be real bad, the sort of thing that people worried would threaten the central city, but after a few decades, most of the flammable parts of the periphery had been scorched off or destroyed. What was left was concrete and steel: the remnants of emergency shelters that were used by millions during the war, shanty towns with underground networks chiseled out of the hard red earth. So much of it was gone, but yet so much survived. What had survived was supplemented by the cartels and whatever drifters were passing through, and it could still make these fires into utter nightmares.

It wasn't just that the burns were used to cover up greater crimes, although more than one Reclamation agent had lost his or her life over the years, hemmed in by fire as they tried to save people who had strayed too close or been deliberately left near the burn, incapacitated and helpless as they watched their punishment for whatever transgression they'd committed blaze closer until it swallowed their screams. It was because they *succeeded* so well that the cartel still had the means to set them despite all the work that had been put into wiping them out over the decades since the Second Secession. Edge burns were unpredictable, with even the best computer models unable to do more than give the crews that fought them a slight advantage in the field. And the aftermath of a burn was the dirtiest work imaginable. It might be God's work, as Rosa sometimes claimed, but that didn't make Grayson feel any better as he pulled body after small, charred body from the wreckage of cartel warehouses.

The politicians told them they were making progress out there, to keep at it, to be proud. A sense of pride never did much to settle dreams and nightmares though, and Grayson woke up an hour before his alarm would have been set for if this wasn't a day off, sweating beneath his sheet, skin sticking to yesterday's clothes. He'd tumbled into bed *again* without changing—fucking gross. Today: shower, laundry, food, in that order. Grayson swung his legs out of bed and went to stand up; then he frowned at his closed door. Why had he—

“Ah.” Right. He had a guest. Or maybe he *had* had a guest; Matt might have bailed by now, but Grayson hoped he’d stuck around. Okay then. New order of operations: shower, *get dressed*, laundry, and food. No wandering around in the nude today. Not that Matt seemed the type to mind, but Grayson wasn’t about to make the situation any stranger for the guy.

He grabbed clean clothes out of his dresser, opened his door quietly in case Matt was still sleeping, and headed into the bathroom. The shower had clearly been used, the floor still wet. Good. Grayson turned the water on, stripped down and stepped into the lukewarm spray.

His condo was just barely close enough to the city center to still be on public water, which was better than a lot of private homes were doing. The people who’d bought his parents’ place had been forced to switch to using a cistern two years ago. The building might be shit at regulating temperature, but at least there was as much rusty water as Grayson cared to use. He soaped up, scrubbing briskly and resisting the urge to get a little more thorough with himself than he should. It was one thing to get off to the memory of the guy when he was just someone Grayson had seen performing; it was another when he was probably sleeping in Grayson’s living room right now.

Grayson ignored the way his cock thickened under his hand and rinsed off, turning the shower from lukewarm to genuinely cold before getting out. He brushed his teeth, shaved, dressed in a pair of track pants and a loose T-shirt, and then headed for the living room.

Matt was still there, sprawled on his side with one hand dangling over the edge of the couch, fingertips brushing the back of a paperback book. There was an empty plate on the nightstand next to him, and his bare feet stuck out from under the end of the blanket, propped up on the armrest of the couch. His bleached hair obscured his face, but Grayson didn’t need to be able to see his eyes to tell he was sleeping. The snoring was a dead giveaway.

Grayson retrieved the plate but left the book where it was and retreated quietly to the kitchen. He’d wait to start the laundry; his machine could be brutally loud. Instead, he checked his pantry, grimaced at the near-barren state it was in, and decided that pancakes for lunch was perfectly acceptable. It would be easy to make enough for two, anyway.

He made his mother’s recipe: cinnamon and nutmeg tossed into the basic batter, a little of the fake vanilla extract that was all you could get anymore added for good measure, and a handful of dried blueberries that would plump

up a little bit as he cooked. Grayson had learned all of his cooking from his mom; Uncle Vince had been far more into drinking than he was into eating, but given the situation at their household, Grayson couldn't blame the guy.

He was halfway done when he heard noise from the living room: a breathy gasp that wouldn't have stood out over the sizzling of the pancakes if Grayson didn't have hearing mods designed to enhance his ability to pick up on signs of life. Grayson frowned; he'd forgotten to disengage them. It was a wonder the clamor of the shower hadn't woken him up. He turned his sensitivity down, and a moment later, Matt walked into the kitchen in a pair of sweatpants that were just a little less tattered than the jeans he performed in and nothing else.

Grayson turned back to the griddle quickly. "How'd you sleep?"

"Good, your couch is just as comfy as advertised." Matt joined Grayson in front of the counter. "I took you at your word and raided your fridge." He inhaled appreciatively. "But I could eat again, if there's enough for two."

"Of course." Grayson pushed the loaded plate at Matt and smiled a little at how quickly he grabbed it. "Silverware's in the drawer there, and I've got butter in the fridge."

One of Matt's eyebrows rose as he grabbed a fork. "Really?"

Grayson shrugged. "Well, fake butter, but it's a decent brand."

"Any syrup?"

"Don't push it."

Matt chuckled and started to eat, right there at the counter. If the sound of his appreciative moans was anything to go by, he was really enjoying his first bite. He certainly wasn't making it any easier for Grayson to ignore his own latent arousal. "This is sooo good. It tastes like magic."

"I didn't know magic had a taste."

"It does, it totally does, and it tastes like your pancakes," Matt declared. "These are mythologically good. There should be epic poems about these pancakes."

"Thanks." Grayson wasn't quite awake enough to talk about learning from his mom, but he went ahead and added two round ears to the next pancake, and dropped the blueberries in carefully until they formed the shape of a face. Once that one was fully cooked, he added it to Matt's plate.

Matt stared at it. "What's that supposed to be?"

“Mickey Mouse.” Matt looked confused, and now it was Grayson’s turn to be incredulous. “Are you kidding me? You’ve never heard of Mickey Mouse?”

“I didn’t live in a lot of places that had entertainment units,” Matt said, his shoulders hunching a bit. Grayson could have kicked himself for making the guy feel self-conscious.

“He’s a cartoon. The original Disney cartoon. You’ve heard of Disney?”

“Yeah, something about theme parks.”

“Yeah.” Grayson remembered his mother talking about taking him to the one in Florida, before it burned down. “They made cartoons, films with animated characters. Mickey Mouse was the original.”

“A mouse.”

“Yeah.”

“They made films about vermin.” Matt sounded more disgusted than amused.

“It worked, I swear.”

“You’ll have to prove it, because I’m just not seeing the appeal. There might as well be a movie making cockroaches the good guys.”

“They did that one two years before the studio went under, actually. An adaptation of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*.” Matt looked completely appalled. “It wasn’t one of their more popular films.”

“I can see why.” Matt cut one of Mickey’s ears off and ate it with relish. “Who wants to watch a show about the stuff you hate?”

“That was sort of the point, though. They were trying to make a statement about irrational prejudice, I think.”

“Hating cockroaches is completely, one hundred percent rational,” Matt declared. “Because they’re filthy, soulless, scuttling demons of the night that eat everything and anything, including themselves.”

“Okay, then.” Grayson turned off the griddle and took his own plate over to the table to eat. Matt followed him like he didn’t even realize he was doing it. “I guess I know what movie we *won’t* be watching today.”

“You have time for a movie?” Matt sounded pleased. “No running off to work?”

“Today’s my day off.” And thank God, because Grayson still felt fatigued. Yesterday morning’s sleep had been delayed by going out to hunt down his dad, and his next night started unexpectedly early thanks to a false alarm over a burn. “I prefer not to run at all when I don’t have to.”

“But you look like you’d be so good at it.”

Grayson wasn’t quite up to blushing, but Matt’s open appreciation made him wonder. He set his fork down. “You know,” he began slowly, not entirely sure how to put this without being offensive. “You don’t have to do anything for me in order to stay here for a while. There’s no condition on being here. Nothing you have to say, or do...” Grayson let it trail off and waited for Matt to respond.

“What, you’re saying that I don’t have to pay for room and board with sexual favors?” Matt pouted dramatically. “And I was looking so forward to it.”

Grayson gaped at him for a long moment before Matt started to chuckle. “I get that you’re not interested in that,” Matt said. “You’re a stand-up guy who’s going to let me pay for the food I consume and your increase in utilities while I’m here, and in exchange, I’m not going to make you uncomfortable suggesting stuff that makes you feel dirty.”

“*You* don’t make me feel dirty.” Grayson felt that the distinction was important. “It isn’t you, it’s the idea that I’d be taking advantage of you.”

“And if I assured you that you weren’t? What then?”

Was Matt actually coming on to Grayson? It had been so long since he’d actually been with someone, Grayson felt a little obtuse. “Are you planning to?”

“Maybe.” Matt grinned brightly. “But I promise to give you plenty of warning. Which book comes after *Casino Royale*?”

Grayson felt like he might get whiplash, the conversation was shifting so fast. “Ah, in the book series it’s *Live and Let Die*. In the movies—”

Matt’s jaw dropped. “There’s a *movie*?”

“It’s a couple of movies, but the middle version is the best one, I think.” Uncle Vince had preferred the first one, but nobody could beat Daniel Craig as far as Grayson was concerned. And the third version... sorry, but Zac Efron had just been a bad choice for an international man of mystery.

“Can we watch one?”

“Yeah, of course. Let me get some laundry on and I’ll pull one up.”

That was how, five minutes later, Grayson found himself sitting on his couch with a cup of reconstituted Morning Joe Breakfast Beverage, watching James Bond explode an embassy in a country that Grayson wasn’t sure even existed anymore. He’d seen this movie probably a dozen times over the years, so it was gratifying to watch with someone who was a complete Bond neophyte. Matt had his legs crossed and his hands folded tight in his lap, probably to keep them from twisting as he watched, utterly rapt.

It took a little over two hours to finish the movie, which was about as long as the laundry took too. When the unit stopped projecting and the lights automatically came back up, Grayson glanced over at Matt and started laughing. He couldn’t help it. “You look like Christmas came early.”

“I never got Christmas,” Matt said immediately, shaking his head a bit. “Or access to shows, except for the stuff the government mandated for education in the group homes. A few of my foster families kept televisions, but they never let any of the kids use them.”

No Christmas. No birthdays either, probably—no televisions, no books if the way he’d devoured the paperback was anything to go by. “Sounds kind of rough.”

Matt started, like he’d forgotten where he was for a moment. Then his shoulders relaxed, his spine eased back against the couch and he smiled at Grayson. He looked perfectly natural doing it, but it still felt like something had just been lost between them: some precious, intangible moment, beaten back by Grayson’s prying. He changed the subject before he could stick his foot in his mouth any further.

“My uncle was a Bond fanatic,” Grayson said. “He collected all the books and movies. I think there was even a video game, at some point. When he passed away, my mom gave it all to me.”

“That’s nice of her.”

“She was very nice.”

Naturally, Matt heard the caveat. “She’s dead too?”

“Three years ago. Cancer.” Cancer was what got most people these days. There was almost no chemotherapy or radiation practiced now, every resource turned toward managing the myriad illnesses that had come with the wars. Most doctors specialized in prevention. Once you were already sick, well... you were moved into palliative care and given access to harder painkillers.

“Sorry.” Matt sounded genuine, too. “Your dad as well?”

“No, he’s still around, he’s just not... well. He lives at the VA.”

“Shit.”

“It’s okay. I’m not bothered by it.” His dad had been that way so long, Grayson could barely remember him any other way. His uncle’s death had been a long time coming and his mother’s death... Grayson remembered his mom wandering around the house in a daze, high on drugs and bruising with every new slip into the walls but determined to take care of her husband, who didn’t recognize her half the time and wept when he saw her the other half. That had been the worst. Right now, with his dad in care and his mom finally at rest, was infinitely better.

Or at least it was when the locked ward of the Veteran’s Hospice Home actually managed to *keep* his dad in there.

“We could watch—” He was interrupted by a tentative knock at the door. Matt tensed. “It’s okay, it’s just my neighbor.”

“It’s probably better if she doesn’t know I’m here,” Matt said. Which, fair enough if he was worried about a stalker. The fewer people who knew, the better.

“She rarely comes in,” Grayson said. “This won’t take long.” He got up off the couch and headed for the door, where Rosaria was waiting with a covered plate in her hands and a fragile hope in her eyes. “Hi, Rosa.”

“Grayson, hello.” She pushed the plate at him. “I made fresh tortillas tonight, these ones are for you.”

“They smell wonderful.” He took the plate and set it on the stand next to the door. “Rosa, I—”

“I heard there was a burn,” she interjected, looking upset but still determined to get it out. “An edge burn. Was it a warehouse? Were there bodies? How many people did you... did you...” Her breath came too fast to let her speak, and Grayson gently gripped her shoulders and rubbed her upper arms soothingly.

“False alarm,” he assured her gently. “It was a false alarm, Rosa, there was no burn. A trash fire that got a little out of control, that’s all. Nothing deliberate, and no one was hurt. There were no bodies.” *For once, there were no bodies.*

Rosa's eyes closed for a moment. "Oh, praise Jesus."

Grayson gave her a minute to get her composure back before continuing. "We haven't found her yet but I posted her picture in the team's headquarters. Everyone is on the lookout. If she can be found, we'll find her." It was as close to a promise as he could make.

"Thank you, Grayson."

"It's the least I can do." *And it feels like less and less every day*, he thought as he shut the door. He leaned his forehead against it for a moment, suddenly exhausted again.

"So you're not just a white knight with me, then."

"I'm not much of a white knight at all," Grayson said as he turned around. Matt was leaning on his elbows over the back of the couch, his expression gone sharp again. It was strange to see him bounce back and forth between soft and hard. "I just do my job."

"I'm not a part of your job."

"No," Grayson acknowledged. "You're not."

They stared at each other in silence for a moment before Matt said, "So, the book has a sequel, right? That must mean there's another movie, too."

Grayson let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Back to safe topics, then. "Yeah, there are lots of movies, but they don't follow the exact order of the books. There are as many different James Bond actors as you have fingers at this point." Maybe a slight exaggeration but whatever, some of those movies just weren't worth watching. "The rest by Daniel Craig are good, though. Although the sequel to this one isn't his best work."

"How many did he do total?"

"Five."

Matt looked down at the entertainment unit to check the time. "I don't have to be to work for another six hours. We could watch at least another two in that time, right?"

"Definitely." Actually, Grayson couldn't think of anything better. "And if you liked *Casino Royale*, you're going to love *Skyfall*. Great villains in both of them."

"But Bond still kicks their asses, right?"

“He’s James Bond,” Grayson scoffed as he resettled himself on the couch with Rosa’s plate of hot tortillas warming his palms. “There’s no other way for him to be.” He queued up the next film, passed Matt a tortilla, and settled in for the best day off he could remember.

Chapter Five

One of the options Matt had been offered by the academy recruiter back in the group home was the military track. Police work involved more interaction with citizens, and not everyone coming out of the foster system was mentally and emotionally prepared to deal with that. It was a nice way of saying that they were all pretty fucked-up, and if that meant that they couldn't get through the day working with relatively normal people, occasionally interspersed with criminals, then they need not apply.

Military track took a lot of the uncertainty out of the work. You would be modded to the gills, similar to police stuff but even higher quality, trained more intensively for a shorter period of time and deployed within three years—a lean, mean killing machine. Military track came with higher pay, a consequence of the usually shorter lifespan associated with it. Military kids were sent to the front, wherever that front was, and fought for the fractured remains of the US of A.

Needless to say, it hadn't appealed to Matt. He didn't care much about the country; he cared about where he was right now. He wanted to be safe, he wanted to make other people safer, and he wanted a place to belong. Besides, the military sounded like a lot of “ninety-five percent boredom, five percent sheer terror” bullshit, and he wasn't interested in that either. Being a member of the police would give him something consistent to do, and it had.

Until this undercover assignment. The boredom to terror ratio wasn't the same, but there was definitely a lot of waiting around for important things to happen. The first three weeks had been tough, stringing Tito along and hoping he'd bite, but now that things had gotten ugly between Tito and his brother, Matt's life was...

Well, it was... unpredictable. Sometimes boring, sometimes not. Never dull when he was hanging out with Grayson, which was unlike any roommate situation he'd ever lived in before. There were no carefully enforced lines between Matt's interloper stuff and Grayson's things, it was all just thrown together and separated when needed. There was no fighting over the food, or what to do or to watch (Matt was mainlining the James Bond movies, and Grayson seemed cool with that, although he occasionally called it quits when a guy named Pierce Brosnan was starring). It was nothing like the academy—so rigid—or like the group homes—complete anarchy. It was comfortable. It was fun. It was...

Stupidly sexy. Maybe it was the fact that Matt spent every evening getting himself worked up while turning on a crowd, maybe it was the long game he was playing with Tito. Mostly, he thought, it was just Grayson himself, being there, rarely pushing for information but always willing to listen, watching from the back of Johnny Rock's while he sipped a beer, letting Matt into his life with what seemed like barely a ripple of disruption. He took money for food and utilities, and that was it. There was no question of rent, and the sex thing hadn't even come up again, which was its own brand of frustrating.

Seducing Grayson wasn't a part of this operation, and there was no reason for Matt to do something that would only complicate things in the inevitable, likely squalid, end of the case. If it was that simple, he wouldn't even think about it. But it *wasn't* simple, because of stupid, ridiculous stuff like Mickey Mouse pancakes (still creepy, no matter what Grayson said, but kind of sweet too) and James Bond and showing Matt, maybe for the first time, what a friend could be. A hot friend. A really hot, awesome friend he wanted to climb like a fucking flagpole.

When had T-shirts become sexy? Matt saw Grayson in them every afternoon when he woke up. He'd head in to make his fake coffee, one hand scratching idly at his side or stomach, the shirt hitched unevenly around his shoulders, smooth tan skin on display... it was all Matt could do not to gape and maybe drool. Matt retaliated by never putting on a shirt unless he had to and sometimes wearing his stripping jeans at home. He saw the heated side-glances; he could hear Grayson clear his throat sometimes, he saw the desire, it was *there*.

But Grayson never took the next step, and Matt wasn't enough of an asshole to force it even though he knew he could. It would be nice, yeah, but then what? Matt was lying about everything, basically. This careful balancing act would spill over into action soon—the sooner the case was wrapped up and the Jimenez cartel was under lock and key, the better. And that would be it. The end. So that meant hours of unresolved sexual tension at home—at *Grayson's*, not at home, fuck—and trying to find ways to distract himself while Matt waited for either of the Jimenez sons to make a move.

He might have scrapped his whole part in the operation if he didn't know for a fact that Tito was still interested, even if he hadn't been to Johnny Rock's in the week since his confrontation with Nando. Matt took a lot of precautions leaving Grayson's condo, but he openly visited his own every day. The Jimenezes knew where he lived, which meant that this was the only place other

than the club that Tito could reliably get in touch with him, and Matt hadn't underestimated his zeal.

The first time he'd come back to the little studio loft, the door had been forced open and then clumsily repaired. There were no traps as far as he could see, but there was a rose so red it was almost black taped to the inside of the door with a note beneath it: *I'll find a way to have you, baby.* Which was... disturbing but welcome. The next day there had been an envelope full of cash, the day after that another note, this one in a rusty ink that looked suspiciously like blood that read: *You own my heart.*

Matt had known Tito's reputation for falling hard and fast, but this was a level of intensity he hadn't anticipated. Tito was obviously leading up to something, and Matt needed to find out what. Of course, where Tito went, Nando was probably following, so Matt didn't let his guard down on these little visits. Tito would have to reach out, arrange a meeting in person eventually, and then Matt could make things start to happen.

That moment came six days after Matt moved in with Grayson, on his fifth trip back to his apartment. It was early in the morning, straight off of his shift, and Grayson had called earlier that night to let Matt know he was going to be late because they were dealing with a burn. Matt could see the orange glow of it in the distance as he left through Johnny Rock's back door, and his stomach clenched unhappily when he thought of Grayson out there with his team, not battling the blaze—no, that didn't happen. Burns had to be contained, people had to be removed from the danger zone, but the only way an edge burn ended was when it ran out of fuel. Water was too precious to spend on a place so desolate. Then once it was finally out, Reclamation would go back in and start pulling out bodies to be identified.

Matt was distracted, tired, and not paying close enough attention as he trudged up the steps to his little loft, the restaurant below closed, but the air still scented with cooking oil and curry. Matt fumbled for his key—that had been a selling point: no biometrics were required—and reached for the door, but it rocked open under his hand.

Matt almost stumbled inside he was so surprised. His heart rate immediately shot up, and he stared into the darkness beyond the crack in the entry and wished, again, that Carmen had let him keep a gun on this op. It didn't fit his cover story, exactly, but when had that ever stopped a drifter from packing heat? If Nando was in there...

Matt was about to turn and run when a familiar voice called out, "Cali."

Tito Jimenez. Here, in Matt's tiny place. Matt took a deep, quiet breath and then put a hopeful note in his voice. "Tito? Is that you?"

"Yeah." Matt could just see the man's silhouette moving a few feet back. Fuck, it was dark in there. "I'm here. I came for you." His voice quavered with emotion, a throbbing intensity that sent a chill straight down Matt's spine. "Come to me, Cali."

"Are you alone?"

"Of course, you think I'd share this moment with anyone else?" From the rising anger in his tone, Matt could tell what he thought of their moment so far. "Come *here*, Cali!"

This was what he'd been waiting for. He had to follow through. Matt entered the loft and shut the door behind him. A moment later, Tito was against him, his hands unnaturally cold, his wet lips tracing a line down Matt's neck. Matt inhaled the resinous scent of Tito's hair gel, the salty chill of his sweat, and bit his own tongue for a moment.

"Finally, angel," Tito crooned, thrusting his hips against Matt's groin. Oh fuck, Tito was hard already, trembling, and Matt couldn't do it, he couldn't make himself respond. Carmen had thought he'd be good at this, but he'd always hated those rough trades: a hand for a blanket, a mouth for more food. You could get your teeth knocked out for being a cock tease in a group home, but maybe he could make that dynamic work here. He had to. "Cali..."

"Baby, we can't," Matt moaned. "It's too dangerous; your brother could be—"

"He's working a job for my father right now, he won't be back for days," Tito said breathlessly. "Let's go to the bed."

"No, baby." Matt framed Tito's face with his hands and pulled him away from the hickey he'd been sucking into Matt's neck. "Baby, we can't, it's still not safe! Nando's men follow me, they'll know, they'll find us..."

"Nobody knows where you really live right now," Tito said petulantly. "And I want you, Cali, I'm dying for a taste of you! Come on, just—"

"It's not good enough," Matt insisted. "It isn't good enough for you, for *us*. I've never felt this way about anyone before," truer than Tito knew, "and I want to be for you, just for you. How could I go on to someone else after you? I never could, but I have to work, Tito, I *have* to work until we can leave together. Then I'll be all yours; I *want* to be all yours."

The distant glow of the streetlight turned Tito's eyes yellow, a faint reflection that nevertheless vibrated with Tito's pent-up emotions. His whole body shivered, and Matt shivered in mimicry. "You want to go away with me?"

"I would go anywhere with you," Matt said, and he sealed the deal with a kiss. It felt like a kiss with the devil, like he'd just signed his soul away. Tito writhed against him like a worm, hands gripping Matt too hard, pressing his tongue between Matt's teeth and thrusting so deep Matt thought he'd gag. Matt moaned into it, pushed forward with his own hips and felt Tito groan against his teeth. After a moment, Matt pulled away with a gasp. "Anywhere, as long as we're safe from your family. We need something, insurance, some way to frighten them into leaving us alone."

"Oh, I know things," Tito said darkly. "I know things about them. They wouldn't dare interfere."

"Nando will. You know he will, he always does." Matt had no idea if this was true, but judging from the way Tito suddenly growled, playing on that rivalry was a good tack. "We need something solid, something undeniable. Dirt that could put them away, that will force Nando to realize that you've outplayed him." Tito didn't say anything, so Matt pressed. "You're better than he is, and you know it. You've always known it. You've just never gotten to show it, because of your family."

"Because of who I want," Tito whispered, one hand coming up to grip his crucifix hard. Matt felt an unwelcome stab of sympathy.

"Because of who you love," he agreed.

"You... you, *you*, Cali, you're right. You're right!" Tito kissed him again, and Matt wrapped his arms around Tito's shoulders, holding him close and thinking about the give of the splintered wooden door panel under his back, the way his hair brushed the tops of his ears, anything else, anything but this.

Grayson popped into his mind, and Matt broke the kiss and stared up at the dark ceiling as Tito worshipped his chest. No, he wasn't going to think of Grayson now. They hadn't done this; they hadn't done *anything* intimate, but that nothing was so much better than this. Matt forced his thoughts back and said, "Tito, we have to go, please. Leave a message for me, tell me when and where." He recaptured Tito's face in his hands and kissed him again, gently this time. "Tell me, and I'll be there. I swear."

"I'll do it." Tito sounded more dazed than convinced, but Matt would take that right now. "I can do that. Soon, Cali, my angel. Soon."

“Perfect.” Matt put just enough space between them so that he could free an arm and grab the doorknob. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

“Cali...” Tito’s hands tightened on Matt’s waist. “Can’t we just—”

“Please, do it soon, Tito.” He got the door open and backed out of Tito’s grasp. “As soon as you can.” Matt closed the door and had to force himself not to run down the tiny staircase. The kitchen light was on in the restaurant now; it had to be after five. Maybe Grayson would be home.

“He’s not your fucking teddy bear,” Matt snarled at himself as he stalked down the street. He slipped into an alley, backtracked by a few blocks, passed under a few awnings and into a covered walkway before he let himself head toward Grayson’s, arguing with himself the whole way. Matt should be getting in touch with Carmen, updating her on what had just happened, maybe explaining to her why he didn’t sink his hooks deeper into Tito when he had the chance. What would it have taken, a few minutes to get the guy off, to pretend to get off with him? He should have done that, but he hadn’t. He couldn’t.

Instead he took refuge in Grayson’s condo, whose door had been modified to let Matt’s thumbprint open it so he could get in without an escort, whose refrigerator held the disgusting purple soda that Matt preferred and Grayson hated, whose books were newly creased from Matt’s rough handling as he paged through too fast. Grayson wasn’t back yet, and Matt was glad, because he needed a fucking shower.

Cleaning up didn’t get rid of the dark-blue hickey on Matt’s neck or the fingerprints on his hips, but it took care of the smell and the crawling feeling that tingled in Matt’s skin wherever Tito had touched him. He brushed his teeth twice, pulled on one of Grayson’s T-shirts, fresh from the dryer, and then huddled down on the couch and put on a Bond movie. He didn’t really hear what the actors were saying; he was too preoccupied with figuring out what the hell was wrong with him. What was it? Why hadn’t he been able to wrap things up tonight? He might have convinced Tito to move faster, or at least gotten him to name a place and a date where Carmen could set up a sting. It was stupid, he was being reckless, he could have... he could have...

The door opened. Grayson came inside, damp from his own shower—he must have cleaned up at headquarters, which meant that it had been bad. Matt’s stomach clenched again, this time with fluttering relief and desire, and then he knew.

Well, shit. He was falling in love. It had only happened once before, but Matt remembered how it had been, the effervescence of a crush turning into the heat of longing. That love had been unrequited, but the feeling of it had stuck with him. Now it was happening again, only a hundred times more intensely, because Grayson was looking at him like Matt was the best thing he'd seen for days.

Matt jumped off the couch. "Hey!"

"Hey." Grayson toed off his shoes with a sigh. "I thought you'd be asleep by now, it's almost six."

If only falling asleep was going to be so easy. "I couldn't settle. How are you?"

"Fine, just tired." Grayson started to head down the hall, and Matt made an abortive, instinctual grab for his arm. It manifested as a twitch, but Grayson still saw it. "What's wrong?"

"Are you sure you're ready for bed?" Matt asked. He knew he sounded off, needy, but he couldn't help it. He didn't want to be alone right now with nothing but his own stupid, circling thoughts for company. His neck itched where the hickey had sunk in. "You don't want to watch a movie, or I'll read to you, or... something?"

"No," Grayson said, his gaze roaming slowly over Matt. "I'm okay. Definitely ready for bed. But... how about you come with me? To sleep only," he clarified. "My bed's big, there's enough room for you to lie in there without us touching."

"What if—um." Matt was embarrassed at how faint he was, but his volume control seemed to be missing. "What if there was some touching?"

"That's fine. Just not anything that makes you uncomfortable."

Matt nodded. "Thanks." He felt like he was going to crawl out of his skin, guilty and dirty and angry about feeling that way for doing his job, and also for not doing it. He followed Grayson back to his room, averted his eyes as the man exchanged cargo pants for a light pair of shorts, and then crawled into bed beside him when invited. Grayson turned the lights off, and they lay there in silence for a while.

The surging, itching energy that flowed through Matt was finally starting to ebb when Grayson said, "I have to ask. Do you need to go to a clinic?"

“No.” Matt saw that he wasn’t convinced and decided to elaborate. “Just... a client got a little out of hand. I didn’t like it, but it didn’t go far enough to make me need a clinic.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Yeah.” The wealth of things unsaid lay between them like a bed of nails, even more painful now that Matt knew he wanted Grayson as more than just a friend, as more than a fuck. “I’m sure.” He reached out impulsively and took Grayson’s hand. “Thank you, though. Honestly. I was out tonight, and things were a little rough, and when everything was said and done I just wanted to be back here.” The *with you* went unsaid, but Grayson smiled like he heard it anyway.

“Good, I’m glad.” He shifted a little closer, so near that Matt could just feel the soporific heat radiating off of him. “Sleep well.”

“I will.”

He did, too, so well in fact that when he woke up, he was sprawled across Grayson’s shoulder, face tucked into the corner of the man’s neck and right arm tossed across his chest. It was almost too comfortable not to fall back asleep, except for the light, barely there strokes across his shoulders that let him know Grayson was awake.

Matt inhaled Grayson’s scent: clean soap and sweat with a slightly smoky edge, the last remnants of the burn that he couldn’t quite expunge. Every breath made Matt more lightheaded, almost weightless, until the only heavy spot left in his body was where blood began to pool in his groin. He kissed the soft, creased skin of Grayson’s neck and felt his heart rate stutter for a moment.

“Why?” Grayson murmured, so low Matt could barely hear it without mods. It was more a *feel* of the word, a rumble through Grayson’s throat that Matt absorbed through his lips. Why... maybe why me, why now?

“Because I want to,” Matt said, quiet and earnest. “Because I want you.” He kissed Grayson’s neck again, then his cheek, and finally his mouth as Grayson turned to face him, opened to him and pulled him close, and this time...

It was so different from Tito it could have been another world. No slick, demanding tongue or sharp teeth worrying his flesh, just soft lips that yielded gently to the pressure that Matt applied. At another time Matt would have wanted more, would have pushed and demanded for more, but right now, gentle felt perfect.

That didn't mean that he was willing to stop at kisses, though. He slid on top of Grayson and sat up, settling on his firm stomach. Grayson toyed with the edge of Matt's T-shirt. "This looks familiar."

"Your clothes are more comfortable," Matt informed him archly before pulling it over his head and throwing it on the floor.

"You look even more comfortable without them," Grayson said. He brushed callused fingers over Matt's bare hips, skirting the bruises until Matt grabbed his hands and pressed them down firmly.

"It's fine. I want you to touch me."

Grayson nodded slowly after a moment. "I could touch more of you if you weren't still wearing pants."

"Good point." Matt lifted his hips and pushed the sweats off without ceremony. He could do alluring, he could do sensuous and seductive, but that wasn't what he needed right now. Right now he wanted speed and to touch and be touched without having to strategize. Fortunately, Grayson seemed completely on board with this plan.

"Fuck," he grunted when Matt sat down on his stomach again, nude and erect. Matt slid back until his ass settled against Grayson's cock, straining against the shorts he wore. The fabric was stretchy and slick, and Matt reached back and rubbed Grayson's shaft, lingering at the head as he imagined working it inside of himself. It had been months since he'd had sex, too busy trying to make detective for distractions.

Grayson's warm hand on his cock brought Matt careening back to the present, and he moaned and thrust forward into his grasp. The lightheadedness was back, stronger than ever, and Matt rocked between Grayson's hand and cock, hands braced on his chest, desperate to come but desperate to stay this way too, on the very edge of something so good he wasn't sure he could handle it. He breathed hard through his nose, reducing his cries to quiet whimpers. So close, he was so close...

"Matt, it's okay," Grayson urged him. "It's okay, let go." He reached up with his free hand and rubbed his thumb over Matt's lips. Matt gasped and opened for him, and then it was too late to try and be quiet again, the lock was broken, and Matt heard his own high keens as he suddenly came apart on top of Grayson.

He didn't feel himself crumple to Grayson's chest afterward, didn't register Grayson's harsh breaths and final thrusts against him, or the sticky feeling of

his own cum between them. Matt didn't realize much at all until a few minutes later, when Grayson pressed a tender kiss to his slack lips.

"Holy shit," Matt mumbled, and Grayson laughed. "That was... yeah."

"I thought so."

"I left you—"

"Ah, no," Grayson corrected, "you didn't, but I *do* need to change now."

"Really?" Matt smirked. "I'm just that good, huh?"

Grayson made a considering hum. "Which one of us just woke up?"

"Smart-ass." Matt leaned in and kissed him again, and then didn't stop until he realized he was starting to adhere to Grayson's T-shirt. "Okay, yeah, time to clean up."

Grayson shifted him to the side and got out of bed. "You can stay here; I'll bring a washcloth back."

"I can stay?" Matt asked, feeling a little stupid to be asking when he was butt naked against the guy's sheets, but he didn't want to presume. He didn't want to force his presence on Grayson any more than he already had, and if he was asked to leave, he'd go, he'd head back out to the couch or—

"Stay." Grayson smiled a little crookedly. "Please."

Well, then. That was that.

Chapter Six

Grayson had been around enough psychologists to know that what he had going with Matt was probably not totally healthy. Grayson hadn't been intimate with another person in months, mostly by choice but partially just because he didn't have a life that was conducive to letting someone in. He had his work, he had his dad to take care of, he had bodies to find and his own sometimes-wobbly mental and emotional control to focus on. He had tough hours and unpredictable shifts and almost nothing about what he did was pretty. It added up to very little to offer anyone, except for someone who had next to nothing, like Matt.

Matt was gorgeous. Matt was almost destitute. Matt was clever and knew what he was doing, or at least he said as much. And what Matt wanted to do, it seemed, was to be with Grayson. He'd been happy enough the week they'd spent together before things got physical between them, and Grayson had been content with that. Then life had broken down a bit for Matt, someone had gone too far—it wasn't hard to guess who, but Grayson knew it was no good bringing up the police again, Matt wasn't going to go for it—Matt had come to him, and things had... progressed.

Grayson couldn't feel guilty about it, even though logically he knew what was happening between them skirted the edges of dubious consent. Matt was an adult, Grayson was an adult, and what they did together was consensual. Nobody was holding a gun to anyone else's head, although Grayson was pretty fucking sure that if Matt kept on moving the way he was right now, Grayson's personal hair trigger was going to go off.

It was one thing to watch Matt in Johnny Rock's, his expert undulations usually kept at a distance meant to titillate his patrons. It was entirely something else to watch Matt writhe against the doorframe just a few feet away, his hips as supple as the cloth that covered them, the smooth skin in the grooves of his pelvis beckoning Grayson to touch. And he *could*, if he wanted to, Matt had made that clear, but Grayson couldn't quite bring himself to do more than watch for now.

Matt slid the fingers of one hand under the edge of his jeans and gasped a little as he touched himself. He turned a bright grin on Grayson. "Have I convinced you yet?"

“I have work in an hour,” Grayson said as dispassionately as he could manage, but his mouth was too dry to properly enunciate. “There’s no time, Matty.” Matt grinned wider, the way he did every time Grayson’s inadvertent nickname for him slipped out.

“There’s plenty of time,” he disagreed. “It’s not going to take that long to fuck me against the floor, or I could sit in your lap and we could do it there on your amazingly comfortable couch.” They’d progressed from hand jobs to enthusiastic fucking in short order, each so hungry for the other it was like they’d both been starving before they’d touched. Matt’s hand moved rhythmically in the front of his jeans, stroking himself harder. “I’m still good from this morning, so you don’t even have to prep me.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Matt, actually, but—” He got his jeans low enough that Grayson could see the bright red head of his cock appear from under the denim, and that was it. Grayson shot up off the couch and over to the door, picked Matt up off the floor, and held him firmly against the wall, his strength mods kicking in to toughen his muscles and increase his stamina so that holding Matt up was no harder than holding a basket of laundry. A very wriggly, loud, sexy basket of laundry.

“Forget the floor, I like the wall too,” Matt groaned. “Fuck, though, these—I have to get my jeans off, let me—”

“I think I prefer you with them on for now,” Grayson said, his voice so low he almost didn’t recognize himself. “You seem to like them so much, showing me just enough to drive me insane.”

“Because I want you.”

“You wanted to tease me.”

“I want to *fuck* you, teasing is just a bonus,” Matt said, wrapping his arms around Grayson’s neck and pulling him into a kiss. It was hot and openmouthed, almost more teeth than lips. Grayson canted his hips up and drove his erection against the crease of Matt’s pants, and he swallowed Matt’s subsequent moan with a satisfied smile. He thrust up again, ignoring the needy ache in his own groin as he dry humped Matt like a teenager.

“Fuck, Grayson, please...” Matt’s hands clawed at his shoulders, sliding over hard ridges of enhanced muscle and lingering gratifyingly. “Just, put me down and let me... let me take these o—oh, *shit*, just... mmm...”

“Like this,” Grayson murmured against the shell of Matt’s ear before he bit down on the soft lobe, loving how Matt stiffened and pressed into it. “Come like this, come riding my cock like this and imagining me back inside you, Matty, getting you all dirty before I clean you off with my tongue in the shower, then making you dirty all over again after.”

Before Matt, Grayson had never gotten into talking much during sex; it seemed like too much work when the goal was just to get off. But that wasn’t the goal with Matt, not since the first time. Grayson wanted to see him come apart; he wanted to make it so good for Matt that he never wanted to leave. It was a little fucked-up, maybe, but that secret, possessive thought powered the rapid beats of his heart and flooded every corner of his mind too often to dismiss. Grayson wanted Matt to feel safe, he wanted him to feel desired, and he wanted to make it clear just how good it could be—*they* could be. Matt inspired Grayson to make a fucking effort, and he wasn’t going to stop now.

Matt whimpered as Grayson moved his mouth to Matt’s neck, licking away sweat and nipping smooth skin with his teeth, not so hard as to bruise, but just enough to tantalize. “If we fucked now I wouldn’t have time to clean you up, you’d have to do it yourself, but I know you wouldn’t; you’d go to work tonight in these awful, pretty jeans of yours stained with both our cum.” He hitched Matt’s hips higher as Matt’s grip tightened warningly and pulled him down faster onto the bulge in his own pants. “And every time you bent over in them, you’d feel me inside of you, rubbing against your skin, filthy and fucking perfect, Matty, it would feel so good, me pumping you so full of my cum that you were wet all night long—”

“*Grayson!*” Matt arched against him and came in a rush, coating both their stomachs with his release. Grayson kissed him through it, kissed his cheek and his chin and his neck until he finally buried his face in the crook of Matt’s neck and just breathed, forcing himself to calm down even though all he wanted right now was to do exactly what Matt had suggested and fuck him against the wall. He just didn’t have time; he *had* to get to work. Every team was pulling overtime lately, with the rising threat of a massive burn ever since a minor one had been thwarted two nights ago.

Phoenix PD had recovered several tons of drugs and five local girls who had gone missing in the past two weeks. It was a massive coup for the cops, but that meant that the cartels were going to be more desperate now. None of the girls were Tima, but the news had sent Rosa to Grayson’s door every afternoon since then to check. He hadn’t known what to tell her; he still didn’t. The cops

weren't sharing much intel with Reclamation, at least not that Grayson knew, and the pressure on their crews just continued to mount.

Grayson felt Matt's tremors start to subside and gently put him back down on his feet. He disengaged the strength mods and his arms and back very briefly turned to jelly, but he stayed up in the end.

"You're the fucking tease," Matt said, but he sounded languorous enough that Grayson was sure he'd be forgiven. "Can I suck you off, at least?" He licked his lips and smiled.

Now it was Grayson's turn to groan. "Honest to God, I have to get to work."

"Enjoy your blue balls, then."

"Gives me something to look forward to." Matt kissed him twice, slow and soft now, and then let his hands drop down to his sides.

"You should put on a fresh shirt, at least." He grinned. "Unless you want everyone at your station to know what you've been getting up to."

Grayson snorted. "They already know." He took in the surprise in Matt's expression and forged ahead, ignoring how his heart panged for a moment. "What, you think the knowledge that you make me happy is limited to this condo? My psych actually made me do a drug test yesterday, just to check that I wasn't taking any new pills or boosters."

"What a bitch," Matt said easily. "So they know about me, huh?"

"Of course they do. You're not a secret, Matt." The grin slowly slid off of Matt's face, and Grayson pulled away, pretending not to see it. Whatever was going on there, Matt would tell him when he was ready. Or not. Either way, Grayson wasn't going to worry about it right now. "Shirt, I need a shirt..." He wandered back into the bedroom and grabbed a clean one, wiped himself off with the other, and firmly ignored his persistent erection. It would go away soon enough.

Matt had recovered his aplomb by the time Grayson was dressed again. He leaned against that same damn doorframe, his stomach still slick, his jeans unbuttoned now to give his semi-erect cock plenty of space. Grayson had to tear his eyes away from it. Matt's tone belied his casual posture, though. "Be safe tonight," he said.

"I will be. You too." They exchanged one more gentle kiss before Grayson headed for the door. He let himself out into the bright midday sun, hot enough

to burn away the last of his sweat in less than a minute, pulled the door shut hard enough to actually latch, and headed for the station.

Grayson walked through the door, and a moment later, Fiona was on him, reaching out and manually shutting off his personal wrist comm. “Fee, what—”

“It’s all hands on deck now, Corbett,” Fiona said tersely. She was the station’s secretary but acted more like their boss. “The mayor has just issued a state of emergency, so no private communication channels while on duty. Tin Man’s talking about it now.”

Tim Quinto was Grayson’s boss, the guy in charge of all of the Reclamation teams in this part of the city. The fact that he was here now, without calling Grayson first, was a bad sign. Tim was taciturn to the point of seeming emotionless, which is where he got his nickname “Tin Man” from, but right now, the tension in his massive frame was clear.

He was addressing the other three team leaders and waved Grayson over as soon as he saw him. “The edge’s got two starters going in the last ten minutes,” he explained. Grayson felt the last remnants of his pent-up ardor drain away as he focused on his boss. “We were expecting the cartels to strike back after we interrupted one of their burns and recovered some captives, but it’s bigger than we were anticipating. All crews are on call, shifts plus four until we get these burns under control.”

All crews... that meant sixteen hours on, twelve off for over three thousand people. It was going to be a bitch to coordinate. “How big are these burns so far?”

“One’s three blocks, one’s only consumed a single building so far, but the second one is too close to populated areas for comfort,” Tin Man replied. “It’s less than five blocks from a subdivision. Phil,” he turned to one of the other crew leaders, “you and Beta are taking that one, Fiona’s got the specs for you.

“Grayson, you’re taking Alpha to rendezvous with the Fireboys and going to the Salt Flats.” The Flats used to be a river running across the south of the city, but it had long since been diverted underground and piped directly into Phoenix’s central water main, leaving a wide, dry channel behind. “You’re running evac on the buildings the Fireboys tell you to, and then you need to run support when they do the demo.” The Fireboys were the only crew in the city crazier than Reclamation; they strategized where and how to set blazes to counter the ones burning, or which buildings to blow up to manage the same. It didn’t always work out, but Fireboys worked their asses off to try and ensure success. The number of avowed pyromaniacs in that squad was legendary.

“Got it? Good.” Tin Man waved a hand at them. “Get going, then.”

Grayson did his best to push all memory of his easy morning and afternoon with Matt out of his head as he got into his power suit and assembled his team. He checked over the power suit’s systems and had his people do the same, a ritual that put everyone in the right mindset to start working. If the batteries ran down, then someone with strength mods and the right training could force their power suit to move without them, but it was always better to avoid the issue entirely.

“Where to tonight?” Lilian asked.

“Salt Flats. We’re working with the Fireboys.”

“Jackasses,” Peter muttered. “Bunch of flaming assholes is what they are.” He caught Grayson’s raised eyebrow and blushed. “My ex is one of them. Trust me, I’d know.”

“Flaming assholes or not,” Grayson said, “we’re running with them tonight, so I want you all on your best behavior.”

He felt Fiona tap into the suit’s earpiece and then say directly into his communication mod, “Your ride’s here, Alphas. Time to cinch up your diapers and roll out.”

“You are not funny,” Grayson told her as he walked by the front desk, joints whirring with every step.

“She is *so* funny,” Lilian retorted, kissing her girlfriend good-bye before following him out onto the pavement. The Fireboys had sent a van—fantastic. Grayson hoped the shocks had been upgraded.

The work itself was tiresome, bordering on monotonous. The fire was big enough that there wasn’t going to be an easy fix for it, and the shanties in the area had already been largely deserted. Grayson went about things methodically, though, checking each shack for inhabitants and breathing a quiet sigh of relief with each new declaration of “Clear.” This place wasn’t a heavy cartel zone, too far away from the main city and all its amenities to be favored. This was mostly drifters, crazies, the hopeless and restless, and the scabs who picked away at the edge, eking an existence out of next to nothing. They were more pitiful than they were dangerous: people who should be taken in and helped, not vilified; but there was no room in the system for them, not in the hospitals or even the jails. They were relegated to this dry, dusty, heat-drowned existence, with few people to care how they lived and even fewer to care if they died.

The Fireboys decided to blast to the north and the east and let the natural barrier of the Salt Flats finish things off to the south and west. That would contain the blaze to a four-block area without displacing too many residents. “It’s the best we can come up with for now,” their chief, Zena, told Grayson as she wiped sweat from her dark brow.

“Any idea what’s at the center of this one?” he asked, not really wanting the answer but needing to know.

“Best guess? Bad product. If not even the scabs are swarming the place and there’s no sign of cartel, then—”

“Probably a dump site, yeah,” Grayson agreed. It happened a few times a year, rural areas set ablaze after cartel members had finished filling them with everything that had gone wrong but wasn’t important enough to warrant a burn of its own. Malfunctioning hardware, bad batches of drugs, but not usually bodies. Those attracted too much attention. “Let us know when you need us.”

“Will do, Corbett.”

In the end, his crew spent every minute of their shift helping the Fireboys tear down shacks and manage the few people who poked their heads out to observe the spectacle. Once the explosives were set, they all stood back and watched Zena sync the bombs on her controls and then detonate them as one. A five-block radius of aluminum and concrete collapsed in a noisy shower of dust, and as a barrier, it almost worked. The fire broke through at one edge of the north side and they all ended up taking emergency measures to keep it from going any farther.

By the time eight a.m. rolled around, Grayson’s suit was down to twenty-two percent power and he had to compensate with his mods to keep it moving steady. The burn was dealt with, though, and Fiona hadn’t chatted at him for hours, so he loaded his crew up and brought them back to the station with sighs of relief all around. It hadn’t been bad, for a burn.

Once he was back at the station, though, Grayson quickly realized that the reason Fiona hadn’t been relaying with him was because she had her hands more than full coordinating the crews involved in the other burn, which had spread to twelve blocks and was threatening to jump into the city proper. “You’re off for a shift. Get your suits in their chargers,” she told him as he reported back in, not even bothering to look up from the vidscreen. “We’ll need you back for this one as soon as possible, though. It’s getting hairy. Bodies on location, and the cartel is taking potshots at the Rec crews on site.”

“You’re kidding me.” That was bold, for the cartels.

“We seem to have annoyed them,” Fiona agreed. “Go on, then.”

Grayson checked that his crew was in hand and heading home before he opened up the top half of his power suit with a sigh of relief. He rebooted his arm computer and was startled out of his sleep-deprived daze by the flashing red light of his wrist comm. *Urgent. Urgent. Urgent.* Grayson took a deep breath before he activated the message cache. If something had happened to Matt—

“Mr. Corbett, this is Nurse Shyalma, if you could please contact me as soon as possible, I need to speak with you.

“Mr. Corbett, this is Nurse Shyalma, please, it’s about your father.

“Grayson, please, get in touch as soon as you can.”

Fuck. He called. She picked up on the first ring.

“Grayson?”

“What’s happened?” he demanded.

“Your father is gone.”

“*How* is he gone?” Grayson knew he was getting some stares in the locker room, but he didn’t care right now. “How, after last time, how, *again*, is he gone?”

“He assaulted his orderly, stole the man’s badge and left via the service door,” Nurse Shyalma said tersely. “Kieran did his best, but he’s got two broken ribs now.”

Grayson closed his eyes and clenched his jaw against the stream of obscenities that wanted to emerge. “When did this happen?”

“Two hours ago.”

When Grayson should have been off shift. He would have gotten the call if not for the emergency overtime. “Where did he go?”

“Mario went after him in the van, thinking he’d head toward your old neighborhood.” There was a long pause, and Grayson felt his heart rate careen into overdrive. “He didn’t. Mario tracked him to the edge instead. We could see the glow of the fire from the common room. I didn’t think it would be an issue, but your dad was very upset by it. I gave him a sedative shot, but it must have

worn off halfway through the night, because... well. Mario was stopped at the perimeter, but several eyewitnesses saw your father run toward the fire. Grayson? ...Grayson, are you still there?"

He'd stopped paying attention as soon as she told him his father had *run into* an edge burn. Grayson was moving, closing himself up and forcing his mods to push his power suit into overdrive, despite its low battery. He'd pay for it later but he didn't feel anything other than cold fear right now, an edge of pain in every breath, a lacey lattice of sparks clouding the edges of his vision. He ran out of the station and toward the burn, toward where he knew it was blazing, spreading, where it was being fought and his father had to have seen it from the VA.

Secessionist bastards! They're in our city, in our homes. Only the fire had been the opposite direction of home, but his dad wouldn't have cared. Grayson ran faster, right toward the orange flare, straight into the knot of the crew keeping bystanders back, ignoring the cries of people—insignificant, obstructionist, he didn't care about them, he couldn't care—as he headed for the VA van. Mario was there, wild-eyed as he turned to look at Grayson.

"Where?" Grayson demanded, barely recognizing the sound of himself. "Where did he go in?"

"Down the central street here," Mario said helplessly. "Right into the middle of it, man, I couldn't get to him fast enough. I'm so sorry—Hey, Mr. Corbett, wait!"

The heat of twelve city block's worth of burn was intense, more than his suit could really handle, but Grayson tried anyway. He turned and ran down the street Mario had pointed to, where the fire burned so hot even the air seemed to try to escape it in shimmering waves, scanning for anything, any sign of life, any sign of First Sergeant Zachary Corbett.

By the time he found it, Grayson was down on his knees. He scrambled to grab it even as powerful hands pulled him back, someone yelling in his ear the whole time they dragged him back to the perimeter.

"—fuck is *wrong* with you, Corbett?" Phil demanded, opening his own helmet after he punched the emergency override on Grayson's. "You didn't respond to comm and your power is *out*, you hear me? Another minute and you would have roasted in this shell."

"It's his dad," Mario said, coming to Grayson's side. It was good that someone could explain it: all Grayson could do was stare at his hands. "His dad got out of the VA's Hospice House a couple hours ago, and he ran in there."

“The crazy old guy with the wild hair?” Phil glanced at Grayson, aghast. “That was your *dad*? I thought it was a suicide, we couldn’t reach him before... are you sure?”

Grayson finally pulled his gaze away from the scorched remnants of the cane he held, so tight his fingers were cramping inside the power suit. “Yeah,” he husked. “Yeah. I’m sure.”

Hours of processing and paperwork and stupidity later, Grayson was finally home again. He trudged to his door, eyes itching from the smoke and the fact that he couldn’t remember the last time he’d blinked. Rosa’s curtains twitched, but he must have looked truly bad if she wasn’t coming out to ask him about the burn and her daughter. What could he say, anyway? Nothing. Nothing at all.

“You’re on leave for the foreseeable future,” Tin Man had told him, not unkindly, but he certainly wasn’t pleased. “Your first psych meeting about this is next week. I’m sorry for your loss.”

But what kind of loss was it? Zachary Corbett hadn’t been a real father to Grayson since he’d been five. Losing his mother, that had been hard. Losing his uncle, that had hurt. Losing his father... he didn’t know how that was supposed to feel.

He opened the front door on instinct, and almost immediately, Matt was there. “Holy shit,” he said softly. “Grayson, what...”

Grayson stared at Matt, at his messy blond hair and the old Reclamation T-shirt he wore, his bare, fragile feet and his wide eyes, and suddenly he couldn’t breathe. He felt disgusting, filthy, like his clothes were too small for him, the snug-fitting suit underarmor that he should have left at work a binding he had to escape, *now*. “I need to—shower, I have to clean up, I’m—” His fingers fumbled with the binding creases, which increasingly frustrated him until Matt finally batted his hands away.

“I’ve got it,” he murmured, finding the insertions like magic and unzipping the suit from Grayson’s body. “There, c’mon, let’s get your shoes off.” He knelt down and undid Grayson’s sneakers, and under any other circumstance—hell, less than a day ago—Grayson’s thoughts would have turned immediately to sex. Right now all he felt was obscurely grateful that he didn’t have to negotiate the knots himself.

“Shower?”

When had Matt stood up again? “Yeah,” Grayson said after a moment. “On cold.” Cold to soothe his burns, cold to help clear his mind. He couldn’t process anything right now, he couldn’t think.

He watched absently as Matt took in the blisters on his face and neck but didn’t say anything, just nodded and led him to the bathroom by his hands, opened the door and turned the shower on as cold as it would go. “There.” He stood back, and Grayson stepped into the spray.

The chill was invigorating, startling him a little as the stench of smoke faded away. Grayson noticed Matt hovering, and he very gently shut the door between them. Not seeing those concerned eyes was like cutting the strings of a puppet, and before Grayson knew what was happening, he was crouched close to the floor, one knee down like he had been hours earlier when he’d seen that cane on the ground. It wasn’t even his father’s cane, but it had the VA logo, and Grayson had been dodging it just... God, was it a week ago? Only a little over a week?

Grayson gripped his hair with his hands, the only place on his head that didn’t hurt, and pulled so that it matched the rest of him. His eyes watered, his chest shuddered, and it took a long moment to realize that he was crying. *Crying*. He hadn’t cried in so long, despite everything he’d seen in Reclamation, all the lives lost, the bodies found. And what was he crying for, even? A ghost of a man, not one who had loved him, not one he had any connection to other than inconvenient blood and enforced responsibility. He shouldn’t care. He shouldn’t...

“Grayson.” His name echoed a little in the bathroom. “Please, Grayson...” Matt didn’t say anything else, but Grayson saw the shadow of him in the unlit bathroom, crouching outside the mottled glass door of the shower in a mirror image of Grayson himself.

“I’m here.” It was all Matt said after that, low and helpless, but it was enough. It was just enough. Grayson wasn’t ready to move and he couldn’t stop his awful tears or the way his chest heaved and his nose ran, but he didn’t collapse completely. Matt was a life raft, even if he didn’t know it, even if Grayson hated doing that to him. He’d take it, for now. He had to. There was no one else to turn to, not this time, and being alone with nothing but his own punch-drunk emotions right now was petrifying. He reeled between anger, guilt, and a gut-wrenching sensation of loss over and over, and without Matt as a touchstone, Grayson might have broken his fist against the shower wall by now.

The water beat down on Grayson's head long enough for his hands to drop to the floor, for his crouch to turn into an exhausted slump, for his breaths to become slow and deep again. He muzzily let Matt dry him off and lead him out of the bathroom and back to his bed. They settled down together, even though some part of Grayson's mind figured that it had to be close to the time Matt left for his shift. Matt covered him with his worn sheets and lay close enough to touch, if Grayson wanted to reach out.

Grayson was exhausted beyond anything he could remember, but he still had the energy to say, "Why don't you ask?"

"You'll tell me when you're ready," Matt said quietly. "Whatever it is. I'll be here."

It wasn't a solemn oath, but it eased the pain in Grayson's chest. He sighed, shut his eyes, and fell into the most perfect, dreamless black hole he could have hoped for.

He hoped it lasted.

Chapter Seven

Everybody knew about the burn gone bad.

It was on all the news stations: the nearness of it to “civilization” as opposed to being safely out in the edge, how it was a bold statement by the cartels that they were prepared to fight back. There were condemnations of the police, of city services, of every politician in office. There was infighting between the agencies, everyone trying to pass off the responsibility for the loss of life—eight people total that Reclamation hadn’t been able to clear out of their shacks before the blaze spread, and the bodies of thirteen others who’d already been dead before they were burned—off to someone else.

Matt was lost. He tried for two days to get in touch with Carmen, only to be told by a terse Juan Pablo that they “aren’t accepting any to-go orders for a while, *amigo*.” And when he finally did manage to reach her, shoving a box of pork tamales into her hands as he sat down next to her in the park, she just sighed and set them aside.

“What the hell is going on?” Matt demanded, scooting in close so he could yell in a whisper. “Where have you been?”

“Working around the clock to cover my people’s tracks,” Carmen said as she rubbed two fingers over her temple. “Our department has lost two cops and seven CIs in the past forty-eight hours, Matt. Including Germaine.”

“Oh, shit.” Germaine was an older woman who used to run one of the middle-of-the-road foster homes Matt had been placed in when he was young. She’d lost her state mandate and her property for repeated drug offenses and had been homeless for the past three years. Matt had found her and offered her money to be his occasional informant last year, not because he thought she’d have much of anything useful to say, but more as an acknowledgement of the fact that she could have been a lot worse as a foster parent. Germaine, in exchange, ended up bringing in more information on low-level cartel members than Matt had ever anticipated.

Carmen had told him it was a bad idea to work with someone who’d known him before, because if they were found out, you couldn’t count on them to only know your cover story. No cop told a CI their real name, just a number they could call to report information to or to schedule in-person meetings that were carefully vetted. Germaine had been Matt’s only exception. She’d been smart about how she got her intel, as long as she wasn’t out of her mind on cocaine.

“Lost or dead?”

“Dead,” Carmen clarified dully. “We found their bodies in one of our few remaining safe houses last night. They’d all been beheaded.”

There it was, the icy rush of shock down his spine that Matt had been expecting. “We’re compromised.”

“Obviously. We just don’t know how much.” Carmen’s lips tightened. “I think you should come in.”

Matt’s heart immediately clenched in his chest. “I can’t. Not yet.”

“You’re not going to do any good out there, Matt. If Tito hasn’t bitten by now, he probably isn’t going to, and we’ve got other fronts to fight on with the Jimenez cartel right now.”

“Like what?” he demanded. “We still can’t raid any of their residences, not with half of the city council on their payroll! We need information that will get us warrants, and I’m going to get it!”

“Matt...”

“I *am*.”

“How are you going to get anything if a cartel thug shoots you down in the street, huh?” Carmen demanded. “You’ve got *nothing* for backup right now; I know, I put you out there like that! No weapons, no way to contact us on the fly, no good place to retreat to. If I could go back to the start of this, arm you to the teeth and damn the risk, I would, but every weapon we’ve got is under lock and key right now to cut down on cop *vigilantism*.” She rolled her eyes. “Another way of saying our police commissioner doesn’t trust his lieutenants. It doesn’t matter, anyway. You need to come in.”

“I can’t.” There was too much riding on this, and besides... “Tito will come to me.”

“He’s probably so busy killing people and lighting fires he’s forgotten all about you.”

“No, he hasn’t, because I’m his only option for *more* than that,” Matt insisted. “He’s obsessed with breaking free from his family, and he’s going to be more motivated to do it now than ever before with everything his family is getting up to. I can *use* that, Carmen.”

Carmen eyed him sympathetically. “How much of this is really about Grayson Corbett, Matt?”

Matt froze for a second and then scoffed. “None of it.”

“Oh, really? Because I’ve heard about what happened to his father. It’s another facet of the ‘human tragedy’ that the pols are pushing in an effort to get people on their sides.” Carmen huffed. “They’re not releasing his name, but I know he’s been taken off duty. No reason to do that in a time like this unless he’s really out of it. How much of you not wanting to come in is about you staying there to take care of him?”

“He doesn’t need me to take care of him.” *I just want to.*

Carmen changed tactics. “Have you considered the risk you’re putting him under? Germaine might have given your name up to the cartel before they killed her. We know the cops who were killed were lured in to meetings by their CIs at the order of the cartel. She knew your name, not just your number. She could describe you, not to mention what the Jimenez could have pried out of our cops before they killed them. Matt... it isn’t safe for you to be with him.”

She had a point. Matt tried to swallow around the ice that had lodged in his throat. “Then I’ll go somewhere else, but I’m not ready to give up.”

“Where? I’ve got nothing for you; every safe house is considered compromised and we’re not going to get the resources for new ones any time soon.”

“I’ll figure it out.” He could see the refusal hovering over her lips, the desire to call it all off and order him back to the police barracks, case be damned. “Carmen, I swear, I’m going to make this work. It’ll be worth it, if we get what we need to go into Jimenez properties, won’t it? You have to let me see it through.”

Carmen sighed. “You better not die, Detective. Or get caught. As of right now, you’re disavowed until you’re ready to come in. I won’t respond to another request to meet. The department just can’t take chances right now. You get me?”

“I do.”

“Good. Now.” Carmen finally opened her food carton. “You should go. I don’t want a witness for when I scarf this down.”

“Your secrets are safe with me,” Matt said seriously before leaving Carmen alone on the bench and heading back toward Grayson’s condo. Which he really shouldn’t be going to, she was right about that, but...

He was needed there. Matt wasn't exactly sure whether or not he was making anything better, but he felt *needed*. No one had ever needed him before, not that he could remember. You didn't make friends in group homes—you only formed temporary alliances. He had never bothered much to make friends in the police academy either; competition was fierce, and fewer than fifty percent of the cadets who started training there completed it. If you had a family to go back to, that was one thing. If you came from nothing, then once you flunked out you were automatically directed into either military service or “essential” services, anything from trash pickup and incineration to scrubbing public toilets. None of which had appealed to Matt.

Sure, he had a few acquaintances. He had his sponsored cadets, who were grateful if not exactly friendly. He had Carmen, who could have definitely been a friend if she wasn't also his boss. But Matt—or rather, Cali—also had Jojo at the club, and Jersey and 'Tana. He had people who were happy to see him, even if that happiness didn't extend far enough to put him up for the night. And he had Grayson, who was already so much more to Matt and could go even further if not for... well.

Grieving for a parent had to be a terrible thing to experience, if just watching Grayson do it made Matt feel like his lungs were being slowly pulled out of his chest via his stomach. Gone were the confident smiles and the easy morning wake ups. Gone was all the ease, actually, the sound nights of sleep giving way to sweet, comfortable caresses, the Mickey Mouse pancakes and the Bond-movie afternoons. Matt hadn't even lived two weeks with Grayson, and he already missed those things like breathing. He missed knowing what to do even more, though.

Grayson barely slept, and when he did it almost always resulted in nightmares. Matt got used to hearing his breathing quicken, to seeing his fingers clench into claws against the sheets. His appetite was gone, his eyes dull, face slack. He was like an automaton of his former self, a poor, heartbroken copy, and the only thing he'd managed to say to Matt yesterday, after he'd come home from his father's brief funeral, was, “You can go.”

Matt had shaken his head, already up off the couch in a flurry of useless activity. “Not unless you want me to,” he'd said, helping Grayson out of his formal suit. Grayson held a small box of his father's effects in his hands, but he gave it up easily enough when Matt gently tugged at it.

“I'm not...” Grayson had shaken his head. “I'm not going to be good for you right now. I'll give you the money for a hotel, though.” When he looked at

Matt, his eyes were wet with tears, but his sincerity was evident. “I want you to be safe.”

It had been a good offer, a generous offer. Matt should have taken it. He regretted not jumping on it, actually, but the first words out of his mouth had been, “I want to be here for you. I told you I would be.”

“That was before you found out what was going on. My dad, he’s just... he wasn’t...” Grayson had wiped tiredly over his face. “I’ll get better without your help. I’ve got so many appointments lined up with the station shrink I might as well live there, and it’s all still so... close. In a week or two I’ll be fine.”

“In another week or two you’ll starve to death.” Grayson had opened his mouth to object, but Matt had just tutted at him. “Don’t try to lie to me.” *Not like I’m doing to you.* “Go back and change, and I’ll make some dinner, okay?” He wasn’t great but he could handle noodles, and was getting pretty decent at pancakes now.

If that had been the whole of his utility, Matt could have stopped there. But that was the thing about those sleepless nights, followed by waking nightmares: every time they happened, Grayson reached for him. He looked around and made eye contact with Matt and reached for him with a groan, and Matt held him through the tremors and tears and whispered all the love he was able to express against Grayson’s skin and into his ears in the form of wordless murmurs and soft kisses. *Love.* Jesus Christ, what a fucking mess everything was.

Matt frowned at his feet as he walked. He wanted Grayson to be safe and happy, he wanted to be there with him and help him through this even though he had no fucking clue what he was doing, but there was no denying that Carmen was right: he was putting the man at risk just by being there. The best thing would be for him to leave. He should find a way to buy a gun—maybe Johnny would sell him one of those antique sawed-offs—give it to Grayson, and then find a way to finish things with Tito, fast. He might end up spending a few nights on the streets, but that was okay: if the right people saw him there, it would only speed things up.

It was safer that way. It would be better. And finally, maybe once this was all over, maybe once the cartel had been beaten back and Tito and his brother were in jail and Matt could openly be a cop again, maybe then he could go to Grayson and explain things. He could tell him who he really was and why he’d

had to become Cali, why he'd lied and all the good that had come from it. He could be honest and tell Grayson that he thought he was in love with him. Matt could hold his heart out in his hands and Grayson would feel better, his father's death wouldn't sting so much, he'd be clearheaded and smiling. He would take Matt's heart and then give his own back.

Matt grimaced. That cliché had become macabre fast. Whatever. It didn't matter. Carmen was right: he needed to make some space and wrap this up. He walked faster, turning onto Southern Avenue. It wasn't too far from the site of the big burn, and Matt wrinkled his nose. He could still smell the ashes in the air; he could almost hear the crackle of the flames, even. Except... no, that was *actually* a crackling flame he was hearing.

Matt jerked his head up and stared down the road at the smoke rising from a distant, familiar building and heard the sirens start to wail. Then he didn't hear anything except the sound of his own worn sneakers pounding against the pavement as he sprinted toward the Sikander's restaurant.

"Mrs. S!" he shouted as he got close. It was hard to see anything through the smoke, but surely she'd made it out. She and her husband and her children... "*Mrs. S!*"

"Matt!"

The fire department was coming to the scene, pushing people away from the burning building, but Matt dodged them and headed straight over to his former landlady, who looked incredibly relieved to see him. "Oh, Matt!" She held out her hands, and he grabbed them, looking around for the rest of the family.

"Where—"

"Suraj had a school meeting to attend, and the kids were both in class, it was just me and Rashida and Pradit working today. We're all fine," she added before he could ask, "but I thought you might have been home! I heard noises upstairs, and when the smoke started to filter down through the light fixtures, I didn't know what to think." She patted his hands. "You're safe, though. And your young man?"

Matt blinked. "What young man?"

"The one who comes and leaves you all those pretty flowers! I see him every now and then, although we've never spoken. He hasn't been by in a few days now. I was worried he could have been there when the fire started."

"How did the fire start?"

Mrs. S sighed. “I suppose it could have been electrical, but the way things have been in the neighborhood lately, I think it was probably arson. I don’t know why, though. We haven’t angered anyone that I know of.” One of her hands fluttered to her forehead. “Thank goodness the children were at school. Their bedroom is on the second floor, right next to your apartment.” The top half of the building came crashing down, and both of them winced. “They might not have gotten out in time,” Mrs. S said quietly, “if they’d been there.”

Matt felt his throat close. He knew what this was. More to the point, he knew *who* this was. He had to get back to Grayson and get him out of his condo before the Jimenez cartel got to him too. “I’m glad you’re safe.” He let go of her hands and turned to run again.

“Matt, what—”

He was gone before he could hear the rest of her question.

Chapter Eight

The best he could come with to describe it, when Grayson's psychologist pestered him for actual words, was a comparison to a roller coaster. It was kind of ridiculous, since he'd never been on one and didn't know anybody who had, but he'd seen videos of them, and that was how it felt. A slow, creaking climb throughout the day, when he was comfortably numb but pulled ever closer to a drop that he knew he wasn't going to be able to avoid. When he was awake, Grayson could control his thoughts well enough to just... turn off. Stop processing, stop thinking about things. He could focus on a book, or on a session, or even the popcorn crackle of his ceiling and not get sucked into thinking about his dad. When he went to sleep, though...

There was the brief plateau, the moment between being awake and asleep when things might just go straight ahead for a while, no careening off the rails. But inevitably, Grayson's subconscious sent him plummeting down into unpredictable dreams that became predictable solely for how terrible they made him feel. He woke up breathless, aching in every joint in his body, his throat hoarse and his traitorous eyes already seeking out the comfort he didn't deserve: Matt, lying beside him.

Grayson should make him leave. He should submit to a month of intensive therapy like his shrink wanted him to at a live-in facility reserved solely for essential state employees which would handle him with professional courtesy, with an eye to getting him back to work. Compassion without genuine affection, enough distance to really build a bridge between himself and what had happened. But Matt stayed, and Grayson, as bad as he was being at communicating with him, still wanted him to.

It was selfish. He'd have to do something about it, soon. Today, maybe, because wanting wasn't the same as helping and Grayson knew he wasn't treating Matt right. He held him at night and then ignored him during the day, didn't let himself get sucked into conversation because he didn't want to talk anymore, he didn't want to pour his heart out to Matt and bury him in pain. And then he did anyway, at night, and that wasn't good. It wasn't right. Matt hadn't let himself in for that, and Grayson wouldn't let him keep taking it. They'd talk, when Matt got home. He'd be honest, he'd excise whatever was left of his own heart so that Matt could keep his, and it would be okay.

There was a knock on the door. Grayson started at the noise, honestly surprised to hear it. Matt was keyed to open the door so he had no need to knock, and Rosa's rap was softer and hadn't come at all since Grayson's father had died. No one at work had messaged ahead to let him know they were coming, either.

The knock came again, a little more urgently, and this time Grayson got up off the couch and made his way to the door. He opened it up and immediately froze as the hard muzzle of a gun pressed firmly against his stomach. Grayson didn't recognize the guy holding it, but it only took a few seconds to place the calm-faced man behind him.

"Back up slowly," Fernando Jimenez advised, and Grayson complied, his careful sense of distance evaporating like gasoline. He was suddenly, desperately, aware of Matt's absence. And Matt was the only reason he could think of that any of the Jimenez cartel would be knocking at his door.

Options poured through his brain, each one worse than the last. He could go for the gun and probably push it aside before the thug got a shot off, but he was certain that Nando was armed as well. He'd just get shot if he wasn't ridiculously lucky, and luck hadn't been on Grayson's side lately. He could try to get his hands on Nando and use him as a bargaining piece, but again—odds of getting shot were high. Neither of those options would tell him anything about Matt, either, and Matt's safety weighed more heavily on Grayson's mind than his own did at the moment.

"Sit down."

Grayson nodded and complied, sitting on the very edge of the couch. The press of the gun left his gut but it stayed focused right between his eyes, and Grayson stayed very carefully still as Nando Jimenez casually went through his home, tossing every drawer and peering into every corner until he was satisfied.

"No weapons," he remarked as he came in from the back and sat down on top of Grayson's bookshelf. It made a slightly tall seat for him, high enough that his feet dangled an inch off the ground, but Nando wasn't embarrassed if the sly smile on his face was anything to go by. "Not what I'd expect in a Reclamation rat's house. What, you never interrupted a burn and decided you wanted some of the goods for yourself? A decent gun, a few mod chips to sell on the side... nothing?"

"No."

“What a boy scout. You a boy scout, Mr. Corbett?” His smile became a frown. “But no, you’re not. Not with the show boy everyone’s sniffing after living here with you. Cali, Johnny Rock’s favorite act, young and pretty and vulnerable... he’s a good fake, huh? Makes everyone believe it. He’s certainly got my little brother wrapped around his finger.” Nando shook his head. “But it’s all a lie.”

“What is?” Grayson asked.

“First things first, Mr. Corbett: where’s Matthew Vieira right now?”

Tension unwound from Grayson like a broken spring. They didn’t have Matt, they hadn’t hurt him. “I don’t know,” he said, a little raggedly.

“Why not? It’s not when he should be working, yeah? Not at the club, at any rate. What, he doesn’t tell you these things?”

“I haven’t asked him much lately.”

“Right, right.” Nando nodded sympathetically. “I heard about your dad. Rough way to go, man, even if he was a little *loco*, yeah? Sorry about that. Our parents, we never quite get over them, do we?” He grinned, and this time it was harsh and mocking. “Not the way we want to.

“My father, he’s dying too. Cancer. I’m ready to take control, ready to move us forward the way we should, but my mother, even now, she always tells me to look out for my little brother every morning at breakfast after we say grace. My fucking little brother. I tell you, Tito has caused more trouble for my family than everyone else put together, and sometimes...” Nando shook his head.

“Sometimes I just want to shoot him through the head and put him out of my misery, you know? Throw him in with a pile of scabs and burn him out of my life. But my mother, I love her, I respect her. And she tells me to look out for him, and so I do. I look into the whores Tito prefers, a filthy preference, but it’s God that’s gonna judge your kind in the end, not me, and I take care of them. Only this time...”

Nando leaned forward, making the bookshelf rock a little. “Only this time, there isn’t much to learn. Matthew Vieira, he might as well be a ghost. Hard to hit what you can’t see, not if you want to be subtle, and my family likes to be subtle when we can. Me, though, I like force. These burns were good for us, they told the powers that be in this city not to fuck around with us. And we found a few people, here and there, who told us some very interesting things before they died.

“How well do you think you know your Matthew, Mr. Corbett?”

Grayson’s mouth was dry, but he forced out an answer anyway. “As well as I need to.”

Nando snorted. “Stupid. You can’t just *trust*, not in this day and age. You’ve got to dig. And it didn’t take a lot of digging to learn something very interesting about Matthew Vieira, Mr. Corbett. Namely, that he’s actually a cop. Matthew March, named like all the other kids who aged out of the foster system in March. Not really creative, huh?” Nando smiled at Grayson. “But you don’t look too surprised. Did you guess, or has he already told you?”

Grayson didn’t answer, but hearing Nando say it—it was like suddenly finding the perfect puzzle piece to join two other pieces together. Little things about the way Matt moved, sometimes, how regimented he could be with his schedule, how he had known exactly how to free Grayson from his power suit’s underarmor. That getup was complicated, and if you didn’t start with the correct seam, the whole thing would jam up. Matt had known exactly where to reach to get it started, how to get it off like peeling an apple in one long strand.

“Doesn’t matter,” Nando said at last. “I just want you to know, I’m not here for you, Mr. Corbett. You’re just how I’m getting Matt here. Well,” he demurred, “you and a little fire at the last place he lived. I know the direction he left in this morning, and I know the way he’ll return. He’ll see his former home burning and he’ll think I’ve done the same to you. But I don’t want that.” He held up his hands. “Plenty of nice people in this building, people with families. Little kids. You sit there and be good, and I’ll do what I’ve got to do and leave with no one hurt who shouldn’t be.

“You act up, though, and I’ll have Paulie put a bullet through your stomach and make you watch me take your cop apart in front of you.”

“Why involve me at all?” Grayson wondered. It wasn’t a proud thought, but it just didn’t make sense to him. “You know where Matt goes, you know when. You don’t like him because he’s a cop. Why bother luring him here?”

Nando sighed. “You’ve got to see the big picture, Mr. Corbett. It isn’t about your whore being a cop, not really. It’s about my *brother*, Tito, being so in love with him that he won’t listen to reason. I already told him about Matthew, and he told me I was making it up to punish him. Little *pendejo*.” He shook his head.

“I’m bringing Matt and Tito here so that Tito can see that the person he’s been so stupid over has another lover, that Tito never meant anything to him at

all. I think Matt will tell him that much, if I threaten you just right. He'll break Tito's heart, of course, but the kid needs some of that. Maybe Tito will kill him, or maybe I'll have to do it. Either way, it'll free up his mind and get one more bothersome cop off the streets. And then... you'll both be free."

"You think I'll just sit here and let you shoot Matt?"

"If you want to prevent your building from becoming the next big city burn, then yeah, I do," Nando replied. "Don't feel guilty about letting this happen, Mr. Corbett. You didn't make the bad choices." Nando tilted his head, and after a moment to tap into his hearing mod, Grayson heard it too: feet pounding on the sidewalk, getting closer fast. "And here he comes." Nando sounded satisfied. "I'll get the door. You keep our friend here in line, Paulie."

Paulie grunted, and Nando walked over to the front door. Grayson's heart pounded hard against his ribs, his thoughts a blur as he strained for something, for *anything* to do to get Matt to turn away. All of it ended with him getting shot and Matt running into trouble anyway. Grayson's fingers twitched despite himself, and Paulie's grip on his gun tightened.

Nando opened the door. "Mr. Vieira," he said pleasantly. "Or rather, Detective March. Come on in. Shut the door behind you."

Matt was panting, his heart racing—Grayson could hear it from where he was sitting. "Grayson—"

"Is fine. We were just having a chat. Now get in here before someone gets curious."

Matt came in and shut the door gently behind him. Grayson didn't hear the lock click, but apparently that was good enough for Nando. "Stand over here, against the wall." Nando motioned with his own gun and Matt went, all the time his eyes trained on Grayson, looking him over desperately. "I'm sorry," he gasped. "Shit, I'm sorry, I was going to leave. I wanted to keep you out of this."

"He already knows you're a cop," Nando said, turning to face Matt. "I told him, although I don't think he was really surprised. Maybe you should have quit while you were ahead."

"I don't know what you're talking—"

"I'm talking about the honeytrap you're trying to pull on my idiot of a brother!" Nando shouted. Matt winced slightly, his eyes darting to Grayson before settling back on the furious scion of the Jimenez cartel. "I'm talking about the con you're running and the fall you're trying to set my entire family

up for, all because my younger brother is a fucking freak who can't keep his dick in pussy the way God fucking intended!" His gun hand shook slightly, all the emotion he'd been holding back with Grayson gone as his ruddy face got darker and darker.

"I'm talking about the fact that you're a fucking cop who thinks he can take out *my* family by seducing the one failure in our goddamn gene pool! I'm talking about the fact that Tito is a motherfucking *idiot* who can't see what's in front of his face, and that's not just that you're a cop. It's that you're fucking around with someone behind his back and he can't even *see* it! You're supposed to be seducing him, but you're so confident that you think you can get off with another guy and he won't even notice." Nando let loose an ugly laugh. "And the worst thing is that you're right. Tito is a fool to trust you, he should have checked, but you seem to attract fools."

"Please." Matt kept his hands up, his expression earnest. "Please, don't hurt Grayson; he has nothing to do with me or your brother."

"I didn't come here for him," Nando said. Grayson couldn't tear his eyes away from Matt but his hearing was still on high, and he heard the slow footsteps coming up the front walk, and the faint creak of the door as it opened just enough to let in a little light. Matt hadn't closed it hard enough to engage the lock. "I'm here to show my brother that you're nothing but a fucking slut, cop or not, and you don't give a fuck about him. And once he gets that, I'm going to kill you myself, then drag his idiot ass back home where it belongs."

Grayson heard a faint gasp behind him, but no one else looked away from Matt, not even Paulie, whose gun was trained on Grayson but whose attention was all on his boss. Matt, though... Matt spared one quick glance for Grayson, apology in his eyes, before he went on.

"I'm only here because I needed a safe place to stay. I haven't been a cop for a long time; I was kicked out of training for being interested in men." He spun lies as fast as he could, and Grayson listened to Nando snort and to the door open a little bit farther, just the tiniest bit, as their listener drew closer. "I'm not honeytrapping your brother, I'm really in love with him. Grayson is just a friend."

Nando sighed. "This is what happens when people get paid to bullshit: their mouths run away with them. You're not only lying, you're lying *poorly*. I think you deserve to be punished for that, so when Tito gets here and I straighten his fucking head out, I'm going to cut off your dick and shove it down your lying

throat before I blow your brains out. Keep talking, and I'll cut off your boyfriend's too before I'm done with you. Are you understanding me, *Caliboy?*?"

"Perfectly," Matt said, and a moment later, he ducked down just before Nando's head exploded in a burst of red and gray.

Grayson and Paulie both were dumbstruck for a moment, but Grayson recovered before Paulie could fire his gun and tackled him, jacking up his strength mods and driving his opponent so hard against the concrete floor that his collarbone cracked. Grayson actually heard the bone break and turned down his hearing even as he disarmed the moaning enforcer and looked around for a way to secure him. He looked up at Matt, but Matt wasn't looking back at him.

"Tito." Grayson turned and saw Tito Jimenez standing in the doorway, a shiny new com unit in one hand, a gun in the other. He took in the way the gun wavered, the man's tiny pupils and shallow breaths. It would be dangerous to try and disarm him now—he was too ready to pull that trigger again.

"Tito," Matt repeated, stretching his red-speckled hands out. "Hey, look at me, not at him. Don't look at him."

Tito's eyes slowly lifted from his brother's corpse, and he finally spoke. "I couldn't have you, not while he lived."

"I know."

"I had to kill him."

"I know, Tito." Grayson could hear sirens in the distance even without using his mod.

"But I still can't have you. It's too late to run," Tito said, sounding eerily calm. He dropped the gun and motioned Matt over. Grayson bit his tongue and didn't say anything when Matt went and pulled Tito into his embrace. "Too late."

"Fucking—Tito, you stupid son of a—" Paulie began, but Grayson punched him unconscious before he could say any more.

Tito was holding onto Matt so tightly that his fingers were white. "I should have known you could never be mine. I'm in too deep. I'd never be able to give you the life you deserve." He shook his head. "This is God's punishment for my sins. For the sins of my whole family. I don't deserve you, I see that now. Forgive me."

Whatever Matt had been expecting to hear, if his murmur of surprise was anything to go by, this hadn't been it. "Tito, you—"

"I got information." He pulled back just far enough to press the com unit into Matt's hand. "Information on my family. You should use it as leverage. Maybe they'll let you be a cop again, if you give them this." He cupped Matt's face in his hands. "I won't be the one to tell them about you though, Cali." He kissed Matt's forehead and then glanced over at Grayson. "You keep him safe."

"I... I will," Grayson said. Ten seconds later the cops were at the door, and Tito Jimenez went down to his knees without a fight, let them cuff him and drag him away, all the while staring at Matt like he was a golden idol, damning but still fatally alluring.

They took Paulie as well, and the detective in charge took one look at the body on the floor and told them to go and clean up a little before he took statements, that he needed the coroner in there stat.

"How did you know to come here?" Grayson asked.

"We got a call from one of your neighbors, sir. She said she saw someone suspicious come inside and heard gunshots."

Good old Rosa. Grayson sighed with relief and resolutely didn't look at the mess on his floor, just took Matt by one hand and led him back to the bathroom. He looked shell-shocked, utterly nerveless. When they finally made eye contact, Matt actually flinched.

"I think... I have a lot of explaining to do," he said quietly, disbelief still written over every inch of his body.

"Yeah," Grayson agreed. He wasn't *angry*, exactly. He was too stunned to be angry, or much of anything at all, but for the first time in days, he felt awake—and aware of what Matt's expression said about the trauma he'd just gone through. "But that can wait a while."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Grayson very carefully pulled Matt forward into a hug. Matt came instantly, almost collapsing into Grayson's grip as his composure finally broke. He muttered senseless apologies, hints of information and all his worries and fears. Grayson let the words wash over him and just held on, regardless of the blood and grime.

Even though he'd come into Grayson's life like a hurricane and blown his careful composure to hell and back, even though he'd lied and driven men to

murder, Grayson couldn't exorcise what he felt for Matt. He'd deal with that later. Right now, he needed this. They both did.

Everything else could wait a while longer.

Chapter Nine

Matt swiped his finger over the screen on his forearm as he checked for a new message. Again.

Intellectually, he knew he would have seen the tiny light in his wrist flash to alert him if he actually received a message, but that was no solace on a visceral level. What if it didn't? What if something came through from Grayson that Matt needed to respond to immediately and he didn't and that threw everything off? This was going to be their first face-to-face meeting since the trial last month, and that hadn't been about them, it had been about, oh... everything else. Everything but the two of them. Mostly Tito, but the fallout was still raining down on the upper echelons of Phoenix. Frankly, Matt was lucky to have held onto his job in the purge that resulted from the information he'd handed over after Tito's arrest.

It still hurt. It was stupid that Matt could actually feel sympathy for Tito Jimenez, but he did. At the beginning of his undercover work, Tito had been the target, one who frightened the fuck out of Matt if he was being completely honest. The man's intensity, his unpredictability, and the huge weight riding on Matt's shoulders as he went into the seduction—all of that had blended into a pulsing mass of anxiety that had clung to Matt like cobwebs during every one of their interactions. In the end, though... in the end, Tito was alone. Completely alone and being discredited for all he was worth by his family's lawyer in court. If not for the evidence he'd passed to Matt, which Matt had very publically transferred to Carmen in the middle of the precinct later on, Tito's testimony would have been useless.

As it was, Tito, Matt, Carmen, and even Grayson were grilled in court as the Jimenezes fought back. Matt was cited for "behavioral issues stemming from a childhood of abandonment and neglect, which make him prone to provoking others for attention in any way he can." In other words, making it all up. Even Jojo was called in to testify about him, which—wow, Jojo hadn't been happy about that, or about Matt working at Johnny Rock's under false pretenses, but they'd still parted on fairly good terms after the trial. At least Johnny hadn't been called in. That could only have ended in bloodshed.

The defamation went on and on. Carmen was "lax in oversight," and Grayson "obviously had issues with sound personal judgement, letting a supposed stripper into his home." He would have been given a pass for his

“profound personal grief,” but instead, Grayson had stood firm. Character witnesses had nothing but good things to say about him, and he in turn vouched for Matt.

In the end, Tito was convicted, along with most of his immediate family. Their properties were seized, and now the police commissioner and three top city politicians were under investigation as well. Matt and Carmen got commendations, and Grayson...

Grayson had disappeared into a counseling center recommended by his psychologist as soon as the trial was over. The only words he and Matt had exchanged for the past month were texts, and most of those were incredibly short. Matt would have texted every other minute if Carmen hadn't convinced him it was a bad idea.

“I get you, I do,” she'd said during lunch a few days after the end of the trial. “You're concerned, and you think you love the guy, and you want to reach out.”

“I *do* love the guy.” Matt was convinced of that, despite his miserable fucking timing.

“Then you've got to do what's best for him right now, not you. And it's pretty clear that he needs some space, yeah?”

“I guess.”

“Then you should respect that and lay off.”

Matt had sighed and swiped his forearm clear of the message. “You fucking suck.”

“That's you fucking suck, *ma'am*, Detective March.”

“Yes, *ma'am*.”

She'd patted his hand. “One a day, maybe. Just to keep in touch. If he responds, great. If not, then maybe you wait until he's out to bring him here.”

“What, to Arroyo's?”

“You want to impress him, right?” She'd lifted one dark eyebrow challengingly. “What's better than my family's food?”

Occasionally, Matt could take a hint. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“That's what I like to hear. Now.” She'd plucked up a chip and dunked it in salsa. “I believe you owe me lunch for putting the entire department through hell.”

“I believe *you owe me* lunch for almost single-handedly taking down the leadership of the Jimenez cartel,” Matt had rejoined.

“Well... you might have a point.”

In the end, Matt had taken her advice. It wasn't as though he didn't have plenty to occupy himself with, what with reintegrating at work, visiting with his cadets to make sure they could handle the fast-tracked graduation, and moving out of the academy barracks to an actual apartment of his own to live in. He could afford it on a detective's salary, and it felt like time to get a little more distance from his job. The department's own psychologist had removed him from the pool of undercover operatives, and Carmen had gotten him a stint in Public Education since his face was so well-known right now.

It was... nice, routine. Visiting classes and speaking to special interest groups and discomfiting city council members. Matt focused hard on foster and group homes, talking to kids about their options, making sure they were, if not joyful, at least all right. It was good work. It was distracting, too, which meant less time spent wondering what Grayson was doing. Matt texted once a day, and after the first week, Grayson had started texting back.

I saw you on television. You look very fancy in your uniform.

Why a television station had wanted to waste time filming Matt doing public outreach with a bunch of grade schoolers, he had no clue, but it had been fun. Mrs. S's kids were part of that class. Matt had smiled and, with effort, replied without any innuendo about how he looked way better *out* of his uniform.

You've got to look authoritative when dealing with ten-year-olds. Otherwise they'll eat you alive.

Sure they will.

Spoken like a man who's never gone up against a crowd of preteens.

That had been it for the day, no reply, and Matt had wondered if he'd done something wrong. A stupid text he sent about his new apartment the next day got a reply, though, and from there they'd gradually settled into a friendly banter. Two days ago, the day before Grayson got out of his program, Matt had bitten the bullet and asked him to lunch. After an interminable three minutes, Grayson had replied with a yes.

Arroyo's might not look fancy, but Carmen was right about the food, so it became their destination. Lunch at noon. And now it was eleven fifty-five.

“You’re gonna scratch the screen if you don’t leave your arm alone,” Juan Pablo said as he brought Matt another basket of chips. Matt had plowed through two of them already.

“Too late,” he replied, rubbing at his reddened skin until Juan Pablo huffed and actually picked up his hand and put it down on the table.

“You need to relax, *amigo*. You haven’t been stood up yet.”

“You’re right, there’s still plenty of time for that to come.”

Juan Pablo rolled his eyes in a way very reminiscent of his cousin. “I’m getting you a beer.”

“I don’t need a beer.”

“A margarita, then. You need something to help you chill out.”

Matt accepted the drink with ill grace and very pointedly didn’t check the time. He knew it was eleven fifty-seven, anyway. He ran his fingers around the cool green base of the Mason jar and ate another chip. Eleven fifty-eight.

“Hey.”

He actually jerked back in his chair, the voice startled him so bad. Matt turned wide eyes up at Grayson, who looked back with a little smile. “Oh, hey. Hi.”

“Can I sit?”

“I didn’t ask you here just to stand.” Matt drank in the sight of Grayson as he took the seat across from him. He looked... *better* seemed like a facetious way of putting it, but he genuinely did look better. Less fatigued, less uncomfortable, less like his father had just died and his lover had unwittingly orchestrated a modern O.K. Corral in his living room. Once he was situated, Matt pushed the margarita across the table. “For you.”

Grayson actually grinned. “Just like old times.”

Matt winced. “Or not. I’m trying to be better.”

“You were in a tough position.”

“That’s true, but I honestly never meant for you to get wrapped up in it all with me.”

“I know.” And he did; they’d had it out over this more than once, the details of what had happened and why it had happened. Grayson had been understanding, but he hadn’t been happy. Matt couldn’t blame him.

“I’m a little surprised you agreed to meet with me. All things considered.”

Grayson shrugged. “My counselor suggested I should get some closure.”

“Oh.” Closure. As in an ending, as in the grand finale. “I understand.”

Grayson sighed. “I’m not sure you do. Matt—”

“*Hola, amigos.*” God *damn* Juan Pablo and his shit timing. Or maybe it was brilliant timing. A stay of Matt’s interpersonal relationship execution, in a way. “What will it be today?”

“They’re doing *pollo poblano*, you should try it,” Matt advised. “It’s amazing.”

“The special, then.”

“Anything else to drink?”

“No, thanks.”

Juan Pablo left, and Matt plowed back into conversation, determined to put off going back to the issue of “closure” for as long as possible. “I guess your friends at Reclamation are happy to have you back.”

Grayson paused a moment before answering. “Actually, I’m not continuing there.”

Matt almost choked on a chip. “Really? You’ve spent three years there, you’re a team leader!”

“Three years is a year longer than most people last,” Grayson said quietly, staring down at the margarita. “I stayed so long in part because I needed the money to keep my dad in the Hospice House, and now that he’s gone I think I’m ready for a change. I’m going to try another branch of Emergency Services, maybe back to paramedics.”

“Big change.”

“It will be. But like I said,” he picked up the glass and took a sip, “I needed it. And *damn*, this is good.”

“Everything here is good.” Matt watched Grayson lick salt from his lips and almost didn’t hear the question he asked.

“What about you? Apart from braving hordes of children.”

Matt shrugged. “Nothing really exciting. I’m off the undercover roster, which is good because everyone in Phoenix knows my face, and I don’t think I was really cut out for going undercover anyway.”

“You fooled me,” Grayson pointed out, and it stung like lemon juice on a scraped knee. Matt smiled mirthlessly.

“Right up until the end, at which point I fooled no one but Tito.” He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter now, I guess, since I’m out of it. My cadets are graduating next week. I went and got an apartment. I feel very grown up.”

“You mentioned the apartment,” Grayson mused. “Or rather, you mentioned how much you hated moving things.”

“I didn’t even have a lot of stuff to move and it still felt like half a day of purgatory,” Matt agreed.

They kept the conversation innocuous until the food came, after which there was no conversation at all for a few minutes as they both dedicated themselves to eating. Matt had been here enough times that he should have been capable of savoring, but he was weak, *weak*. It was gratifying to see Grayson’s eyes close a few times as he demolished his own portion. Maybe he’d come back on his own. If nothing else, this meeting could have landed Arroyo’s another regular customer, and that was a small bright spot.

Juan Pablo cleared the plates and brought over the bill, which Grayson picked up before Matt could stop him. It almost felt like a date, except for the looming separation that was inevitably going to happen. Matt picked at his dirty napkin, striving to come up with something to say, anything, as Juan Pablo brought Grayson his change. “So—”

“There’s a line out the door. We should probably clear the table so they can seat someone else,” Grayson pointed out.

“Right.” Right. Time to face the firing squad. Which, given what both of them had gone through, wasn’t funny at all, but Matt wasn’t in the mood for funny. He led the way out into the bright sunlight and took a deep breath as he felt Grayson settle in at his shoulder. He opened his mouth and—

“I got a bookshelf for my new place.”

It wasn’t what Matt had meant to say, but Grayson ran with it. “Yeah? You found some actual books to put on it?”

“I’m trying to put together my own Bond collection.” Matt turned to look at him, forcing a little smile to his lips. “They’re not easy to find, but I’ve got the first three. I’m still looking for *Diamonds Are Forever*.”

“I’ve got two copies of that one,” Grayson remarked. “I could give you one of them, if you’d like.”

Like a good-bye present. “That would be nice.”

“Or you could just come over to my place and read it there.”

Matt’s brain skipped a beat. His smile turned into a stupid gape, and there was nothing he could quite do about it.

Grayson ran a hand through his hair. “Look, I think I gave you the wrong impression in there. I didn’t come to see you today just to say good-bye.”

“Why... not?”

“Because I want you in my life. I think. I just... look, I don’t even really know who you *are*.” Matt nodded dumbly, because he understood: that was the whole problem. “I really liked the other Matt. I *wanted* him. But I want to get to know this Matt too.”

“This Matt? This Matt is a liar who endangered your life.”

“This one is a decorated detective who was doing a very difficult job, and who has saved my team a lot of grief since then. Reclamation has had a lot less business in bodies this past month.” A real grin cracked Grayson’s face. “They even found Rosa’s daughter, Tima, alive last week.”

Matt’s jaw dropped again. “You’re fucking kidding me.”

“No. She wasn’t in a warehouse either, thank God. Rosa’s got her in a really good drug rehab program, and I’m practically swimming in fresh tortillas. You should come over and take a few of them off my hands.”

“Seriously?”

Grayson nodded. “If you want to. I know it’s probably weird for you, the thought of going back to my place.”

“Not weird, no.” Just completely out of reach, as far as Matt had been concerned. “So, James Bond and tortillas. Sounds like fun.”

“Such fun,” Grayson agreed, reaching out and taking Matt’s hand. He pulled him in a little closer, and Matt held on tight and braced himself and still couldn’t quite process the gentle kiss that Grayson pressed to his cheek. His *cheek*, like he was one of those frightening preteens, chaste and sweet and ridiculous. It was a perfect kiss, actually. “So. Are you free now, or should we schedule the date for later in the week?”

The date. Their book and tortilla date. So *ridiculous*, there was no reason for him to be smiling like this.

“Now is good. I mean, you only live twice, after all.”

Grayson snorted. “If you say anything about being the spy who loved me, I’m keeping all the tortillas for myself.”

“Got it.” They headed for the nearest bus stop, hands still entwined, and the only person who looked twice at them was Matt himself.

Not dreaming, then. It was a second chance after all.

That was all Matt could ask for.

The End

Author Bio

Cari Z was a bookworm as a child and remains one to this day. In an effort to combat her antisocial reading behavior, she did all sorts of crazy things, from competitive gymnastics to alligator wrestling (who even knew that was legal!) to finally joining the Peace Corps, which promptly sent her and her husband to the wilds of West Africa, stuck them in a hut, and said, “See ya!” She also started writing then because what else are you going to do for entertainment with no electricity? She writes award-winning LGBTQ fiction featuring aliens, supervillains, soothsayers and even normal people sometimes.

Contact & Media Info

[Website](#) | [Blog](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)